

SCOTT ZARCINAS



ANANDA

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Also By
Scott Zarcinas

FICTION

Roadman

THE PILGRIM CHRONICLES

Samantha Honeycomb
The Golden Chalice
DeVile's Contract

NON-FICTION

Your Natural State of Being

ANANDA

Scott Zarcinas



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For my girls

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*“You either believe miracles happen every day,
or not at all.”*

Albert Einstein

PART ONE

ADELAIDE, 1995

CHAPTER 1

THE LATE NOVEMBER sky had prematurely greyed by the time Michael Joseph trotted across the gravel of Wattle Gardens' parking lot. A gust of wind tugged the cuffs of his blue sweater like an annoying child trying to get his attention, then shook the branches of the eucalypt under which his VW Beetle was parked. The rustle of the leaves and the crunching of his footsteps drew his attention to the few remaining vehicles. On any other day the thought of an empty parking lot would have been disheartening, but not today. Empty was good. It meant he didn't have to pretend to be happy if he happened upon Norman Page on his way home after school, or any of the other teachers for that matter.

Halfway to his car another gust ruffled his long brown hair, bringing with it the smell of the nearby sea. He glanced at his watch, then up at the overcast sky. It was approaching five thirty; there would be another sixty minutes of useful daylight left, he guessed. If the rain didn't come first.

Irked with this recent bout of unpleasant weather, he hastened his lengthy strides. In fact, when he thought about it, everything irked him lately, and it didn't take a genius to work out why, either. He knew damn well why, and there was absolutely nothing he could do about it. That made things even worse. He hated feeling so helpless. If a problem needed fixing, he was always the first to roll up his sleeves and get to work on it. Yet, this was one problem he simply couldn't fix. There wasn't even anyone he could turn to for advice, except, maybe, his father, but he only wanted to do that as a last resort, when all else failed.

At the VW he noticed that he had forgotten to lock the door when he arrived this morning. "You idiot," he mumbled, and hopped in

behind the steering wheel and started the engine. With a sense of relief, Wattle Gardens Primary School disappeared in the rear-view mirror as he steered the car out through the main gates onto the cul-de-sac and rounded the corner. Pulling up to the intersection with the main road, he was suddenly confronted with rush hour traffic and indecisiveness. Did he really want to be going home to a cold and empty house? Angie probably wouldn't be home till after ten. She would be working late at the office again, no doubt about it; she was all work and no play. Then again, what else was he going to do? All his friends had families to go home to; their wives only let them off the leash every once in a while, and certainly not in the middle of the week. Home it was then.

Michael pulled the car onto the busy road and the grey clouds seemed to darken with his thoughts. *Same shit, different day*, he mused, crossing to the outside lane. Someone honked and made him jump.

“Fuck you!” he muttered and gave them the finger.

It took almost half an hour longer to cross the city than usual. Rush hour, the rain, the traffic lights, everything was conspiring against him. To compound matters, it was almost dark. Finally, just as the rain began to ease, he turned onto Christopher Street and pulled into the driveway at number sixty-four. The headlights fell onto the low, redbrick parapet separating the house from the street and then onto the empty space where Angie's car should have been.

He parked the VW and got out to check the letterbox. It was empty. He should have known; not even the utility companies, it seemed, were bothered to bill him any more. Was it him, or had he become a Mr. Nobody overnight?

Although it wasn't exactly overnight, was it? he mused, running his hand through his hair. *Things have slowly been going downhill for over three years. Closer to four, even. Ever since Angie got her damn knickers in a twist over starting a family.*

He let the flap of the letterbox swing shut, then trudged across the small front lawn, shoulders slumped, feet dragging. In the dim light, he eyed the porch and the bluestone façade. Had it really been three years since he moved in here with Angie?

Time flies when you're having fun, Mikey, he mused, stepping up to the house.

The suburb of Tusmore wasn't the kind of environs he had ever expected to reside when he was a college student contemplating where and when he was going to live after he graduated. He felt out of place in this part of the city. For a start, he was too far away from the sea and the beach where he had spent most of his life. He needed to hear the seagulls squabbling, the crashing of the waves, the feel of the sand between his toes. Tusmore was about as far removed from that kind of life as he could imagine, an upper-class suburb with leafy streets and polite families where dogs didn't bark after the sun went down and young housewives dutifully looked after the children during the day whilst gossiping about the size of other husbands' pay packets. All wives, that was, except Angie. She was not your normal eastern suburbs woman.

Michael opened the front door and flicked on the hallway light. He was immediately confronted with a ghastly sight. Angie had inherited the house from her parents after the accident in 1990, and, for one reason or another, it was still furnished as it had been when they were alive—antique cabinets and sofas, wallpaper and carpets that were worn and faded, even a grandfather clock in the hallway and a rusty clawfoot in the bathroom. It reminded Michael of an old-aged home. It even had that old musty smell, which, he had to admit, was probably more attributable to the age of the building than anything to do with her parents. One day, though, he was going to stop procrastinating and do something about the yellow and white striped wallpaper and thinning blue carpet in the hallway. One day he was also going to refurbish the lounge room and the kitchen. One day he was going to do a lot of things.

He closed the door and headed to the kitchen at the end of the hallway to begin preparing dinner. The lights were off in all rooms, the lounge room and the study on the right, the main bedroom and Angie's old bedroom on the left, dark chambers that reminded him more of hidden caves in the bush than the living quarters of a house, places he just didn't seem to care about nor want to do anything with. Thankfully, there was still one place left he felt a modicum of peace and belonging, but before he entered the kitchen he stopped to wash his hands in the bathroom opposite the grandfather clock, a habit

his hygienically minded father had drilled into him since childhood. Once done, he spent the next half an hour busy at the kitchen divider mashing the potatoes and spicing the mince for a cottage pie, keeping half of it heated in the oven for Angie when she arrived home.

“Whenever that’s going to be,” he said with a snort, sitting down at the dinner table. Some nights he didn’t even see her at all.

Lifting the fork to his mouth, the telephone shrilled from down the hallway. He half stood, then sat back down and continued eating, letting the answering machine pick up the call. It wasn’t until after he had cleaned the kitchen and washed the dishes that he went to the lounge room to check if the caller had left a message. Someone had. On the foot table next to the Steinway, the answering machine’s red light was flashing on and off. He pushed PLAY.

“Michael, hunni. Are you there? Pick up the phone.” It was Angie. Her voice sounded huskier than normal, the voice of someone working themselves far too hard. There was a pause, then she must have realised that he wasn’t going to answer and continued with her message. “I’m still at the office. Something’s come up. Stephen wants me to go through one of his divorce cases with him. It’s kind of messy and I don’t know how long we’ll be, so don’t cook for me, okay. I’ll try to be home as soon as I can. Love you. Bye.”

