

**BAD
SEED**

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ALAN CARTER

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FREMANTLE PRESS

For Vilya, Isaac, Grace and Liam

PROLOGUE

Shanghai, Songjiang District, Sunday, March 9th, 2013.

Zhou hadn't slept well. He was still sick; a bug that he couldn't shake off. Once again he'd spent most of the night squatting in the toilet, emitting a foul liquid stream. He took a swig from his flask of tea, hoping it would stay in his stomach for a while. The kids were down with the bug too, complaining the whole time, but the hospital was full and the drugs were too expensive. The kids just needed to finish their education and get a job with computers so they wouldn't end up a city sanitation worker like him, clearing up everyone else's shit. The boy was a worry though, fifteen and already flirting with the local gang. Another cramp gripped Zhou's guts, he wanted to fart but he didn't dare. He stood on the river shore among the debris of plastic and aluminium and surveyed the earthmovers rumbling across the mud on the far side. Maybe one day they would live in one of those fancy clean skyscrapers and have their own yokel servant to bully. He lit a Double Happiness cigarette and drew deeply, gazing at the Huangpu River and the yellow-grey smog hovering over his life.

The river was brown and sluggish today, like nearly every day. The gulls flew low, squawking half-heartedly. A sand barge chugged by, low in the water, filthy smoke curling out of its funnel. Around him people went about their business of scraping a living. Zhou shivered and pulled his jacket tighter, wondering when spring might arrive to drive away the sickness and misery. He took a final gulp of tea. A full and stinking communal bin awaited his attention, a builder's skip brimful of grease and oil, rotting food, cans and

bottles. He readied his shovel and hose and flicked his cigarette into the river. That's when he noticed the dark shape bobbing in the water.

Was it a body? He couldn't tell. Then there were more. Many more. The river seemed to change colour: brown, rust, red. He tried to count the shapes but it was impossible, there must be hundreds. It was like the stories his grandfather told him of the Japanese occupation – the massacres, the rivers of blood. He could see flesh now, pinky-brown torsos rolling in the current. As one edged close to the shore he could finally make out clearly what it was.

'It's a fucking pig,' he said.

Thousands of swine floating down the Huangpu River on a chill morning in March. It had to be an omen for something terrible. Others had seen them now; pointing, chattering, cursing, even laughing. He too started to laugh.

'Shanghai Pork Soup! Throw in some dumplings. It's breakfast for those rich bastards down in Pudong.'

He cackled. He couldn't help himself. If he didn't laugh he would surely cry.

PART 1

1

Coogee, Western Australia, Monday, August 5th. Dawn.

Cato Kwong wondered how long it had been since the goldfish was fed. He sprinkled a couple of flakes in the tank and the fish lazily vacuumed the surface. Rain lashed the windows and another southerly gust shook the walls. Across the road the ocean was churned milky green-grey. Foaming rollers pounded the limestone groyne of the marina. Several million dollars worth of pleasure craft bounced around like corks in a washing machine. Cato looked out across the luxury development they'd called Port Coogee. It was one of several coastal confections that had emerged from the undergrowth south of Fremantle, like dieback in a national park. It had been built on industrial wasteland and offered sparkling ocean views and the chance to live the dream. The blocks alone were priced anything up to three-quarters of a million. But here in Coogee the property boom seemed to have faltered. Cato glanced out of the rain-spattered window. Sand from the many unsold lots wind-whipped and swirling across the deserted streets; half-built McMansions abandoned with flapping tarps; a security guard patrolling in a Hyundai runabout to scare away undesirables. The guard had failed miserably today.

The master of the house, Francis Tan, had been the first to die – and the quickest. Cato turned to the sound of bootie-muffled steps on the metal footplates. It was DI Mick Hutchens, phone glued to his ear, tiptoeing across the blood in a blue paper suit.

'Yes sir, I will still be at the hearing as arranged and on time.' He frowned at Cato, rolled his eyes, and mouthed 'fuckwit'. 'I

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appreciate that, sir. Look it's a bit of an abattoir down here so I'd better get back to it. I'll keep you posted throughout the day. Cheers.'

One of Duncan Goldflam's forensics boffins shuffled by, taking in the wretched scene on a video camera and murmuring her commentary along the way. Hutchens waited until she'd moved on.

'Okay, lead me through it.'

Cato took a deep breath and waded in. He pointed towards the front door. 'The mains power switch was either manually flicked off or triggered by a short circuit or power cut in the storm. We'll know later. Either way the result's the same, darkness.'

Technicians measured, cameras flashed, shadows played on walls. Outside, the weather got worse. Cato led Hutchens up the wide polished jarrah staircase past a large gilt-framed family portrait. Their steps echoed dully on the footplates; along the way there were numbered markers on blood splashes, prints, and smudges. 'No signs of forced entry. Our killer heads straight to the master bedroom.'

