

# ROADMAN

Scott Zarcinas

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**Scott Zarcinas**

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*F-Troop lyrics by Irving Taylor and William Lava, from the TV sitcom  
F-Troop, 1965*

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Based on the story by  
Peter Leovic and Helen Ivich



# Acknowledgments

Like the main character you are about to get to know, this book did not follow the normal path. The idea of *Roadman* was first conceived as a screenplay and was ultimately produced as a major motion feature film in 2008 of the same name. I was lucky, and honoured, to be given the opportunity by Peter Leovic and Helen Ivich to turn their screenplay into a manuscript, and finally this book. I just hope I have done justice to their characters and story.

Sometimes love kills.



# **PART ONE**

The Making



## CHAPTER 1

The roo hopped out of the rocky creek and into the crosshairs of the gun sight. Behind the fallen eucalypt, the barrel resting deathly still in a wooded notch, Max Grieff exhaled silently and readied his finger on the trigger (*The warm hand, always the warm hand*). The grey and her two younger companions stopped, looked around, twitched their ears, then, satisfied they were in no immediate danger, bent down to nibble on the grass. He was down-breeze and on high ground. Unless they zigzagged up the bank between the red gums and granite outcrops and hopped right on top of his camos, there was no way they were going to detect him. He drew a deep breath, nice and slow. He'd been waiting long enough. She was his. Now all that was stopping him was the sign. And that couldn't be too long now, surely not.

The three roos kept nibbling the grass on the side of the bank as they had. He kept the Remington trained on the biggest grey as she rested her front paws on the ground, tugged at some grass roots with her mouth, then made a half-hop forward, using her tail to balance for that precarious split-second when both her rear legs were off the ground. Pointing directly at her skull, and extending as comfortably as a bionic third arm from the nook of his shoulder, all twenty-two inches of crafted cylindrical metal followed her forward, never for a second leaving its target. In fact, right at this moment, the world around him seen entirely through the lenses of the gun sight, he kind of felt like the Six-Million-Dollar man (*"We have the technology. We can rebuild him."*): physically superior, telescopic vision, mentally focussed, all he needed was a mission to save the

world from the scum of the earth. But he already had one, didn't he? Could've squeezed the trigger and ended her stupid, pathetic days right then and there. Would've been easy-peasy, like shooting ducks on the old billabong, but he didn't. The sign still hadn't appeared.

The sign. Always the sign.

There was sudden itch in the middle of his back but Max ignored it and kept his finger on the trigger, light but firm, the slightest extra pressure more than enough to send the .22-cal hurtling across the hundred or so metres to the roo and smashing into her puny brains. Like an omen, the sun chose this moment to reappear from where it had slipped behind one of the few white-bellied clouds still hanging around after this morning's downpour, bathing the valley in a sudden shower of evening gold that twinkled off the spiny fronds of the blackboys. He was more than aware of the illegality of what he was doing. His roo license was as clear as the daylight on that point, strictly night time shooting only. But what the hell, who was going to catch him out here? Nobody between him and the outskirts of Serena, just a hundred square kilometres of dirt track and bush. Bloody locals weren't much interested in venturing past their verandas in any case. Anyway, the sun was almost down. Just another few minutes before it dropped behind the hill, and less than an hour before it disappeared over the horizon altogether, so he was kind of technically into the early hours of the night, wasn't he?

But getting his wrist slapped by some dickhead ranger on a power trip wasn't what was bothering him the most. He just bloody well hoped the sun didn't reflect off his telescopic sight and startle the bitch and her mates back onto the creek bed. Worse, the winter sun had somehow brought the breeze with it too, which had now picked up and was floating down the valley like some ghostly crow impatient for the kill. It ruffled his combat jacket and wormed its way under his camos to his naked skin, raising goosepimples around his nipples. He could also feel it tickling his ears and ruffling his scruffy locks (the way Sarah used to, when the days were good, before the troubles began), almost as if it were whispering

to him, *Go on, do it. What are you waiting for? Squeeze the trigger. Nice and slow.*

Good God, it almost sounded like the good-for-noth'n bitch. That same noth'ns-ever-good-enough, whiney, moaning, impetuous whinge that always got in under his radar and made him want to slam the back of his hand across her chirpy fucking mouth.

Forcing himself to retreat from the unwanted memories, Max calmed his thoughts before he fully jumped on board the ol' rage train and hurtled back to another time and place he thought he'd left well behind. Didn't take much though, did it? The past was always closer than you thought, like a shadowy passenger. It never really left you, wherever you went, even in the dark of night, always there, watching, silent, even if you couldn't always see it. Didn't take much at all to bring it out of hiding. Just a little flame, a little torchlight, shone in the wrong dark corner of the mind and BINGO! two fat ladies, legs eleven, and you're the winner of every fucking memory you never wanted.

He suppressed the smirk that was trying to break across his face. Instead, he flared his nostrils, testing for the scent of the roos. Along with the lingering dampness of the soil and scrub, it was still there. Could also sniff a trace of the sea, even this far from the coast. No matter. The important point was that he was still downwind, but for how much longer? The breeze was like any capricious bitch. More to the point again, like Sarah. Could turn on him any moment, then his day was as good as done. One whiff of human sweat, or the grease in his gun barrel, and the roos would spring away quicker than click of his firing pin.