The news was disappointing, but half expected, really. He ran a hand through his hair and glanced over his shoulder at the couch. Yesterday’s *Adelaide Sun* was lying folded on the cushions. Picking it up, he flicked on the TV and turned down the volume so that it was no louder than a hushed background murmur. Then he slouched lengthways along the couch, resting his head on one armrest, his feet on the other. Like the TV, the newspaper was merely a distraction to bar any thoughts of his problems with Angie getting through to his surface consciousness. He wasn’t really reading the paper, not really taking in the story on the front page about the baby that had been abducted from the mall and was now feared dead, and it wasn’t long before his eyelids began to droop.

At some point he dozed off, woken only when a beam of light swept over the lounge room ceiling some time later, headlights shining through the crack between the curtains. As he stirred, a car engine

idled briefly before switching off. He glanced up at the Elvis Presley clock on the wall near the door. Strumming a guitar, Elvis sang into a microphone, his black legs swaying at the hips, his torso dressed in a blue jacket with black lapels. He was saying it was nearly ten, early for the likes of workaholics like Angie. Michael heard the car door shut, then silence as she crossed the lawn, then her hassled footsteps on the porch. After the keys wrestled with the lock, the front door opened and then slammed shut, shaking the Elvis clock on the wall. Almost immediately, her briefcase, heavy with cases and files she often brought home after a day in court, thudded onto the floor of the main bedroom, followed by the clomp, clomp of her shoes being removed.

Seconds later Angie appeared in the doorway, frowning. Michael could feel the stress surging from her like the pressure wave at the bow of a ship, and he braced himself for a rough ride; it had been another frustrating day at Sugarman Klein & Pickering. The blue suit jacket sagged on her slender frame, as if two sizes too big, and there was a large run riding up her black stockings, disappearing beneath the hem of her skirt. Her hair, normally held into a taut bun, was falling in loose strands around her face, and he caught her big brown eyes staring at him through the large rimless glasses perched on the tip of her nose, which she pushed to the bridge with a terse shove of her forefinger. The other hand was holding a woman's magazine. It was obvious something other than work was on her mind.

"What's the matter?" Michael asked, folding the newspaper onto the floor beside him.

Angie shrugged, a noncommittal twitch of the shoulders that Michael associated with apathy and disaffection. She glanced briefly at the magazine in her hand. "I, I saw an ad in the *Woman's World* that might help us with," and she paused, hesitant to continue, "with, you know, our problem." Her voice sounded even more tired than on the answering machine. Angie flicked through the pages to the ad, after which she stepped forward, the magazine splayed out.

Michael used his elbow to prop himself up and took the magazine. Her hands dropped to her side like a little girl awaiting approval from her father, and she continued to stand like this at the foot of the couch while he read the ad.

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Michael felt a cold finger of dread stroke his spine. Elbows on knees he stared at the words, unmoving at first, then ran a hand through his hair. "Do you think this is what we need to do?" he asked, glancing up at her over his shoulder. "It's going to cost a fortune."

Her hands shot to her hips and her scowl deepened. "Is that all you ever think about, money?"

"Of course not, but we're not exactly swimming in cash at the moment, are we?"

"It isn't going to cost us a thing," she said, sliding a strand of loose hair behind her ear. "I've read the health insurance package from work and in the fine print it says that if there's a legitimate cause of infertility, then the policy will cover the expenses of any treatment."

"You've obviously checked it all out," he said.

"Yes," she said. Her rimless glasses had slipped again. "I have. I just don't know why we didn't think of it before." Then thoughtfully, pushing her glasses back to the bridge of her nose, she said, "But it doesn't matter. What matters is that we're going to do something constructive about it. I've made an appointment for next Thursday. Five o'clock."

To Michael, this was all a bit of a surprise. He also felt left out. She had obviously been planning something like this for quite some while and he hadn't even had so much as a clue. They had never discussed the option of medical intervention at all before now, not even with his

father, who was a doctor. Why now, suddenly? What was the rush? He needed time to think about it, long and hard, certainly longer than a week. This wasn't something they should just jump recklessly into. The situation wasn't nearly as desperate as she was making it out to be.

He suddenly remembered an appointment he had to attend, just the excuse he needed to delay matters. "I have a staff meeting after school that day," he said. "The headmistress won't give me leave. You know how she is."

"Why are you being so obstinate?" she said. Tears were starting to well in her eyes. "You don't care, do you? If we don't do anything about it now we may never have the chance. It's now or never."

"That's not true. I want a child as much as you do. I'm just not panicking about it."

Angie glared at him and crossed her arms. "Well, at least that shows I care. It's more than I can say for you. You just keep on saying not to worry. It'll be okay. We'll have a baby before Christmas. Well I've got news for you. I'm not pregnant and Christmas is almost here."

Michael stared at her. "Why are you working yourself into a frenzy? It's not good for either of us when you're like this."

"So it's my fault is it?"

"Angel, come on, now you're being irrational. No one is blaming anyone here."

"Really? Then why do I feel as if you blame me for everything?"

The next instant, Michael was addressing thin air. He heard her hurried scuffles down the hallway, then the slamming of the bathroom door. Slowly getting to his feet, Michael thought it odd how his legs could feel as heavy as his heart. He went to the bathroom and heard some muffled sobs through the closed door. He imagined her sitting on the toilet seat with her face buried in her hands, probably smudging her mascara. Then he tried talking to her, apologising for what he'd said, and when that failed he tried the doorknob. It was locked. Behind him, the grandfather clock said it was almost a quarter after ten. He figured there was no point in continuing like this. He'd just have to wait until she calmed down in her own time.

As he ambled up the hallway to the front bedroom, her crying faded until it fell silent. He felt a tug in his heart and a wrench in his gut, sad

that she was so distraught, and angry that he couldn't do anything to help her over it. Angie deserved better than this. They both did. His greatest fear was that they were pushing each other so far away they'd soon fall out of sight, and he knew all too well it wouldn't take too much more before one of them plummeted over the edge.

Tomorrow, he promised himself, he would try and make amends.