The room was tasteful and subdued in its decoration: a large picture window overlooked the frothing Indian Ocean, thick cream-coloured carpet, en suite bathroom, and walk-in robes. A Nellie Crawford still-life needed straightening. They stood on the threshold and surveyed the sprays of blood on the walls and sticky dark puddles on the bed. A naked man, face down, with the back of his head caved in.

'Victim one: Francis Tan, age forty-three. No struggle. He never even got to wake up.'

Next to him, a naked woman lay sprawled on her back, half out of the bed, a bruised and bloodied left arm hanging down and shattered wrist grazing the carpet. Face gone.

'Victim two: Genevieve Tan, age thirty-nine. She probably woke up as her husband was being attacked. Tried to do something. Failed. Some defence wounds on the arms and hands.'

The boss didn't ask Cato how he knew it was her for sure with the face obliterated. Just as well, this wasn't the time to tell everybody he recognised the birthmark low on her hip. He knew

everyone in this house, at one time they had been as close as family. Closer. He was used to wading through other people's bloody nightmares. Now he'd taken a wrong turn, got lost, found himself back up his own street. Inside his own bad dream.

Hutchens nodded, businesslike: tick, move on. Cato felt the strong need for a hot shower and a long sleep; he was ready to tear adrift, like those boats rocking in the gale. They followed the sad trail down the hall to the next bedroom: a Bob Marley poster on the wall, clothes erupting from drawers and scattered on the floor, an acoustic guitar and a Fender Strat leaning against a bookcase. A desk cluttered with files and a laptop, an unmade bed. Just inside the door, a body curled foetus-like on a blood-soaked sheepskin rug. Jocks. A T-shirt. Eyes wide open.

'Joshua Tan. Fourteen. Must have heard the commotion and was on his way to find out what was going on. Again, defence wounds, he tried to put up a fight.'

There was one more bedroom. Duncan Goldflam, forensic honcho, just coming out as they were going in.

'Dunc?' said Hutchens.

A shake of the head. 'This might be the one that finishes me, boss.'

Kanye on the walls: a double bed, dressing table with make-up, tampons, pills. A framed happy snap of a couple, the young man with tickets on himself. No body here, just an awful lot of blood. Cato swallowed the metallic taste of nausea.

'Victim four: Emily Tan, sixteen. Still alive until about half an hour ago. She died on her way to hospital. She was the last.'

Then the killer had left. A bloody smear of size nine sock footprints down the stairs and out the front door, disappearing where he'd have put his shoes back on and went his merry way.

Hutchens thumbed over his shoulder. 'Coming up the stairs we passed a family photo. Five people. Where's the other one?'

'Matthew Tan. Nineteen. We haven't managed to locate him yet.'

'And no forced entry, so we assume either the door was unlocked or the killer was welcomed over the threshold. Or he had a key.'

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‘Fair bet,’ said Cato. He could see that even surrounded by all this carnage, the DI seemed to be distracted, somewhere else. Hutchens still hadn’t asked Cato how he knew so much about the family, so soon.

A call came in on Hutchens’ mobile. ‘Hold on a sec,’ his hand covered the mouthpiece. ‘Matthew Tan sounds like a good place to start, do you reckon?’

Another strong gust shook the walls. Cato couldn’t disagree. He knew the boy, and if anybody was capable of this, he was.

2

Lara Sumich was hunched over the toilet bowl, naked and spewing. It felt wonderful.

‘You did this to me, you bastard,’ she said to the man brushing his teeth behind her.

His reflection grinned in the bathroom mirror. ‘Love you,’ he said, through a mouthful of froth.

Lara wiped her face with the back of her hand and stood up. She nudged him aside from the washbasin and gargled some water. Then she pressed her lips to his broad back and wrapped her arms around his front, hands rippling over the belly hair, creeping lower.

‘How about John?’ she said.

He spat some toothpaste into the sink and rinsed. ‘Terrible name. He’ll end up working in a library, or a ballet dancer or something; overcompensating. Tyson, I reckon.’

She felt him growing under her touch. ‘Is that what you’re doing?’ she murmured. ‘Overcompensating?’

‘Always.’

Her mobile trilled. ‘Fuck.’

‘Leave it.’

But she couldn’t. It was her boss from Major Crime, DI Pavlou. ‘Put him down, dearie, and get yourself into the office, quick sharp.’

‘Something up?’ said Lara giving John a last regretful tug.

‘A nice juicy murder, back in your old patch. The name’s triggered all sorts of bells and whistles in the system.’

‘Be right in, boss.’ She terminated the call and quickly threw some clothes on.

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John was flushed and still proudly erect. ‘And what am I supposed to do with this?’

Lara gave him a chaste kiss on the cheek. ‘Later, sweetie.’

‘What if it turns out to be a girl?’ he said, wrapping a towel around himself and patting her tummy. ‘A little you, running around the place.’

‘Heaven forbid,’ said Lara, closing the door behind her.

*

‘So how come you know so much about them?’

DI Hutchens was on his way out of the office. There was a whiff of aftershave and a sharp trim to his greying forward comb. He was dressed to impress and seemed to have shed a couple of kilos in preparation for his summons before the court of public opinion. Cato had hoped the hostel inquiry would keep his boss distracted for quite a few more weeks but was reminded, once again, never to underestimate the man’s ability to concentrate when you least expected it.