*What are you waiting for?* the breeze whispered in his left ear. For the moment it still had a patient tone, but if it were anything like his fuck'n ex it wouldn't be long before it became downright nasty.

At the end of the barrel, the female grey was still trained in his sights, still nibbling on the grass and half-hopping forward every so often, searching for juicier roots. Slowly but surely, she and the two other roos were edging up the valley toward the sun, but he wasn't too worried. Not yet.

*Squeeze the trigger*, the breeze whispered.

*I can't*, Max spoke back in thought.

The breeze was like a pesky fly he couldn't swat away, one that was buzzing around his head and landing every so often on his face, crawling up his nostril, into his mouth, in and out of his ear. Nothing he could do to stop it. Any sudden movement to shoo it away and he could say goodbye to the day's work.

*Why not?* it asked, this time in his right ear.

*You know bloody well why not*, Max shot back, the blood rushing to his face.

He could feel his whole head glow like a billy can warming up on the humpy's campfire. Could also feel his heart suddenly kick into higher gear, ramming back and forth into his ribcage. The muscles in shoulders tensed and he dug the heels of his spit-and-polished into the dirt behind him, a reflexive jerk that he hoped the roos wouldn't notice or think too much of. For the first time since he had trained the barrel on his quarry, he sensed the first inkling of doubt. Was the sign going to happen today? Was the entire bloody universe conspiring against him once again? The thought of returning to the humpy empty-handed made his jaw clench until it hurt, just like he'd taken a punch from out of the blue from Jonesy.

*Go on. Hurry up! Before she gets away. Easy-peasy-lemon-squeezy.*

His right leg twitched again. Both temples throbbed. Even his eyes felt like they were about to pop out their sockets. Man, this bitch just didn't give up, did she?

*You can't do it, can you?* Now it had turned to scorn. Just like Sarah. Just like every bitch he'd ever met. *You never could follow through with anything. Just like you could never...*

That was just about fuck'n enough. The breezy bitch had gone too far, and he was about to tell the voice in his head to piss off when, just as suddenly as the sun had peaked from behind the cloud, it happened. The time had arrived, and just like he could feel a sneeze coming on, it began building up, more and more with each passing second. As quick as that, the moment was erupting. There was no pulling out now. No point in trying to stop what was going

to happen, just like you couldn't stop a sneeze from ejaculating out of your skull—he had seen the sign.

For a split second, that eternal moment between life and death, the crosshairs were trained right between the eyes of the roo, precisely at the junction where the bones of her snout fused with the dome of her skull, her weakest point. She had straightened, sat on her haunches, turned her head, and looked straight into the gun sight *asking* to be killed. And that was all the invitation he needed.

He knew now that only he had the power to decide the bitch's fate, not God, not anybody, not even the fuck'n memory of his ex. Only he alone and the thought of so much power tingled delightfully in the upper reaches of his pants. Like it always did.

Then the silence in the valley was ripped apart with the crackling of gunfire.



The tingling in his crotch aroused a memory of his latter primary school days, the first time he ever felt that mysterious movement down under. Back then in the seventies, most ten and eleven year-old boys were getting rocks in their pants over the sight of Olivia Newton John's gyrating skin-tight leathers at the end of *Grease*, or listening to Deborah Harry's sexy crooning of *In the flesh*. Not him. The first time his rock raised its head and threatened to peak between his zipper had nothing to do with leather clad Australian pussy or scratchy vinyl records—it was the presence of death.

He remembered as a kid wanting nothing more than to be a grown-up. He hated being small and weak, and he especially despised being told what to do. It was the year of '78, when music lines were drawn deepest and longest in the schoolyard. Could've called them trenches, in fact, dividing the world into Swedish and Scottish halves: those who worshipped ABBA on one side, and those who'd kill anybody who hadn't sworn their allegiance to The Bay City Rollers on the other. Problem was (if it were a problem at all), he couldn't stand either; couldn't stand the sight or smell of meatballs *or* haggis. Hell, he didn't even like Elvis, and was even

kind of glad when the fat bastard had finally bitten the bullet the year before, too. But that probably had more to do with his old man than the burger king himself. In fact, he knew it did.

The day that sprung to Max's mind was blistering hot. Wearing only a pair of khaki shorts and a tired yellow T-shirt, the boy he once was and had tried so hard to forget (*Ab the memories, there they were again, shadowing him from the past, watching, silent*) had begun the long, slow cycle on his second-hand dragster up the gravel road from Serena to the hidden clearing behind the Johnson's farmhouse.

*My God, the older Max thought. That was over thirty years ago. Three fucking decades. What the fuck have I done with my life?*

For the next eight kilometres, the road moved like a stuttering conveyer belt beneath the dragster's wheels. To make matters worse, the A131, as it was known back then, hadn't been graded for well over a year and the bike jarred so badly on the ruts and potholes his innards felt as if they were about to drop onto the road through his arse.

*If dad heard me use that word, the boy had thought at that moment, cycling around another large pothole, he'd clip me around the ears and make me wash my mouth out with soap.*

He didn't care, didn't give a blue razoo. The stinking German bastard wasn't around. Most probably propping up one end of the bar at The Griffin's Head with the other stalwart of Serena's watering hole, Rhys Fynn, and so he could say *Arse!* as loud and as many times as he wanted. He shouted it this time, "ARSE!" There, what could the useless bastard do about it? *Noth'n. Absolutely noth'n.* It felt good, like a pig wallowing in his own shit. And that was another word he liked but daren't say in front of him: *Shit!* It was great to get out of the house and do and say whatever the hell he wanted.