THE NEXT MORNING began as normal. Angie was up at six, Michael at seven. When Michael sat down for breakfast at the kitchen table, she was dressed for work and drinking her obligatory cup of coffee, white, two sugars, from a mug with a yellow smiley face and a caption that said: DON'T WORRY, BE HAPPY. He smirked. Being happy wasn't high on his list of possibilities today, as with any other day in the foreseeable future. As usual, Angie had readied some cereal and a cup of coffee for him. There was an awkward silence while he tipped the cornflakes into his bowl and took a sip of coffee. They hadn't said a word since last night's argument and he tried smiling and making small talk, but Angie only brought the happy mug to her lips and smiled faintly in return. It was rather tepid, like his coffee.

Half giving up on the likelihood of any conversation this morning, Michael wiped a dribble off his chin with the back of his hand and gazed outside through the sliding glass doors that opened onto the backyard. The weather forecast was for cloudy skies and rain, hence his black sweater and jeans, and yet a plethora of dusty rays were shining onto the yellow kitchen walls. He should have felt enlivened, but his mood seemed unchanged. He was dulled this morning from lack of sleep, having tossed and turned all night, a fitful night filled with nightmares of being chased by unknown assailants.

Over a spoonful of cornflakes, he briefly glanced at his wife. Flicking through the magazine she had brought home last night, Angie stopped at an article in the "True Confessions" section, some of which he was able to peruse upside down, a tearjerker about the horror one woman went through when her baby was kidnapped two years ago.

Angie was captivated. She was frowning and taking quick sips of coffee, continually pushing her rimless glasses to the bridge of her nose. Her hair was tied into a professional bun, emphasising her large brown eyes and the fullness of her lips, and all of last night's creases had been ironed from her work suit. The gold crucifix she wore was dangling on the outside of her shirt between her breasts. She was wearing lilac lipstick, the same colour she had worn on their first date to watch the bonfire and fireworks show on Serena beach. Despite their recent troubles, he reckoned she still looked as gorgeous now as then.

He remembered that night with fondness. November 5, 1989, Guy Fawkes night. As they drove along the peninsula to Serena, they had discussed how many children they'd like to have. It was an odd thing to discuss on a first date, he had to admit, but discuss it they did, in detail, and the answer had been three. They were both single children, and they shared the common hope of starting a family in the future. He told her that he had always wanted to have a trio of little ones; it had been that way ever since he could remember. ("One for me, one for my wife, and one for the grandparents," he had joked at the time.) It was the same, he was happy to learn, for Angie, and the dream of having children was the seed that matured into the bond that eventually united them.

Back when he and Angie met, they were twenty-two and carefree and full of hope. Things were different in those days. Angie was different. They had a bright future, dreams to look forward to, a successful career, she as a lawyer and he as a teacher. After that, babies. There was a cheery purpose to their life. They seemed eager, if not ravenous, for each day, especially Angie.

Happiness, though, he came to realise, was only one side of a coin, misery the other. Your destiny was determined solely on the flip of that coin; heads you got lucky, tails you bummed out.

It was soon after they met that tragedy struck. They received news one night that her parents had died in a horrific bus accident on a local church outing. Angie, needless to say, was devastated. He tried imaging how he would have coped had it been his parents travelling in that bus and not Angie's. As the months passed, she somehow managed to pick up the pieces of her life. Her strength to carry on was admirable. She

graduated with honours from Law School that same year and was one of only fifteen graduates to find employment. It was the middle of the recession, the one that followed the stock market crash of '87 and the one Paul Keating said was "the one we needed to have," (could you believe Australia still voted him in as Prime Minister after that?) and Michael was as proud of her achievements as he imagined her parents would have been. He knew then that Angie was the woman he would marry. She was going to be the mother of his three children.

How things change, he thought now, watching his wife. *Your dreams, your hopes, all of it decided on the flip of a coin that always lands bums up.*

Angie finished reading the article, sipped the last of her coffee, then stood up. "I have to go," she said, slipping the crucifix down the V of her shirt and out of sight. "I'm running late."

"But it's only quarter past seven," he said, glancing at his watch.

Angie took her mug to the sink. Michael saw her rub her temple as she went. If the mornings started like this, he knew she was sure to have a migraine by lunchtime.

"Don't start on me, Michael," she said. "I've got a lot of paperwork I have to get through at the moment. I don't need this."

It was a lie, pure and simple. He knew Angie took pride at being the most efficient worker in the firm, and he knew paperwork never mounted up on her desk. Unlike him, she needed the right conditions to be productive, namely a spotless desk where everything was in its correct place. If it weren't, then she simply wouldn't start until she had made it so, just as she always began the morning ironing her suit. He opened his mouth to say he didn't believe what she was saying, and then quickly shut it.

"I'll see you this evening," she said, flashing something tired that was supposed to be a smile, but was more like a forlorn grin. "I'll probably be late again. You know how it is."

Michael certainly did.



THAT EVENING AFTER school, Michael decided to call in on his

father and fulfil the promise he had made last night. Though, if he were honest, Michael wasn't certain how he was going to approach the subject. How do you tell your father you think your wife is infertile and it's destroying your marriage? He could barely think it, let alone say it.

As he entered the house, a wave of nostalgia swept over him. Michael had been thirteen when the family upped and moved from Serena to Adelaide in 1980, a move he remembered with fondness. His dad had been following the lure of a partnership offer in a nearby doctor's practice and had bought the house soon after. Like the house in Serena, this one was situated just a few streets from the beach (so close, in fact, he could hear the waves crashing on a still night). Those years were filled with happy memories—high school, university, the early days of dating Angie—when things had been a lot simpler.

Robert Joseph was wearing a white apron with yellow flowers over his shirt and trousers when Michael walked into the kitchen. He greeted Michael with a smile and a playful slap on the back. "Good to see you, Mikey," he said, removing the apron and tossing it onto the edge of the sink. "What can I get you? A beer?"

Michael nodded. It was probably what he needed to help loosen his tongue. He stepped past the shorter, stockier man and sat down at the kitchen table. While his father rummaged inside the refrigerator, Michael looked around the room. On the near wall was a corkboard pinned with photos and lists of chores. One photo caught his attention in particular. It was a family snap taken last Christmas when nobody was looking at the camera, what he figured professional photographers would call a 'real life' shot. It was probably mid afternoon, after the presents had been exchanged, because there was wrapping paper strewn all over the carpet and everyone was sitting in the lounge room eating with plates on their laps. He saw himself sitting next to his mother, smiling lopsidedly. His nose was slightly hooked and prominent, salient almost, though by no means large, as were his chin and forehead, which others had told him suggested intelligence but which he just considered unappealing. How such a gorgeous woman like Angie could find him attractive, he was at a loss to explain. Perhaps it was his jade-green eyes; she was always complimenting him on their colour.

