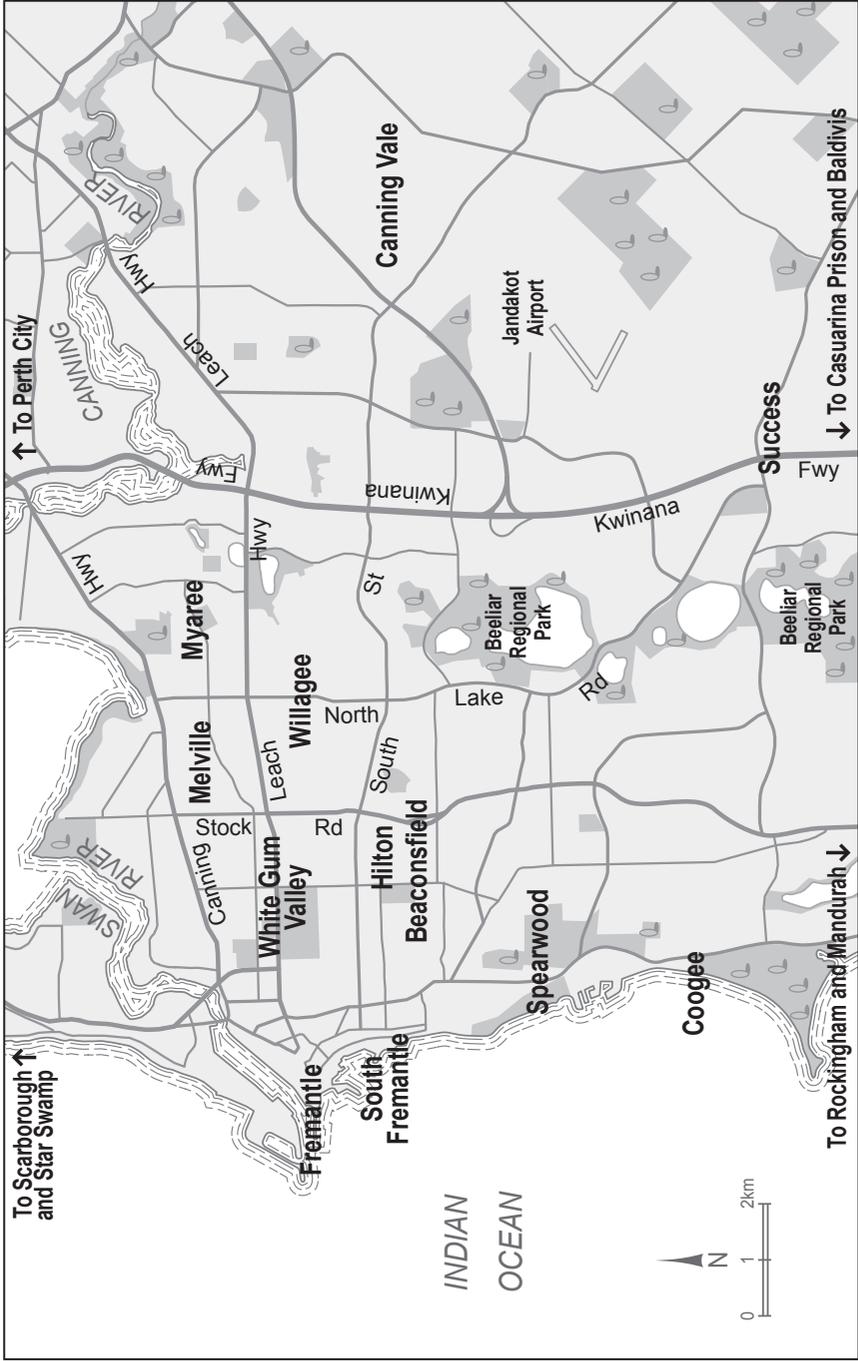


ALAN CARTER

**GETTING
WARMER**



Fremantle and surrounding suburbs

Nec prece nec pretio ... a recta via deduci.

Neither by entreaty nor by bribery ... be drawn from the right path.

Fremantle City motto

PROLOGUE

'Do you hate them?'

'Why would I?'

'What's going through your mind at the time?'

They've sent me a Psych graduate from Edith Cowan. Can you believe it? She's told me more about herself in the first five minutes than she'll get out of me in the next five years. Fresh out of uni and she reckons she can just enter a mind like mine and have a look round. Don't go in there, darling, you might never get out again.

'Nothing.'

'Nothing?'

'That's right. Nothing's going through my mind at the time. Empty. I don't hate them. I don't get a blood lust every full moon. Here today, gone tomorrow. Nothing personal.'

She's talking about the ones who survived. I'm not. She finishes writing her notes and gives me a pretty little frown.

'I find that hard to believe. I mean, their injuries. You seem to have so much anger inside you.'