"Shit! Arse! Shit! Fuck!"

But, as good as he felt, he had a problem. One hell'uva problem. When the old man's newest bitch had insisted he wear a hat (*It's scorching outside, lipstick lips had shrieked, you'll burn to a crisp!*), he had disdainfully shrugged her off and ran out of the house, slamming the door in her god-ugly face. What the hell did she know?



She wouldn't be around long enough to see his sunburn anyway. None of them ever were.

Now, riding uphill along a dirt road shimmering with heat haze, he wished he'd taken her up on her offer. It was as if he were viewing the surrounding scenery over the top of a sizzling barbecue plate and he now knew what it was like to be one of those ants he'd fried to death with a magnifying glass on the driveway. Rivulets of sweat trickled off his face in gluey streams, evaporating in the oppressive heat and leaving sticky trails of salt crystals on his skin. Worse, his skull felt like it was about to explode any second, as if the useless old bastard in the sky was teaching him a lesson, focusing the sun's rays on top of his head until it burst into flames.

*What'd you expect,* he said to himself, *trekking out so bloody far from town on a day that pushed forty?*

He put his foot down to catch his breath. His legs had long ago started to tire and go to jelly. The hard work was almost done, though. Not much further until he'd reached the top of the hill, then the road would plateau a little before it dropped, then rise, then drop again before it hit the main road to Adelaide, skirting the edge of the old billabong. Not that he had any intention of going for a swim, despite the heat. He had other things on his mind. Plus, though he had the shit bad luck to be a fool's son, he weren't no fool himself. The old billabong was well off limits, even to him, who liked to think he was more daring than most kids in his class, even the older kids at high school, but even that place was beyond his dare. Why the local yokels called the Myponga Lake the old billabong he didn't have the foggiest, but, if he could guess from the drunken filth that spewed from his father's mouth, it was most probably a way of rat-bagging the Aboriginal myths about the place and pretending the Bunyip's curse didn't really put the shits right up them and make them tell their kids never to go anywhere near that place without an adult, *Never!* Not that he ever did, 'coz he believed the curse, like all the kids in town, and that was good enough reason to stay the hell away. 'Till he was older, of course. Then he could do and say what he liked, anytime, anywhere.

"Shit! Arse! Shit! Fuck!"

He cast his vision beyond the old billabong to maybe fifteen or twenty kilometres away, to where the hills rose in undulating curves. The grass slopes were browned from another summer of relentless sun and through the heat-shimmers they were like waves rising and falling on the swell of a muddy sea; and for a brief, giddy moment he actually felt the ground lifting him up, like a fishing buoy. Behind him, Serena and the beach at the bottom of the hill were well out of sight. Even the now vacant edifice of Prince Albert's School for boys looming over the town from Victor's Ridge was hard to make out from this distance ("Prince Albert's School for rich bitch poofs," his old man would always sprout, even in front of Rhys Fynn, its caretaker). Closer, to either side of him, now that the last of the houses on the outskirts of town had fallen away, all that was left was grazing farmland dotted with scrubby bushland.

"Come on," he said to himself, closing his mind to the heat-shimmers dancing over the road ahead. "The worst is over."

He was surprised at how sticky his voice sounded. Every word clung to his throat like salt crystals on his skin. God, he was thirsty. And hot. Way hot. Shit, he should've put on that hat! Nothing was going to make him stop, however. He was on a mission. Not even if the farmhouse waiting for him up ahead was as spooky as the old billabong, not even if the going was incredibly slow and was murder on his elbows and knees, not even if his guts fell out between his arse, nothing was going to prevent him finishing his plans.

He drew a deep, hot breath and began cycling again.

After an hour or so of much easier riding, he finally reached the gate to the farmhouse, which, from here, was still out of sight behind the small crop of gum trees. Either side of the driveway, two massive date palms cast tiny midday shadows over the gate, upon which a corrugated sign was hanging lopsided by long pieces of twisting wire: PRIVATE! DO NOT ENTER! Ignoring the warning, he lifted the small lasso of fraying rope that was looped over the adjacent post. The rusty hinges squealed in protest as the gate swung open. Before he hastened into the derelict property, he

scanned the entire horizon behind him, checking for the telltale plumage of rising dust. Satisfied there were no oncoming vehicles, he entered, shut the gate, and looped the rope back over the post. The driveway (no more than two ruts and a central hump) was overgrown with weeds and grass that, like everything else in this shithole, had turned brittle brown in the summer heat.

Cycling as fast as he could, the dragster followed the inner rut like a tram on its track. Magically, his thirst began abating with each eager rotation of his pedals, and within minutes he had rounded the small crop of gums. Then there it stood, burnt out and alone in the distance, a gutted skeleton in the middle of an overgrown field. Farmhouse no more, it was a dead turtle on its back with its legs pointing to the blazing sun, its head retracted into its shell (or cut off). Had been derelict since the murder of farmer Johnson and his wife in '58, or so the old man had told him. Believed him too; had been one of the few days the drunken fool was sober. Apparently the flames were seen all the way from town. Someone had also said they'd heard an explosion, which only fuelled the rumour that the twin boys did it for the inheritance, though no-one knew for sure because nobody had seen noth'n of them since the cops pulled their parents' charred skeletons from the smouldering coals the next day.