Robert now put two cans of West End Draught on the table. "I

took that with the new camera you and Angie gave me,” he said. “Not her favourite photo, is it?”

Michael didn’t need to answer. Though almost everyone thought her pretty, it wasn’t a flattering photograph. Angie was frowning and looking particularly grieved. Robert’s present hadn’t been well received, and Michael knew his father was feeling a tad guilty at the prank he had played that day. Michael opened his beer, took a sip and glanced back at the photo, also feeling a little bad at his role in the mix up. It had been his suggestion to buy her something to take her mind off her problems, but in the end it had backfired. It was best left unsaid.

Still gazing at the photo, Michael took another sip of beer. Angie was sitting next to his cousin, Julian Joseph, Jude to his family. Where Michael had the brains in the family, Jude had the looks, by far and away the most attractive of all the Joseph men. He had mesmerising crystal blue eyes that burned like polished sapphires and he was never without a different girl tagging eagerly onto his arm. His rise through the ranks of SAPOL, the South Australian Police Force, was as swift and dynamic as the number of women he seemingly bedded, so it was always a surprise to Michael that Jude soured his face with a perpetual frown, as if everything he’d achieved wasn’t enough, as if everything and everyone, especially his family, was a source of constant disdain and contempt.

In the picture, Jude was slouching into the soft cushions of the couch, dressed all in black. His blonde hair, whiter than Angie’s more golden colour, was neatly coiffed, befitting his newly promoted rank to Chief Inspector. Michael examined his expression more carefully. There was something on Jude’s face he hadn’t noticed on the day. Jude was staring at him with scorn, and even in the photo Michael could feel his blue eyes stabbing like daggers of ice. He wondered why Jude hated him so much.

“I know he’s a cop,” Robert said, following Michael’s gaze, “and as his uncle I should be more understanding of his faults, but I don’t trust him. I bet you a million bucks he’s bullshitted his way into that promotion. Worse than that, he bullshits us, his own family.” Shaking his head, he sat down at the table directly opposite Michael. Then he relaxed, like someone letting go of a troubling problem, and smiled.

“Is there something on your mind, Mikey, or have you just popped around to look at old photos?”

Michael didn’t know where to begin. There were just too many things overwhelming him at the moment. He lowered his eyes to the can of beer, running his fingertip around its lip. Robert chuckled quietly. Michael flicked his eyes up to his father’s face, then quickly down to the beer can again. A wry grin adorned his face. “Is it that obvious?” he asked.

“It’s not that difficult when you’ve watched someone grow up over the last twenty-eight years of their life,” Robert said. “You get to know them pretty well, but I wouldn’t go so far as to say it was obvious.”

Michael saw the kindly look of concern on his father’s face and for the first time saw his true age, not the young man kicking the football with his son in the backyard, or playing beach cricket after work, but as a man only a few years from retirement and desperately keen to see his grandchildren grow up before he dies. That only accentuated the problem. As the months passed, it seemed more and more likely that it would never happen.

Michael’s finger continued running around the lip of the can. Robert waited for him to begin. “You know we have been struggling to have a baby,” Michael said, finally.

Robert cleared his throat and briefly glanced at the photo on the corkboard. “Everyone knows you and Angie have been trying for a while,” he said. “I hope she wasn’t too offended by the present I gave her for Christmas. It was only meant to lighten the situation.”

“You mean the book of Kama Sutra?”

Robert nodded.

“She’s over it now,” Michael said. “We had a laugh about it later. It made trying for a baby more fun, at least.”

Robert seemed happier. “So what’s worrying you at the moment?”

Michael ran his hand through his long hair, contemplating the intricacies of how to put into words what had been only vague concepts till this moment. “It’s been nearly three and a half years since we got married,” he said, “and don’t get me wrong, I love Angie and the fact that we’re married, but I’m worried that not being able to have a baby is going to, you know,” and then he stopped.

“You’re worried it may split your marriage,” Robert finished.

Directly hearing out loud what had been on his mind for some while made Michael feel somewhat dour. It was a reasonable reflection of his general state of being over the past six months, and he nodded, saying nothing for a while. “Angie seems to be taking it badly,” he said, eventually. He reached for the beer can, then stopped halfway and withdrew his hand to his lap beneath the table again. “She doesn’t say much, but I know it’s affecting her, and not in a good way. Know what I mean?”

Robert shook his head in agreement, and said, “It’s my experience, both professionally and socially, that in matters where a couple is unable to bear children, it’s usually the woman who gets hit hardest. If a woman can’t have kids she tends to blame herself, for lots of reasons. Sometimes she feels she’s a failure, or worse, that she’s no longer a woman. I suspect Angie is doing a lot of this blame at the moment.”

Michael smirked; it was precisely what he had been thinking. Not that she’d ever said it outright, that was not her style, but he’d suspected that self-blame had been the problem for a while. “She won’t talk about how she’s feeling,” he said, sighing. “She’s using her work to avoid confronting the issue. Yesterday she left at seven in the morning and didn’t come home until after ten at night. I wish I could do something, but I feel helpless. Whenever I try to talk to her I feel like she’s deliberately avoiding me. I don’t know what to do.”

Pausing at first, Michael took hold of the beer can and brought it to his lips, not knowing how to proceed. The friendship he had with his dad was great, but he wasn’t sure how much he should, or could, relate the depths to which he and Angie had fallen. The worst part was being invisible. He reckoned that was about as low as it could get, and when a man is no longer noticed he begins to think about other things, bad things, like which one of the partners at Sugarman Klein & Pickering was screwing his wife on the boardroom table after all the other staff had gone home.

He decided not to say anything; it was uncomfortable to say the least. Instead, he took another sip of beer. He could see his father was disappointed. Somehow he knew he wasn’t receiving the whole truth.

“I can only begin to understand how you must be feeling, Mikey,”

Robert said, looking Michael firmly in the eye, “and I won’t ever try to tell you what you should or shouldn’t do with your own wife. But one thing this old dog has learnt in the past fifty-seven years is that honesty and patience always win through in the end, no matter how rough it may seem at present.”

“It’s getting rougher,” Michael said. Robert cocked an eyebrow. “Angie wants us to go to a fertility clinic. She’s even made an appointment for next week.”

“And you don’t think it’s the right thing to do.”

Michael sat back and ran a hand through his hair, glancing at the light above table. Why was he so averse to seeking treatment at a fertility clinic? Why, when he imagined himself walking into the waiting room, did he have this feeling of dread and despair, as if he was walking into a lion’s den?