'Are you calling me a liar, Marissa?'

I can see up her skirt, the smooth inside of her thighs. She knows it. She shifts, moves the notepad to block the view.

Too late, it's in my head now and it's in yours too.

Isn't it, Marissa?

She feels my eyes on her, hears my voice inside her. Wishes she hadn't taken me on. Now she is all alone with me, I remind her of all the bad things in her sorry life. She feels me under her skin. She feels me in all her private places.

I know I've won. Again.

1

Thursday, January 21st. Morning.
Thompsons Lake, Beelihar Regional Park, Western Australia.

The cadaver dog lay in the meagre shade of a paperbark, panting for dear life. It was heading for another forty-degree day, the sixth in a row. There was smoke in the air; a few kilometres away a grey column billowed into the sky: one of a handful of maliciously lit bushfires ringing the city. Detective Senior Constable Philip 'Cato' Kwong checked the time on his mobile: 9.36 a.m.

A handler gave Mintie some water. As dogs went, Mintie was not half-bad. She was generally quiet, good-natured, and served a useful social purpose. Cato, no big fan of dogs, had come across plenty of humans who couldn't tick those three boxes. Minties: the police PR department thought it was a good idea to hand out the lollies to teenagers maddened by grog on Australia Day. Maybe it would help them stop and think before throwing a punch or glassing a stranger. All would be revealed next Tuesday, January 26th. The dog stirred herself, lapped gratefully at the bowl and reluctantly followed her handler back into the glare.

The search grid was approximately ten by twenty metres. It was in a patch of bush reserve known as Thompsons Lake, at the southern end of the freeway. The lake itself had gone down the gurgler with a succession of dry winters followed by the summer heat. All that remained was a crust of cracked mud and desiccated waist-high grass. To keep the native animals in and the feral cats and dirt bikers out, the whole area was ringed by a high fence. That posed the first problem. How do you get a body in? They'd all just trooped through a turnstile gate on Russell Road like they were headed for a day at the Royal Show. There were vehicle access tracks

into the park but none near here. Cato could think of plenty of places to bury a corpse but this wasn't top of his list.

White-tailed black cockatoos screeched tetchily from the treetops. The handler whispered to Mintie, patted her and set her free to follow her nose. A line of uniforms and emergency service volunteers started another grid sweep.

'I'm pretty sure I left her over there.'

Cato looked at the man who spoke. Gordon Francis Wellard: nudging late-forties, goatee, jaded bohemian look. Shorter than Cato had imagined but there was the hint of muscle to deter those who might want to take him for granted. Laugh lines spidered out from crafty eyes. You could imagine him sitting outside Gino's midmorning, stretching out his macchiato and pontificating on the dearth of arts funding in a so-called boom state.

Wellard was sitting handcuffed in a fold-out picnic chair between two corrective services officers, all of them sharing a smoke and a joke. It was a big day out for him. Wellard was already serving life for one murder. Now they were searching for another earlier victim, Briony Susan Petkovic. Bree, as her mother called her, had been missing for over five years. This was unfinished business for the missing girl's mother, Wellard's ex-wife. That was her, standing a few metres away in a sun hat, singlet and cargoes holding a metal T-probe.

Shellie Petkovic had known Wellard had something to do with it from the moment her daughter went missing. According to the files, she had endured Wellard's taunting for the last five years. She had pleaded with him to give Bree up. Countless prison visits, some at her request, many at his invitation, some lasting the full hour, others just thirty seconds. All to no avail. He made it up as he went along, according to how he might be feeling that day.

But now that he was locked up and thought he had something to gain, he'd finally reconsidered his position. The police had been nervous about putting his bizarre conditions to the mother but she'd consented without hesitation – anything was better than not knowing. So here she was with the T-probe, prodding the earth for

her daughter's body under the direction of the murderer. In spite of the heat, the idea made Cato's skin goosebump.

'Or maybe over there?' Wellard said, a pensive finger to his lips, like he was deciding where to put the new furniture. 'Yes, getting warmer, definitely.'

Funny as.

DI Mick Hutchens stepped between man and ex-wife, obscuring their views of each other and trying to keep the whole thing from unravelling. This was his idea. DI Hutchens obviously scented a result. All Cato could smell was sweat, smoke and something sour.

Mintie barked once, wagged her tail and pawed at a patch of sandy ground.

They surrounded the dog as she sat waiting for her treat. The handler patted Mintie and gave her a dog lolly. Hutchens had a glint in his eye. He nodded at a minion and a T-probe went into the parched soil. There was a soft scrape, like a hiss, as if the earth was exhaling a long-held breath.

The probe hit something. The underling pulled it out, marked the spot, and tried again a few centimetres away. It hit something again. A few centimetres further away, another strike. A sob escaped from the mother. Wellard had gone dead quiet. On the outer fringe of the circle he tried to stand to get a closer look but the corrections officers pressed him back into his seat.