"Pure fuck'n mystery," the old drunk put it. And he was right, for once.

Michael Joseph, one of the kids in his class at Serena Primary School, put it another way. "The Johnson farm is haunted. Everyone knows that. Even my dad says so."

Dr. Joseph was one of the only two remaining doctors in town, and everything he said was the truth. You could trust him more than the priest, or so lipstick lips reckoned, and she'd know. Maybe for that reason, the sight of the burnt out shell always made his stomach feel like someone had taken it with both ends and wrung it like a wet sheet. Approaching it, he sensed something unnatural, something that *lingered*, and he knew that if he stayed a little too long he was likely to end up *lingering* too. For fuck'n ever.

He gulped with difficulty. Salty saliva scalded his hoarse throat like he'd eaten gravel. Then he cycled past the burnt farmhouse, careful not to *linger*, on to the next crop of gumtrees behind. The absence of cattle and sheep since the farmers' death had allowed the grass to grow tall and high, brown tangles that grabbed at the bike's spokes and chain and prevented him from riding all the way to his secret hideaway. He dumped the dragster as far from the rear of the farmhouse as he could and walked the remaining distance, finally stepping through the ring of eucalypts and wattles into the clearing. It was probably five degrees cooler in the shade, but he barely noticed, too eager to examine the traps he had set the previous week.

He had earned a tidy sum tossing newspapers onto the neglected lawns and weedy driveways of Serena to pay for his hobby. At one cent a paper he made thirty cents a day or thereabouts, depending on how many paid their monthly bill to Stelios Polites, the Greek dickhead who owned the deli on the corner of Bay Road and The Esplanade. With the money he saved (more to the point, with the money he had *hidden* from his father; the thieving bastard had once discovered his stash under the mattress and spent it on two bottles of scotch and an overnight room at The Griffin's Head with one of his lady friends), he bought two rabbit traps at the army surplus store on Bay Road, along with the switchblade he carried in his pocket. Guys who made a living from army surplus never asked too many questions, even to ten-year old kids. Besides, it was obvious what he was up to and there was nothing illegal about it. Trapping rabbits was a rite of passage for any country lad and no army surplus manager was going to refuse a kid his rite of passage, especially if he had the nine dollars and sixty cents to pay for two rusty, well-used rabbit traps that would've remained on the shelves until the next fucking century.

At the entrance to the first warren were the remains of a pregnant doe. Her rear foot was caught between the teeth of the trap and there she had died, painfully and slowly. Judging the extent of the flyblown corpse and its stench, it must have happened soon after he laid the trap last Saturday. It was bloated and its eyes had

been removed, either by the ants that were swarming over its face or by the crows that flew overhead. He cursed, but what could he do? He would have to figure out a way to come here more often than once a week, otherwise this kind of shit was going to happen all the time. Arming the sweat off his brow and shooing away the flies from the corpse, he removed the doe from the trap and threw it into the wattle bushes, which gobbled it up like a pack of hungry mutts that hadn't seen food for days. He reset the trap, careful not to get his fingers jammed in its rusty teeth, and then went searching for the other trap he'd set on the other side of the clearing.

Nearing the second trap, he thought he could hear the whimpers of a struggling animal. His heart lurched quicker and, for the first time in his life, he felt the stirring of life in his underpants. Just a faint tingle, but it could well have been a kick to the balls. It stopped him in his tracks. Then, after a few seconds, it went away. Confused, he continued on, but nearing the warren he felt it again.

Then he heard the whimpering sound again and bent down to investigate. The trap was pulled into the mouth of the warren, held firm by the peg he had hammered into the ground through its chain, which he now pulled, dragging the trap and its wriggling prey out of the hole. The tingling in his pants grew stronger when he saw what was there. The metal teeth had seized one of the rabbit's hind legs, ripping into its flesh and chomping almost all the way through the bone. The rabbit wriggled with blind panic when he tried to pick it up, and he giggled. Grabbing the rabbit by the neck, he then tried to prise open the teeth of the trap. They were clenched tight, stuck by the rust.

He tried again without luck. A drop of sweat dripped from his forehead onto the rabbit's writhing belly. His hands were shaking, and the tingling thing in his pants grew bigger. God, it was downright uncomfortable. It now felt harder than the switchblade in his pocket.

That was it! Reaching into his shorts, he removed the switchblade, and in one swift motion the rabbit was free, its hind leg twitching in the metal jaws like a lizard in the mouth of a ravenous dingo.

Arming the sweat off his brow again, he looked around, wanting to be quick. In the middle of the clearing stood a granite rock the size of a toppled refrigerator, perfect for what was on his mind. How he hadn't noticed the rock before he didn't know. He stared at it, mesmerised, and wandered over to it in a trance. On the ground at the base of the rock he saw an empty Mars Bar wrapper. A thought whispered through his mind, a thought that made his heart skip a beat. Did someone else know about this place? At this point in time did he really care if they did, did he really give a blue razoo if they were hiding in the wattle bushes and watching his every move? With his mouth as dry and dusty as the A131, he reached out and stroked the hot, smooth surface of the rock. The thing in his pants was now even harder (how was that possible?), now as hard as the granite altar on which he flung the rabbit down. It squirmed and tried to kick him with its one remaining hind leg, and as it twisted its head he caught its fear-struck, accusing gaze, but nothing was going to save it now.

He did what he had to do.