“I don’t know what to think any more,” he said, sighing. “There are good and bad things about it. Her health insurance is going to cover the costs and the clinic may actually be able to help us have a baby. That’s something good, at least, but I’m worried for Angie. She seems to be pinning all her hopes on this. If they can’t help, and we can’t have any kids, she’s going to be devastated. It’ll be worse than when her parents died. At least then we could plan for a future and have something to believe in. I’m afraid that she’ll have nothing left to hope for if the fertility clinic falls through.”

“There’s always hope, Mikey,” Robert said, his voice and expression serious. “It’s what’s kept mankind getting out of bed ever since he emerged from the African jungle.”

Michael was pensive. Hope, he thought, was about all he had left.

CHAPTER 2

AS HE SLEEPS, Michael is aware of two things; firstly, he knows it is the night before the appointment at the fertility clinic; secondly, he knows he is in the middle of a frightening dream. In it, everything is in black and white. He is running down the street. His legs are heavy and his chest is burning. He thinks he is being chased, but he's not sure; he can't see anyone behind him, but he feels fear, terrifying fear. Suddenly, he trips and falls. A black shadow looms over him. He tries to get up, but he can't. He can't move. He can't run. He can't do anything. He screams, but no sound comes out. Then he feels horrendous pain, as if he's being stabbed in his stomach, as if his whole intestines are being wrenched out. He knows he is going to die. The black shadow is watching. He looks up at it and screams in horror. The shadow has no face.

Michael woke with a fright and sat immediately upright. The back of his throat was stinging sharply, like a bad case of tonsillitis, though he knew it was probably because he'd been breathing harshly through his mouth, like someone who'd been running, while he slept. He put his hand over his heart and felt it thumping against his ribs. He could feel sweat on his brow. Taking several deep breaths, he glanced at the clock on the bedside cabinet. It was 5:29 a.m.

Angie continued to sleep quietly, oblivious to his recent fright. Slipping out of bed, now wide-awake, he went to the bathroom. His hands, he noticed, were trembling. It had to be one of the worst nightmares he'd ever had, even worse than those he suffered as a child after he and Jude saw Billie die, when he'd wake up terrified and screaming for his dad to come and comfort him. He glanced at his fatigued reflection in the mirror and tried telling himself that it was

only a dream, that it wasn't real. It took a minute or two, but it seemed to work. His mind began to calm and his hands lost their shivering tremble.

After relieving himself, he filled the bathroom sink with hot water. Steam misted the mirrored doors of the cabinet above, which was good because he didn't want to look too closely again at his bleary eyes and haggard face. He opened the cabinet and reached for his razor. The blades looked blunt, so he removed the disposable head and tossed it into the bin beneath the sink. He was surprised to see it land near a crumpled blue box and a white, plastic object that on first glance looked like a small toothbrush. He bent down and removed the box and object, only now recognising what it was, a home pregnancy kit. At one end of the plastic tester he spied a reading. It was negative.

He knew Angie used to test her urine every month like clockwork when they first began trying to conceive, but the sight of the pregnancy tester confused him. Angie hadn't bothered to do it for the last six months or so, when she came to realise that the likelihood of being infertile was more probable than possible. Why had she tested it last night? Was there something she wasn't telling him?

The thought that Angie was withholding something troubled him the whole time he showered and got dressed. The image of that pregnancy tester lying in the bin beneath the bathroom sink simply wouldn't leave his head, and by the time she arrived in the kitchen at quarter to seven, dressed and ready for work, he was in a rouseable state of scepticism. She had, after all, arranged the clinic appointment behind his back. What else had she been up to that he wasn't aware of?

The cuffs of his blue shirt were rolled half way up his forearms, as if ready for a fight, and his freshly washed long hair was hanging loose over his shoulder, occasionally falling in front of his face as he finished the last spoonfuls of his cereal. Angie seated herself at the table with her usual cup of coffee, paying no particular heed to him. She seemed neither surprised nor pleased that he had risen before her. She just stared outside through the windowpane sliding door, interested only in gauging the weather. He followed her gaze, glancing quickly outside. Several fluffy cumulus clouds were rising with the sun over the hills in the east. There was nothing of interest for him, just the same shit,

different day, so he turned back to Angie with the intent of confronting her with the news of his earlier discovery in the bathroom.

Angie didn't give him the chance to speak. "Don't forget we have the clinic appointment today," she said, taking a sip of coffee. "Five o'clock."

"You know I don't like hospitals," he said, and then, almost as an afterthought, added, "Miss Schmetterling had a fit when I asked her if I could miss tonight's teachers' meeting. Are you sure I have to go?"

Angie rolled her eyes and sighed. "Yes. We've discussed this all before and we don't need to go through it again. You're my husband and we're in this together. If you don't meet me at the hospital, it'll be a total dereliction of your duty."

"Christ!" he said. "This is emotional blackmail."

"Don't you blaspheme!" she said, and slapped her palms down onto the tabletop. Tears formed in her eyes. She pushed herself up from her chair, knocking the underneath of the table with her upper thighs, and before Michael knew what was happening she was out of the kitchen and crying. He heard her footsteps hurry down the hall to the front bedroom.

He threw his hands in the air. "Christ!" he said, pushing the chair back and standing up. "Angie, I'm sorry," he yelled after her. "I didn't mean it, you know that." He waited for her reply. There was just the tic-toc of the grandfather clock. "Angel, come on!"

This was getting ridiculous, he thought. This whole thing was getting out of control. He couldn't say anything anymore without her running off crying. Staring at the ceiling, not knowing what to do, he absently ran a hand through his hair. He just wished the whole situation would go away and they could get back with their lives, the way they used to be when they just got married, happy and carefree, like when they used to find the time to go for dinner at their favourite restaurant, Piccolo Diavolo, and spend a romantic night together, or like when they used to go away on weekends to his father's holiday house in Serena and relax and enjoy each other's company. That was all he wanted, nothing more. He just wanted the marriage to get back to normal.

He followed her out of the kitchen, and as he walked around the dividing bench he glanced at the refrigerator's only two magnets, yet

more reminders of Angie's deceased parents: JESUS LOVES YOU! and GOD GIVES WHAT'S RIGHT—NOT WHAT'S LEFT!

"Yeah, sure," he harrumphed, glaring at them. "God gives you nothing but shit and then complains that no one is grateful for it."