Cato stepped back with the rest as the shovels came out and two men began to dig.

A stench rose. The body was crawling with maggots and other insects. Flies descended on the uncovered feast. It was about a metre and a half long and it had four legs.

'It's a fucking pig,' observed Hutchens.

Wellard giggled from the comfort of his picnic chair. The mother screamed and swung her metal T-probe at his head. Cato instinctively stepped in to protect him and that was the last thing he remembered.

2

Friday, January 22nd. Midmorning.

Fremantle, Western Australia.

The place stank of stale beer and alcopops and the floor stuck to her shoes. Lara Sumich shoved her ID into the bar manager's face. He looked like he hadn't slept much, nor had he brushed his teeth recently.

'What can I do for you Detective. Senior. Constable?'

His name was Luke and he'd addressed his question to her chest.

'The security video footage from last night. I'd like to see it.'

Luke looked puzzled. 'I don't remember any trouble?'

'A bloke got a bottle shoved in his face outside on the street. He reckons he had a bit of push and shove earlier on in here with the guy that did it.'

'First I've heard of it.'

'Maybe you need to streamline your internal communication processes.'

'What?'

'Talk to your staff a bit more.' Lara was losing patience. 'The footage?'

'Magic word?'

'How about Liquor Licensing? Can we get a move on?'

They went behind the bar, down a cluttered corridor and into an office. It was standard-issue grubby: desk, chair, paperwork, ashtray, computer, and a poster of a naked young woman body-painted in Dockers colours and holding a Sherrin footy. The two video monitors were on a separate table: one full screen and the other split into four, feeding from cameras on the dance floor, behind the bar, in the foyer, and covering the entrance. On one of the screens a cleaner crossed the dance floor, mop and bucket in hand, and on another pedestrians hugged the shade outside as the heat built.

‘Disk or thumb drive?’ said Lara.

‘We can do both, which do you prefer?’

‘Disk. Everything from about eight until closing.’

‘No worries.’ Luke clicked and tapped for a while, then handed her two disks. ‘Happy viewing.’

There was a muffled yelp and on the monitor Lara saw the cleaner run back onto the dance floor waving her arms. Lara followed Luke back down the hallway.

‘Mister Luke, Mister Luke!’

‘What now for fuck’s sake?’

‘Mister Luke in the toilet.’

‘What are you on about?’ He turned to Lara. ‘They’re cheap as chips but you can’t get any sense out of these people.’

Charming. Lara didn’t bother replying.

‘Go now, Mister, look in the toilet. Men’s.’

This time Lara led the way, gesturing for the pair to wait as she nudged open the door. Nightclub toilets tend to be a bit whiffy but this one smelled like an abattoir. All of the cubicle doors were open, except one. Blood was coming from in there, a dark and sticky puddle on the scuffed blue tiles. Lara looked under the door gap and saw feet in a pair of skanky trainers. Not wanting to contaminate the immediate scene, she went into the adjoining cubicle, stood on the bowl and looked over.

Cato Kwong felt the lump on his head. It was just above the hairline to the left of the temple. It had gone down a little but was still tender. The wound hadn’t needed stitches, just the medical equivalent of glue and sticky tape. He’d been out cold for five minutes before waking with the migraine from hell and blood gumming his left eye. He dimly recalled the mother sobbing ‘Sorry, sorry’, Wellard being led away cackling, and DI Hutchens swimming into vision.

‘Cato, mate, you okay? Thatsaboy.’

He’d been released from Fremantle Hospital after scans and tests confirmed no skull fractures or apparent brain damage. Cato spent the evening at home nursing a headache and evil thoughts about DI Hutchens and Gordon Wellard. After swallowing a couple of

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Panadol, he'd opted for an early night. No Jake until Tuesday, they were going to the Australia Day Cracker Night down at the harbour and then the boy would be staying the rest of the week before going back to mum and her new boyfriend.

Cato took a sip of coffee and looked out the window across the low roofs of Fremantle and the shimmer of Indian Ocean beyond the Norfolk pines. Another forty-degree day, but this time he was in an air-conditioned open-plan office. Now there was the paperwork and the post-mortem on Wellard's big day out.

Gordon Francis Wellard was a sadistic, controlling, attention-seeking psycho – they were ten a penny in Casuarina, Western Australia's maximum-security chook house. But he was reputedly DI Hutchens' psycho, an informant groomed since the early days of the DI's career. Both men had prospered along the way: Hutchens with his career trajectory and Wellard with his seeming untouchability in whatever he was accused of doing over the years. Now he'd embarrassed Hutchens by being sent down for murder. Wellard needed to redeem himself. He should at least tell them where the bodies were buried.

Hutchens really believed he'd got through to the man. 'Look Cato, I know he's a prick but he's staunch. He'll do the right thing. He owes me.'