When next he looked at his hands they were crusted with congealing blood and gripping the handlebars of the dragster. He was speeding back down the A131 toward the sea and home with no recollection of how he had got here. Time had somehow been removed from his memory, but he didn't care. He had a lump in his shorts the size of Ayer's Rock and a smile on his face as wide as the billabong. But the A131 had ripples in its surface that were just as solid as the Rock, and potholes just as big as the billabong, and he realised too late he was going too fast. The front wheel plunged into the gaping mouth of a large pothole and he lost control. The front wheel was swallowed and the rear wheel kicked up like a bucking brumby, flinging him over the handlebars in a crumpled heap onto the side of the road where a grader had long ago piled a rubble of gravel and dirt.

Dazed, he spat out a mouthful of dust and blood and propped himself up to inspect the damage. At least all his teeth were where they should be, but he was in a right fuck'n mess. He was covered

in gravel and dirt, his shirt was ripped almost all the way from his right armpit to the lower seam, and his skin was peeled raw from both knees and palms. He touched a newly formed lump on his right brow and flinched at the sting.

“Stupid dickhead,” he muttered, then gingerly picked himself off the ground and staggered over to his bike. Like the broken neck of a roadkill, its front wheel was buckled out of shape. His shoulders slumped. If he walked back home he was going to be late for supper—way fuck’n late—and that meant getting the leather strap across his arse, which was sore enough as it was. He rubbed it semi-consciously, and winced. Hitching, he figured, was the only way he would make it in time. Gently, he sat by the crippled dragster and waited. The rock in his pants, he noted, was now a limp rabbit.

Luck was not too long in coming, though. His dad’s mate, Mr. Fynn, pulled up half an hour later in his VW Beetle and asked if he needed a lift. “Looks like you’ve just been attacked by a potato peeler, son,” he said. Max could smell scotch on his breath, even from outside the car. “Want me to take you to Dr. Joseph?”

Max shook his head, glancing down at his injuries. “Just need a lift home, if that’s all right,” he said. “Have to make supper before dad gets home.”

Mr. Fynn nodded. “Was on my way to meet him now at The Griff. I’ll keep him busy for a while if ya like.” He gave him a wink.

Max tried to smile his thanks, but the painful grazes on his face meant all he could manage was a half-twisted wince. The dragster was too big to fit in the car, even with the front wheel bent at right angles, so they left it by the side of the road. This was the countryside, where the yokels knew every bloody other yokel and no-one bothered to lock their doors when they went to work or on holidays, so he wasn’t worried about it being gone when he returned to pick it up, whenever that would be.

“What you doin’ all the way out here on your own, anyway?” asked Mr. Fynn.

Max climbed into the passenger seat and shut the door. He said nothing, preferring to just stare ahead through the windshield at the dusty road and grit his teeth.

Mr. Fynn started the engine. “Does your father know you’re ‘ere?” He gave a long, sly wink, waited for a few seconds, then said, “Don’t worry ‘bout me, son. Your secret’s safe. Been keep’n secrets since way b’fore you came kick’n and scream’n into this world.”

Max looked over at him, not liking for one second the look from the man’s bloodshot eyes. “Trapp’n rabbits,” he said, which was true. What he didn’t say was that he had poked out its eyes with his army knife, flayed, gutted and buried it up to its neck to be eaten alive by the ants or crows. The thing in his pants stirred at the memory.

“Trapp’n rabbits, eh?” Mr. Fynn threw his head back and laughed, accelerating toward the township. “Good on ya. Now, I’m gonna let you in on one of my li’l secrets.”



## CHAPTER 2

With the Remington slung over his left shoulder, Max bent down and caressed the female carcass, admiring the clean entry wound through its skull. He inhaled a deep intake of roo scent, holding it in as long as he could before exhaling. The time it had taken from pulling the trigger, rising from his vantage point and crossing the terrain to examine his prey couldn't have been longer than thirty or forty seconds. Yet the tingling that had filled his jocks at the instant of the kill had already given way to a fading throb (long gone were the days when it could last a whole morning or afternoon), but it sparked into life again for a brief moment at the smell of fresh death.

“Come now my beauty,” he said, grabbing hold of the base of its tale and heaving the carcass onto his back. Its head bounced against the back of his knees as though a kid with boxing gloves had taken a few jabs at the back of his legs. “Gotta get you back to the humpy before night sets in.”

He glanced up at the western hill where the roo's two partners had instinctively bolted at the crack of gunfire. The sun had dipped behind the tree-covered crest, jacketing the valley in a dark shade of camouflage-green. He could see no movement up there except the gentle sway of the topmost eucalypts. He figured the roos were making bloody sure they kept well out of sight, maybe even watching him from behind a crop of granite, trying to work out what he was going to do next.

*If they had any fuck'n sense, though, they'd bolt for it right to the top and outta fuck'n sight.*

The heels of his boots dug into the dirt as he started the long trudge up the southern slope to the humpy, just as a pair of white cockatoos flew overhead squawking at each other. The noisy fucks seemed unable to decide which tree to land on, like an old married couple in a restaurant squabbling over which table to sit. He followed their erratic zigzagging flight path until they disappeared behind a high line of eucalypts, roughly in the direction he was headed. Which might take the better part of forty minutes to reach, he reckoned. At least the breeze had dropped its fuck'n nagging. He figured as soon as the female grey had hit the ground it had got what it had wanted and then pissed off looking for some other sucker to do its dirty work.