He wandered slowly up the hallway. Deciding to let Angie keep her distance, he stopped before entering the front bedroom and leant against the doorframe. The curtains to his immediate left had been pulled open and light was streaming through the window, forming a bright square on the quilt in the centre of the room. It was the only room in the house they had attempted to renovate. Angie, he recalled, had made all the decorating decisions. The result: purple. The whole room was one shade of it or another—lilac, mauve, lavender, violet—the walls, the linen, the curtains, the quilt, all were purple, even the bedside alarm clock and lamp. The only things not were the bare wooden floorboards (Angie had insisted they rip up the horrid blue carpet, at least in this room), the sliding mirrored doors of the built-in closet, and the oak dressing table at which Angie was now perched.

With her back to him, she was sitting on a stool directly ahead, peering into the dressing table mirror and rubbing foundation makeup into her cheeks and forehead. A cosmetic case sat open like a mini painter's satchel to her left. It was brimming with assorted lipsticks, eyeliners, brushes, creams, mascaras, and lots of things Michael didn't recognise. In the reflection he could see her face. She was trying her best not to cry and the whites of her eyes were streaked with red. He felt a tug of guilt and apologised for what he had said in the kitchen.

Angie sniffed and applied a touch of moon-dust colouring to her cheeks. Then she put the mascara brush down and began touching up her eyes with black eyeliner. She was deliberately silent while she worked, making him wait for her reply, and only after a minute or two did she turn around and face him. "If you're truly sorry," she said, holding his gaze, "you'll be in the lobby of the hospital before five o'clock this evening."

She turned back to the dressing table mirror and removed the lid to a tube of red lipstick. As she slid the lipstick across her lips, they were transformed into soft, alluring petals and Michael suddenly understood why bees were so attracted to flowers. After a few seconds, she puckered

and smacked her lips gently together, then stood the lipstick on its end next to the cosmetic case and turned around.

“How do I look?” she asked.

Michael was about to reply when suddenly, as she stood up, Angie doubled over as if she had just been delivered a punch to the stomach. Her face was contorted—mouth gaping, eyes wide—and despite the recently applied makeup her skin had turned ghastly pale. He stared at her, momentarily immobilised with fright. Angie groped for the dressing table, the other hand clutching her lower belly. The tube of lipstick was knocked onto its side and it rolled off the table onto the floor next to her briefcase. Angie didn’t seem to notice. She wobbled precariously, teetering like a toddler just learning to walk. Without a second to spare, Michael broke free from the paralysis of his initial shock and rushed over, catching her just before she fell.

Angie didn’t speak. She didn’t seem able. She just leant into his embrace and grabbed hold of his arm. He was horrified. He didn’t know what to do or how to help, other than just hold on to her and hope the pain would quickly pass. His mind was racing. What was happening? Did he need to rush her to the hospital? Should he call an ambulance?

After a minute, her wrestle-like grip began to relax. To his relief, she was soon standing erect once again with the colour returned to her face. He stood by as she took several deep breaths and pursed her lips, blowing the air slowly out of her lungs. When she finally met his eyes he could tell the worst was over. “Are you okay?” he asked.

She nodded, regathering her composure. “I’ll be all right,” she said, after a moment. “Don’t worry, I get it all the time.” But her attempt to play down the seriousness of what had just happened only made Michael worry even more. She seemed to sense his unease. “It goes away by itself. It’s just a little stomach cramp, that’s all.”

Her smile was weak and unconvincing, and he knew by her reticence that she was withholding the truth. She patted his arm in a poor attempt to allay his concerns and reached for her briefcase beneath the dressing table. Before leaving, she kissed him on the lips and reiterated their plans to meet after work. Michael knew he had no choice but to let her go. She left him standing alone in the bedroom, confused and worried.



LATER THAT DAY, Michael stood motionless at the blackboard with his back to the class. His hand was raised where it had stopped in mid-sentence, a broken piece of white chalk firmly fixed between thumb and forefinger. He had been in a daydream, lost in his own world. He had no idea how long he had been standing that way and was busily trying to figure out how he had managed to misplace his memories and what he had been saying to the class.

They were obedient and silent, damn good kids he reckoned. All he could hear was their shuffling bums on the seats and the anxious pacing of someone walking past the classroom in the corridor outside. It sounded like Norman's footsteps, heavy and discordant, like a clumsy elephant constantly tripping over itself. Running a chalk-covered hand through his hair, he tried to pick up from where he had left off. Only he couldn't remember.

Suddenly, the image of Angie floated in front of the blackboard like a vision of the Holy Mary. He remembered this morning's incident in the bedroom, her face contorting with agony, her body doubling over as if she had been stabbed in the stomach, and it made him sick with worry. Despite her words of consolation, he knew Angie was covering something up. She said that she was fine, but she wasn't; he had seen the alarm in her eyes flashing as brightly as lightning. For whatever reason, she was holding back. Knowing this was more terrifying than the mysterious pain itself. He reckoned he hadn't felt so frightened since the day he saw Billie die.

He remembered that day clearly. The sky had been blue and cloudless above Serena, another piping hot day in the summer of '75. Michael was playing backyard cricket with Jude, who lived two blocks around the corner and often came over to the house to play, especially during the school holidays. They were both in their swimming trunks (Jude's red, his yellow) and their eight-year old bodies were tanned and supple. Michael was holding the bat, a new Slazenger he had just got for his birthday, and Jude was tossing and catching the tennis ball, readying himself to pitch it down. Michael knew all Jude wanted to do

was hit him in the head with the tennis ball. All he wanted to do was hit the ball over the fence with his new cricket bat. That's the way it always was that summer.

Jude's end was the clothesline. Michael's end was the back wall of the house, where he was tapping the bat on the ground and waiting for Jude to deliver the ball. They were separated by no more than fifteen yards. They were also as far as they could get from his mum's precious vegetable garden in the bottom corner of the yard. Hitting the ball into the vegetable garden was instantly out, no questions asked, followed by an immediate change of innings. Michael really wasn't too concerned about that. He was going to hit Jude a lot further than the tomatoes and the cucumbers—he was going to hit him over the fence and out of the yard.

Michael tapped the bat on the ground and watched his cousin. Jude had a knowing grin on his face. He was wandering near the edge of the vegetable garden at the top of his run-up, which Michael thought was ridiculously long. It was obvious Jude wanted to cause some serious harm with the ball. Michael wasn't worried. He tapped his Slazenger on the grass again and waited.

Jude wasted no time. He ran in and delivered the ball as hard as he could. Michael watched it hit the grass and take a nasty kick, jumping straight for his head. There was no time to take a swipe with the bat. He jerked his head backward, but the ball seemed to follow him, chasing him like a large demented wasp. It shot barely an inch past his nose and clattered into the wooden boards of the back wall. He had escaped instant humiliation by the barest of margins.