According to the file, Shellie Petkovic had endured three years of wedded hell with Wellard. The first thing she did when she was free of him was to revert to her maiden name. The charismatic man she thought she married revealed his true colours on their honeymoon at Kalbarri Beach Resort. A trivial argument ended with her needing two dozen stitches at the local hospital. Over the next two years Wellard bullied her, bashed and abused her, raped her, stole from her, and stalked her. Every time Shellie tried to leave she was menaced and manipulated into compliance. Bree, her daughter by a previous relationship, bore witness to the unfolding nightmare and, like Shellie, fell under his control. At thirteen Bree was skipping school, by fourteen she was drinking and doing drugs supplied by Wellard, and by fifteen she was a missing persons statistic.

During one of those rare periods when Shellie had found the

nerve to seek refuge with a friend, she received a phone call from her daughter. Bree said she was with Wellard. That was the last time they spoke. Two days later, when asked where Bree was, Wellard said he didn't know. Neighbours reported hearing a row there that night of Bree's call but they'd reported lots of rows and nothing ever came of it. No trace of Bree was found and no matter how hard they tried, police could not pin her disappearance on Wellard. Briony was a wayward child, they concluded, she could be anywhere. After her daughter went missing, Shellie Petkovic found the courage to leave Wellard for good. The case remained open but the file gathered the computer equivalent of dust. Shellie kept bothering the police, reporting cryptic, taunting phone calls and comments from Wellard, but all they could advise was a restraining order to add to the bundle she already had on him. Two and a half years later, Wellard was arrested for the murder of his new de facto, Caroline Penny. He was found guilty at trial and locked away.

Facing life inside, Wellard had made contact with his old mate DI Hutchens and offered up Bree's whereabouts. Maybe he was angling for favoured status and early parole for his cooperation. Maybe he just wanted to remain the centre of attention and have a bit of fun. Cato could only go off the official reports and they didn't have a space on the forms to record any individual psycho's twisted *raison d'être*.

Cato's head had started to pound again. He had no idea what his boss was expecting from this paperwork. A whitewash? A delicately underplayed *mea culpa*? A flick pass to a scapegoat? Cato had been down this path before and vowed, if only to himself, never to cover Hutchens' padded arse again. Yet here he was, in from the Stock Squad cold and granted a second chance in Hutchens' hand-picked Fremantle Detectives squad. Maybe this was the price he was destined to pay for his sins, trailing behind his boss with a yellow plackie bag and a pooper-scooper. Cato steeled himself for a face-to-face with Hutchens. He was about to knock on the DI's door when it opened.

'Just the man I wanted to see,' said Hutchens. 'A Stock Squad expert.'

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‘Sir?’

‘That pig we found yesterday. Some sick bastard murdered it with a fucking nail gun. Can you believe these people?’

‘That’s probably a job for the RSPCA, boss.’

Hutchens patted his grey forward-comb. ‘I know, it’s just sick, that’s all. Poor bugger, never did anyone any harm.’

Cato had never imagined the DI would have a soft spot for all creatures great and small.

According to Hutchens, the preliminary forensics on the scene had found no trace of the missing girl but had revealed the horrors of the pig’s last moments at the hands of a sicko with a nail gun. Whoever did this would show up on their books sooner or later; sickos tended to switch species at will. In the meantime they had to deal with the wash-up from the Wellard fiasco.

‘I’m going to see the fucker tomorrow, wring the bastard’s neck,’ said Hutchens grimly. ‘If he thinks this is the way to get what he wants, he’s dreaming.’

‘What *does* he want?’ said Cato.

‘Twenty minutes in the showers with a big rough boyfriend to focus his mind, that’s what.’

‘What do you want me to do with the report? I haven’t got much room to move. Too many witnesses.’ Excuses excuses; so much for Cato’s solemn vow of truth, integrity and no more pooper-scoopers.

‘Fuck the report. What’s wrong with the truth? Shellie consented to the terms of the search because she’ll do anything to find her daughter. Not my fault Wellard’s a prick. Write that, write whatever you like.’ Hutchens gave him a funny look. ‘You worry about the paperwork too much, Cato, you’re turning into a bureaucrat. I hired you to be a copper.’

‘Sorry sir, I do my best.’

‘Instinct, mate, that’s what it’s all about.’

‘I’ll remember that. Thanks, sir.’

‘What’s all this “sir” shit? We’re not on parade. You taking the piss?’

‘Never.’

‘Good. Go and see Shellie. Get her squared away.’

The phone went and Hutchens grabbed it. A moment of murmuring and his frown dissolved. 'Fucking beauty. See you in ten, Lara.'

'Good news?' said Cato.

'Too right.' Hutchens beamed. 'Body in the dunny at the Birdcage, blood all over the place.'