*Glad to be fuck'n rid of ya*, he said to himself. *Glad to be fuck'n rid of all of ya good-for-noth'n bitches.*

Better yet, at least the temperature was dropping in the wake of the sun. Couldn't bear the thought of trudging up this hill with an extra forty kilos of dead flesh with the sun burning a dirty great hole in the middle of his head. Still, the speed of the drop probably meant it was gonna be a cold one tonight. Probably wake up to a ground covered in frost and a billy can full of solid ice. Which meant he couldn't leave things till morning. Would have to gut and skin the carcass before he hopped into the swag and got some shut-eye. And man he was tired. Hadn't had a decent night's sleep in...

"Fuck knows," he grunted, as the deadweight on his back shifted sideways and caused him to stumble over a protruding rock. But sleep was the last thing he was gonna worry about right at this moment. Had to get out of this valley and up to the humpy before Venus and her pretty fuck'n sisters decided it was time for happy hour at the Sky Bar.

"There are Abos," he remembered the old crout saying more than once, usually with a ciggy hanging out of his mouth and a stubby of West End wedged into his fist, "and then there are *black* Abos, black as fuck'n hell."

Same went for the night. There were nights that were dark, and then there were nights that were so fuck'n dark you couldn't see your cock when you went for a piss, let alone what you were

pissing on. Out here in the bush it was nearly always the second kind of dark, except when the moon was full and shining like a midnight sun, and the last thing anyone with a brain cell between their ears would want was to spend the night on this slope freezing their balls off next to a rotting carcass they'd have to use as a windbreak.

Max trudged on. Halfway up the slope, to his surprise, his thoughts were suddenly cut short by what he guessed was the sound of some bitch screaming for help. Could almost hear another voice too, he reckoned, a bloke's, but then their yelps were drowned out by a flock of squawking cockatoos that had taken flight over the darkening valley. Must have been more than two hundred of the noisy fuckers. The racket was deafening, and while the flurry of white feathers circled overhead like some screeching apparition from the billabong he scanned the area both beneath and above his eye-line. Trouble was, the way the echoes bounced around the valley, the voices could've been coming from any direction. Down below in the creek, from where he'd just come. Over on the western ridge, where last few rays of daylight were luring the cockatoos like a swarm of demonic moths. Even further east along the creek where it cut sheer cliffs through the steeper part of the valley, the gorge which every kid at school this side of the Fleurieu Peninsula knew the Abos had tried to claim as sacred land a hundred years ago to stop the Myponga dam being built upstream. Those same cliffs, in fact, down which he'd sometimes spied abseiling rock climbers through the Remington's telescopic lens and pretended to pick them off one by one.

He let go of the roo's tail, allowing the carcass to slide down his back and thump to the ground. In the same motion, he hitched the Remington to his shoulder and pointed it in the direction of the gorge. From this height, even through the telescopic lens, it was difficult to see anything behind the eucalypts. Would've been much easier from higher up near the humpy, but he thought he could make out the top of the gorge at least. Was nothing of any particular note, just the hazy green of the trees and the grey of the craggy gorge. Certainly no flashes of bright yellow or orange

or red bouncing down the cliff face like yoyos on extended twine. Man these pricks annoyed him, almost as much as these noisy fucking cockatoos. Had considered many times reporting them to the cops, even to the South Australian Water authorities, but wasn't he also trespassing on government land? Would be too many fuck'n questions fired in his direction, and that he needed like a .22-cal to the head.

Still, if the gorge was where the voices had echoed from, that'd be just fine. Those cliffs were far enough away not to be of any concern to him, at least four or five kilometres as the crow flies, maybe even six. The acoustics of the valley made anyone seem a lot closer than they actually were. Hell, he'd even heard cars driving along the causeway across the top of the dam on certain days, usually when the easterly was blowing down from the hills, which wasn't often. First time he'd heard the muffled engines of the cars, though, he'd nearly browned his camos. Thought it was water rumbling down the creek from the dam's overflow. Had been tracking fresh spoor through the rocky bed at the time and thought he was a gonner. Had had horrible visions of being washed out to sea by the flash flood, his bloated body eaten by great whites just offshore where he'd spent the greater part of his miserable fuck'n life.

*Nice irony there, hey?* Local fishermen might pull up a severed arm or leg in their nets a few weeks later, but there wouldn't be much else left of him to bury in St. Peter's cemetery. Perhaps that was the way to go, hey? Didn't they say drowning was the least painful way to end your days? But why waste your fuck'n time? If you're gonna go, just put the barrel under your chin and pull the trigger.

He scanned the gorge once more through the telescopic lens, then, happy he hadn't missed anything, lowered the barrel and hitched the Remington over his left shoulder. The cockatoos were now coming to roost in one of the eucalypts three-quarters up the western hill face, wings flapping, beaks clawing for a perch, many of them hanging upside down and squawking their displeasure at the others for not allowing them any space to gain a perch. The sheer weight of numbers had completely covered the tree in a blur of white and bent several branches arching toward the ground.

He waited another few seconds listening for any more signs of unwanted visitors. Satisfied that he could hear nothing more than the occasional squawk of an irritated cockatoo, he picked up the roo by the base of its tail and jiggled it into a comfortable position over his right shoulder, then started back up the hill.