Michael picked up the tennis ball and threw it back to Jude. After a brief flurry of words, something to the effect that Michael couldn't hit the ball if he tried, Jude went back to the top of his run-up. Michael tapped the Slazenger on the ground, talking to himself and making sure he concentrated properly this time. The last thing he wanted was to be brained by a bouncer from Jude; he'd never hear the end of it. Jude ran in again and sent down another fast delivery, which Michael swung at and missed. The ball passed just over the top of the rubbish bin and thumped into the wall again, much to Jude's obvious delight.

Jude mocked him once again. Michael threw the ball back and

gritted his teeth, saying nothing, hoping to wipe the cocky smile off his cousin's face. Jude ambled to the top of his run-up for a third time, strutting with confidence. Michael wiped the sweat off his brow with his forearm and tapped the Slazenger on the ground, thinking that if Jude bowled another bouncer he was going to hit it so far Jude was going to get a sun burnt palate watching it pass over his head. Jude steamed in and fired down his fastest ball yet, thundering it straight for the spot between Michael's eyes. This time Michael saw it coming, and he got into position early. He stepped back, lifting the bat high, and then connected beautifully with a perfect pull shot. He watched the ball sail in a high arc over the backyard fence and out of sight. In baseball terms, it was a homer. In backyard cricket terms, it was six-and-out. But he didn't care; the stunned look on Jude's face made it all worthwhile.

Jude mumbled something Michael couldn't quite hear and stormed over to the corrugated iron fence, pressing his eye against a rusty hole to search for the ball on the other side. The next-door neighbour's house belonged to an old man in his seventies who lived with his wife and retarded son. They had a Great Dane called Belvedere, which roamed their back garden like a sentry but was as harmless as a mouse. Sometimes he escaped by digging a hole beneath the fence and then went charging around the streets of Serena scaring the willies out of little old grannies until his owner managed to recapture him. Michael liked Belvedere. He threw biscuits and chunks of meat over the fence for him whenever he could, but for reasons he never knew, Jude always seemed wary of him.

Over by the fence, Jude was visibly excited by something he could see through the hole. Gesticulating wildly, he shouted for Michael to come over. Michael dropped the bat and rushed over to join him, eager to see what was happening on the other side. Jude peered through the hole again, and then took his eye away from it, looking directly at Michael with an expression of utter disbelief.

"Someth'ns wrong with Billie," he said, hushed and afraid. Billie was what he called the Great Dane because he couldn't quite manage to say Belvedere without tripping over his tongue. "I think he's dyin', Mikey."

Not knowing what to expect, Michael quickly peeked through another rusty hole. The midday sun had heated everything it touched like a devilish King Midas, so the act of pressing his cheek to the fence was like laying his face onto a barbecue hotplate. He ignored the pain to see what Jude was raving on about. What he saw made his skin crawl. Belvedere was lying on the ground writhing in agony, foam drooling out of his mouth like washing suds, eyes rolled back and his legs and tail and body shaking feverishly. Billie was dying, that was for sure.

Five minutes later, Michael pulled his eye away from the hole, the skin of his right cheek and eyebrow scalding red. Billie was twitching no more. If this was death, he thought, it was horrible. He suddenly felt dizzy and he had to suppress the violent urge to vomit. His breathing was short and shallow and he desperately needed to sit down.

Jude, on the other hand, was positively joyous. His blue eyes were gleaming and the smile on his face was as broad as the fence. He was jabbering excitedly, as if it were the best thing he had ever seen.

Michael was suddenly furious. With every word Jude uttered, he could feel his head begin to throb. Hitting him over the head with the Slazenger would have had the same result. He clenched his fists and swallowed hard, then did something he had never done before—he punched Jude flush in the face, a right hook that connected with his cousin's jaw as well as his bat had connected with the ball. He immediately regretted what he'd done. His hand now hurt like hell.

Michael braced himself for the expected retaliation. They were going to have their first punch up and he was not looking forward to it. To his surprise, Jude did nothing at first, just gaped in shock, then gently rubbed his jaw and glared at him. Coldness washed over his face. Michael was about to say something, maybe even apologise, but he saw something in his cousin's eyes that was as frightening as watching the death of Belvedere—seething hatred. His voice suddenly evaporated like sweat in the midday sun.

“You'll regret you ever did that,” Jude said, then turned around and sulked away.

Michael watched him disappear around the side of the house, rubbing his jaw. Later that night, Michael lay in his bed tucked beneath the faded yellow sheet, feeling quite lost, feeling quite ashamed at

witnessing the agonising death of an innocent animal. The skin on his scalded cheek had formed into an ugly blister, but at least his hand had stopped throbbing. In fact, he didn't seem to feel any pain at all, only sadness, horrible sadness.

His dad was sitting at the end of the bed, seemingly at a loss for the right words to say. Billie had apparently been fed a steak laced with rat poison, something called warfarin, but which Michael initially heard as wafin. It had caused a massive bleed inside Billie's brain called a stroke. That's why he'd been fitting and drooling.

Whatever the reason, Michael hoped he'd never have to see such a horrible thing in his life again. He recalled the chilling words Jude had said earlier that day: Someth'ns wrong with Billie, I think he's dyin', Mikey.

Seeing the Great Dane die wasn't the only thing that was worrying him, though. He knew Jude wasn't going to forget this incident. Not for a long while. Not ever.

The school bell sounded the end of the final period, shaking him from his memories. Michael jumped, and for some reason absently rubbed his fist. He turned and faced the class. They were patiently waiting for him to say something, their faces staring up at him like sunflowers tilted toward the sun. He knew what they wanted to hear, so he quickly gave them permission to leave.

The volume in the room immediately turned to full. The children gathered their bags and packed their books away, then began streaming out of the classroom into the corridor and merging with the children exiting the other classrooms. A little girl in a bright floral dress ambled up to him. Her name, for some reason, eluded him. She was a cute kid, a real daddy's girl—blonde hair, blue eyes, perfect lips. Pointing to the blackboard, she asked him what he'd written.

He turned around, at first quizzical, then wide-eyed and incredulous. On the blackboard, in large white letters, was a message that seemed to have come from beyond the grave, as if it had been spelled out on a ouija board:

*Something's wrong with Angie.
I think she's dying, Mikey*

Michael staggered back, grabbing a steadying hold of his desktop. He read it again, his mind stumbling over the words like a dyslexic. The little girl asked him another question, but he was still too stunned to answer.

Suddenly, a mental image flashed before his eyes, of Angie drooling and twitching on the ground in a foetal position, writhing in agony, one hand clasping her belly, the other her head.