Nearing the crest of the hill, he stepped over the flattened barbed wire fence out of government land and into the derelict Johnson farmstead, safe in the knowledge that he could orientate himself back to the clearing from here in the middle of the night with a blindfold wrapped around his head and his hands tied behind his back. But it wasn't until twenty minutes later, when Venus began dancing in the pale pink sky, that he heard the voices again, causing his heart to skip a beat.

They were coming from the humpy.



The thought flashed across his mind that she had found his secret hiding place behind the Johnson farm. Then he realised how bloody ridiculous that was. For a start, his ex-wife (no, not ex-wife yet, his soon-to-be-ex-wife, the scourge of his fuck'n life) would never be seen outside a shopping mall or beautician's salon. Secondly, she might have instructed her fuck'n lawyers to skin him alive like one of his own roos, but even she wouldn't dare have him followed all the way out here by some private investigator to find out what meagre possessions he might be stashing away from her greedy, prying eyes. Even that was beyond the depths of her considerable depravity, but not by fuck'n much.

Thirdly, this woman sitting on the granite rock in front of the campfire was at least ten years Sarah's junior. Prettier too, but holy-fuck'n-moly it was like looking back to New Year's Eve 1997, when he'd first seen those sparkling blues flash their come-fuck-me look across the crowded bar at the Grenfell Tavern. Should've known straight away she was danger with a big fuck'n "D". But women do that to ya, don't they? Make you doubt your natural instincts and convince you they're all fuck'n sweetness and sugarplum pudding, while

in reality they're noth'n of the sort, more like meat pies made with rotting flesh and makeup pastry smothered with a thick stench of perfume sauce. Still, he might have dropped out of high school two years earlier than most, but he wasn't that stupid to need a second lesson on the dangers of the opposite sex. Like kangaroos, they were best kept at a nice safe distance —preferably through the lens of a gun.

Luckily, the bitch sitting on the granite rock hadn't seen him yet. Neither had the dark-haired guy in the white T and fancy-pants jeans. For some reason they were both examining her left foot, he kneeling and holding her outstretched leg with her hiking boot resting on his thigh, she with both hands on the smooth surface of the granite rock either side of her hips to balance herself. She winced when he tried to manipulate her foot to get a better look at it.

Max could tell two things immediately. They were weekend hikers (or even amateur climbers; he was no fuck'n expert on telling the difference) that had fucked up somewhere in the valley and got themselves in trouble. Now they had somehow stumbled upon his humpy and wanted help. He knew this was going to happen someday. Knew someone would discover its whereabouts at some point ever since he'd hammered the roof onto the three corrugated walls back in the summer of '96-97. Had even made special precautions should such a thing happen. But even still, the sight of these two punks had taken him well and truly off guard.

The other thing he noticed, which was plain fuck'n obvious even from where he stood, was private school. No matriculation certificate or fashion degree needed there. The stigma of daddy's money was stamped across their fuck'n foreheads: SILVER FUCKING SPOONIES. Probably hadn't done a hard day's work in all their life. Could tell by the attention to perfect fuck'n detail, as if they had nothing better to do than sit in front of the mirror all bloody day, especially the Sarah-bitch clone: the perfectly applied eyeliner and lipstick; the perfectly manicured fingernails; the perfect blonde hair falling perfectly down to her perfect shoulders (and not a perfect fuck'n strand out of place, even though she was obviously in a considerable amount of pain); the silver pendant slipping between her perfect cleavage; the perfect North

Face sleeveless jacket and hiking pants that said, “Hi, I’m perfectly casual,” but were a little too perfectly fuck’n casual for his liking, like a four-wheel drive that had never been out of the city and off the fuck’n bitumen.

Her fella was the same. Fuck’n metrosexual nancy boy trying to look rugged in his two-hundred buck pair of Lees and sneakers. His T-shirt probably cost more than his weekly rent, if he actually paid any fuck’n rent. Plain fuck’n ridiculous, the pair of them, but no matter how he felt he wasn’t going to let his day turn to ruin. He snapped himself back. He’d been standing gaping at them like a fuck’n idiot for nearly fifteen seconds, but they hadn’t noticed him yet, thank fuck. So, with the Remington and roo still slung over his shoulder, he cautiously edged sideways behind the bough of the closest eucalypt, keeping the good-for-noth’n brats trained in his sight. For a moment he even considered edging even further away down the slope while they were preoccupied with her foot, biding his time until they gave up waiting for whoever—him—to return to the campsite and moved on.

But what if they went snooping around the humpy? Looked like ol’ fancy-pants had already put his beaky nose where it wasn’t fuck’n welcome. A long eucalypt branch the size of a walking stick, Max noticed, was sticking straight into the air near the roo skins on the drying rack, which was nothing more than an old fence line he’d salvaged from the farmhouse and erected to the other side of the humpy, the side that seemed to get most of the midday sun. The branch itself was no problem. The fact that it was gripped in the teeth of the mantrap he’d set was. They’d been snooping all right, and set off the trap in the process. That alone meant he couldn’t back away and let them go just yet, not until he found out who the fuck they were and what they found. Pretty unlikely they were coppers staking him out and pretending to have hit a spot of bother; they were both too good looking to be cops, but you could never be too sure, could ya? No fuck’n way.

He watched the bitch take out a mobile phone from her pocket, dial a number, wait for several seconds, then shake her head in disgust when it didn’t connect.

“You sure it’s broken?” the guy said, now looking up from her foot to her face. “It just looks like a bad sprain.”

Shoving the mobile back into her pocket, she bit her bottom lip and momentarily closed her eyes, sighing, just like fuck’n Sarah. “Yeah, I’m sure,” she said, pouting her perfect lips. “I think I know the difference between twisting my ankle and breaking it, don’t you?”

Max couldn’t help but hate the withering look she flashed at the guy in front of her. How many times had he seen that fuck’n look before? The guy was only trying to help. Was every bitch on this planet so bloody ungrateful?

“Well, what do you want me to do about it?” said the guy.

She pushed his hand away from her ankle and took her outstretched leg off of his thigh, placing her foot on the ground with care and testing its strength. She tried to stand, then gave up almost immediately, plonking her perfect arse back down onto the granite rock.

“Maybe you should do something useful for a change and go get some help,” she said.

*Got him all twisted around your perfect li’l finger, haven’t you? Max thought. But you’re a bit too clever for your own fuck’n good, aren’t ya? Girl like you gotta be careful. Might find a guy who don’t appreciate being talked down to like that.*

The guy stood up, shaking his head. He was tall and slim, a good half-foot taller than himself, Max guessed, probably a couple of inches over six foot. From his angle behind the eucalypt and slightly downhill, the top of the guy’s head wasn’t much lower than the roof of the humpy. Max wasn’t fazed. He’d had his run-ins with a lot of guys taller than himself over the years and come out on top most of the time. This guy was no different. The taller they are, the harder they fall.

Fancy pants was eyeing the Cherokee over his woman’s shoulder, and Max wondered if he knew the keys were dangling in the ignition. Would solve all their problems, wouldn’t it? Nice and simple. Would just have to follow the wheel tracks through the high grass back around the crop of eucalypts to the burnt out farmhouse, then



follow the driveway out of the farmyard through the rusty gate and onto the A131. Then it was as easy as taking the main road all the way back to Adelaide through Myponga and the South Eastern Expressway. They didn't know how close they were to safety. Part of him wished they would just go ahead and do it and leave him the fuck alone. They'd probably return the vehicle tomorrow and give their polite, private school apologies, maybe even offer him some money for his troubles, but part of him also knew that that coming back here would be the biggest mistake they ever fuck'n made.

"That could take hours," the guy said, returning his gaze from the Cherokee back to her. "I'm not leaving you. Besides, it's gonna be dark soon. We're better off waiting here until whoever built this thing comes back," and his arm shot out, pointing at the humpy to his right, then dropped back to his side. "He can't be too far. You heard the shots. We can ask him to drive us back to Adelaide, or even the nearest hospital."

Unconsciously rubbing her left ankle, the bitch rolled her eyes again. "What makes you think he'll help? Guys who live out here don't want to be around people. That's the whole bloody idea."

*You got it kid, Max thought. No people. No troubles, and no bitches to ruin your day.*

Fancy pants dropped his shoulders. "Sal, what d'you want me to do?"

*Be a fuck'n man and grow some balls! Show her who wears the fuck'n pants you pathetic son-of-a-bitch!*

Sal, still tenderly rubbing her left ankle, flicked her head over her shoulder in the direction of the Cherokee. "Go see if you can find the keys to the car," she said. "They must be somewhere."

"What if he's carrying them in his pocket or something?"

"Just like you?" Sal blurted, then bit her bottom lip.

*All men are the same, that gesture said. All stupid, and all fuck'n useless.* Then the control was back.

Lost it there for a second, Max reckoned, but now she was taking several deep breaths to suffocate her annoyance before she said something else she'd probably regret. Not that her dickless boyfriend would do anything about it if she did.

“Jade, just do me a favour and... Have... A... Look...”

Somewhere in one of the eucalypts nearby a kookaburra began laughing, as if it could sense the humour in the moment. It kept taunting the humans below with its stupid laugh for a few moments until it decided it was bored with the entertainment on the ground and flew away to mock someone else it could find.

Jade, though, didn't seem to even notice the kookaburra and was now scanning the contents of the humpy through the open side. Max could see his mind working overtime, trying to work out where the fuck the keys would be put for safekeeping, if they were put there at all. At a quick glance, Max could see that nothing had been moved or taken. The steel traps, saws, axes, spades, and hunting knives were still where they should be, hanging on the inside walls. The swag was unrolled on the ground in the far corner, untouched since he'd risen with the galahs and cockatoos this morning. Both his makeshift first-aid kit and toolbox sat closed on top of the army trunk abutting the closest wall, its padlock locked and dangling in its latch. Everything pretty much accounted for, he reckoned, even the spare petrol cans. Only thing missing was the canvas waterbag that had been hanging outside on the branch to which the rear of the humpy was tethered for extra stability.

*So that's all they were fuck'n after*, he thought, now eyeing the waterbag propped against the granite rock at the bitch's feet. Ol' fancy pants had obscured it from his sight while he'd been examining her foot. He felt a damn sight better about that. They hadn't been snooping around after all, but had set off the mantrap with their makeshift walking stick to get around the drying rack and grab the waterbag, which Sal was now reaching for.

At the moment she unscrewed the cap and brought the waterbag to her lips, Jade finally figured out the fuck'n obvious and turned his sights upon the Cherokee once again, making a step toward it.

Now, Max figured, was the moment to introduce himself to these good-for-noth'n brats.