“Just like Billie,” he whispered, horrified at the idea.

He kept staring at the blackboard, running his hand through his hair. He’d never had a premonition before, he didn’t even believe in them, but this felt very much like one now, like déjà vu in reverse, as if he could sense something bad was going to happen before it did.

He heard the little girl’s footsteps running out of the classroom. She was obviously bored with receiving no answer to her questions and wanted to catch up with her friends before it was too late. He watched her leave and waited until she was out of sight before rubbing the offending sentence off the blackboard. As the duster wiped away the words, he caught himself smirking. The stress of the past few months was affecting him a lot more than he realised. He needed to relax. He needed a nice long holiday sitting on the beach reading a good book and drinking beer. Lots of beer.

He finished cleaning the blackboard and glanced outside the dirty windows. The sky was drizzly grey and the light was already fading. Some kids were shooting baskets on the basketball court, which also doubled as the school quadrangle. Others in parkas and raincoats were saying farewell to each other beneath the two large eucalypts over on the far side of the court. He figured it was time he stopped dawdling and got going as well. Removing his leather jacket from over the back of his chair, he looked up at the clock above the lockers on the back wall. It was showing ten to four, though he knew it was five minutes slow. He hadn’t bothered to set it to the proper time because he liked the thought of having five minutes less to go before the end of school. Nevertheless, time was ticking and Angie would be waiting. In slow, exaggerated movements, he made his way to the door. He felt like a man twice his age; his bones felt achy and his feet hurt. That holiday couldn’t come too soon.

He stepped out into the corridor, what he thought of as the highway of the building, and was surprised to find himself its sole occupant. To his right was the reception and principal's office at the main entrance. To his left, the staff room and emergency fire exit at the rear. The classrooms abutting the corridor reminded him of prison cells lining death row. He couldn't wait to get out of here quick enough.

After locking the door, he hastened as fast as his tired body would allow toward the main entrance. Halfway there, he heard the click of a shutting door from behind. He turned around to see the rotund figure of his friend, Norman Page, exiting his classroom. As well as the cream cardigan and beige trousers he was wearing, he carried a grey tatty coat over the crook of one arm and a taupe leather briefcase under the armpit of the other. Michael had once seen inside that briefcase. It was filled with nothing apart from nudie magazines and candy bars. Norman locked his classroom and looked up at Michael. There was a frown deeply embedded in his brow, which Michael reckoned was as permanent as his stubby nose and double chin.

"You look wonderful, my friend," Michael said, smiling.

Norman grabbed his belt and hoisted his trousers over his overhanging belly. "And you're a very handsome woman," he replied in his best Elvis Presley impersonation.

Michael thought the lip-curl lingered on his face like a poorly reconstructed harelip. He watched Norman turn and waddle towards the staff room. After a few steps the large man halted, sensing that Michael wasn't following, and turned around to confront him.

"Are you coming to the staff meeting or not?" he asked.

Michael kept smiling as he had. "Not today, Mr. Page. I've got a get-out-of-jail-free card."

Norman's shoulders slumped and he almost dropped his briefcase. Michael could see he was having problems figuring out how he could get away once again whilst everyone else had to stay behind. Norman was always complaining that Michael was the headmistress's pet. It drove Norman mad. He was always late in the mornings and missing meetings, while Norman was never late and yet was forever under the watchful eye of his superiors. Norman felt that no matter what he did, everything always went pear-shaped. Michael, he was forever

grumbling, was luckier. Everything always seemed to work out for him, as if the gods were always on his side. Michael had to disagree. Norman didn't know the problems he was facing at home.

"But, but how can you?" Norman said, still obviously flummoxed. "It's out of the question. You can't leave before Frau Hitler gives her orders for the month." He clicked his heels together, dropped his coat, and gave a Nazi salute. "Vee must obey! Resistance is futile!" His fake German accent echoed around the corridor and Michael hoped no one else had heard, especially the headmistress. It would just be Norman's luck if she had.

"Then call me nobody, mein Kommidant," Michael said, looking at his watch. "I've got an important rendezvous in an hour. Angie won't let me get out of it."

Norman lowered his arm. "Sure, you're off to enjoy yourselves while your poor friend suffers at the hands of a sadist. Don't desert me like this Mikey, you know I can't cope alone. I'm always the sacrificial lamb. Why can't it be someone else for a change?"

The look on Norman's face was almost pitiful. If Norman knew what he was about to do, Michael thought, then he probably wouldn't complain so vociferously. If he himself had a choice, he would gladly exchange places with Norman right now.

Michael bade farewell and left his friend to pick up his coat and attend the meeting. "Mikey, I almost forgot," he heard Norman say before he exited through the main doors. "Bridget's cooking for Thanksgiving tonight. She asked if you and Angie would be interested in coming over later."

"Thanksgiving? Who celebrates that?" Michael said with his hand on the door.

Norman shrugged. "We do. Bridget's father was a US Marine. He settled in Sydney after the war and we've kind of kept up the family tradition."

Michael took a moment to consider the offer. "I don't know, Norman. I'm not sure how long this thing's going to take. Can I call you later?"

"Sure, if I'm still alive to take your call."

Rolling his eyes, Michael waved goodbye and strode outside. The

main entrance opened onto the basketball court-cum-quadrangle. Beyond and to the left was the teachers' parking lot. The threatened drizzle he had seen from the classroom had materialised into light rain and he was forced to break into a trot. He cursed. This incessant weather was beginning to really get on his nerves of late. He was beginning to feel permanently damp, as though his clothes were always wet.

As he reached the parking lot, the sky visibly darkened and the rain began to fall in heavy drops. He cursed again. He spied the faded yellow paintwork of the VW parked between two other cars and began running to it. He jumped in and slotted the key in the ignition, grateful to get out of the rain. Annoyingly, the steam lifting from his soggy clothes fogged the windows almost straight away, and when he turned the key he felt a sudden chill, more than he expected wet clothes should, like he had just sat down inside a freezer. He began to shiver and his teeth chattered uncontrollably, and right at the moment the engine sputtered into life the image of Angie twitching and drooling on the ground flashed before him.

Once again the unnerving premonition of dread washed over him. A voice suddenly popped into his head, hushed and frightened, as if narrating the image: *Someth'ns wrong with Angie. I think she's dyin', Mikey.*

He slammed the gear stick in reverse and accelerated back. "Please don't let anything be wrong with her," he mumbled. Except, to his dismay, no matter how hard he tried he couldn't erase that image of her from his mind.

He sped through the gates out of the school grounds. The idea of going to the hospital suddenly didn't seem so bad.

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