‘I went to school and uni with Francis Tan. We were mates back then.’

Hutchens nodded. He liked proving himself right. ‘And the wife, face all bashed in, but you still knew it was her.’

‘Yes.’

‘Stayed in touch, did you, after school and that?’

‘Off and on.’

‘Okay.’ Hutchens checked his watch. ‘Fill me in later. Found the son yet?’

‘No.’

‘You happy to front the hyenas?’

‘Police Media have got their golden girl doing the honours. I’ll be standing next to her looking serious and capable.’

‘Okay, keep me posted. Squad meet at five.’

And Hutchens was gone.

‘Sarge?’

Cato sat at his desk and logged on.

‘Sarge?’

Cato realised somebody was talking to him. He was still getting used to the new rank, he'd only had it a week. To be precise he was still only Acting Detective Sergeant Kwong; it all depended on whether his predecessor, DS Meldrum, returned from his triple bypass operation. It seemed unlikely. 'Yep?'

It was DC Chris Thornton, a Sydneysider with ambitions beyond his abilities but, his saving grace, a keen eye for detail and order when pressed. He'd make a really good warehouse manager one day. 'Call for you on line two. Some woman.'

'Name?'

'Didn't give one. Said it was ... personal.' The last word accompanied by finger quotes and the kind of smirk that invites a headbutt.

Cato picked up the phone. After a few seconds he closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. This was the last thing he needed right now.

*

'So, over the course of nearly two years at Hillsvie, during nineteen ninety-six and nineteen ninety-seven, you were regularly sexually abused by the warden Peter Sinclair?'

Counsel Assisting the Inquiry, Andrew Burke QC, looked like he rowed for Guildford Grammar old boys. Fit, lean, grey and rich. And a chip on his shoulder – probably bullied at school. Hutchens had his phone on silent: he checked for any messages. Lots.

'Yes.' The witness was David Mundine, a nervous pudgy man in his late twenties who, judging by his yellowed fingers and twitches, was itching for a cigarette break. Hutchens glanced at the rap sheet in his file: drink, drug, property damage and burglary convictions and a restraining order taken out by the de facto. A gust from outside seemed to sway the whole building. Horizontal rain flayed the windows.

'Did you tell anyone what was going on during that time, David?'

'Yes, I told the police.'

Burke QC raised an eyebrow in apparent surprise. 'You told the police?'

'Yes.'

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‘Can you remember the name of the officer you spoke to?’

‘Yeah, Michael Hutchens, like the bloke from INXS.’ He pointed in the general direction. ‘Him over there.’

Just about everybody in the bland overcrowded room on the fourteenth floor of the St Georges Terrace tower block turned to get a good look at the man sitting three rows back. Hutchens ignored them and played Zen. So it was his turn to be the dancing bear in this seedy little sideshow. The judicial inquiry into sexual and physical abuse at state-run institutions was the gift that kept on giving for the tabloid media: lurid allegations, sex and violence, dastardly villains, and pitiful victims. Hutchens had already worked out that it was his role to prance across the stage in a humiliating costume while they prodded him with spears. Fine. All he had to do was get to the other side in one piece.

Burke QC sniffed like he’d become aware of something unpleasant on the soles of his expensive shoes. ‘And what response did you get, David?’

David looked down and took a sip of water. ‘He told me to piss off and stop wasting his time.’

Cue audience boos and hisses.

*

Cato was on Leach Highway in a pool Commodore driven by DC Deb Hassan. She’d been assigned the job of family liaison. In recent months she’d shown herself adept at prising nuggets of information and evidence from grieving relatives under the guise of being caring and concerned. They were headed to a riverside address in Shelley, a girlfriend of Matthew Tan’s. Cato’s mobile sounded. It was a voice he recognised: DSC Lara Sumich, one-time colleague now on secondment to Major Crime. They’d had a problematic relationship over the years. A one-night stand, quickly followed by a falling out as Cato stymied her efforts to frame a man for murder. Then a truce of sorts with Lara saving his life two years ago. They’d developed a mutual grudging respect but since her transfer to Major Crime they’d had little contact.

‘How’s the job going?’ said Cato.

‘Good, mate. Saw you on News 24 this morning next to Headline Hannah. How’s the new rank?’

‘Easy come, easy go. I’ve learnt not to get too attached to these fripperies. What can I do for you?’

‘We’re offering our support and expertise to your Tan inquiry.’

Whether we like it or not, thought Cato. ‘Thank you, why so soon?’

Usually it was seventy-two hours before Major Crime stepped in on a murder inquiry, the theory being that most homicides were three-day jobs: domestics and the like, devoid of any subtlety, forethought, or even a compelling motive. If they remained unsolved after three days then the shiny suits might either offer their expertise to the local office as required or even take over the whole show. But sometimes they wanted in from day one.

‘Lots of bodies, looks nasty, they’re a well-known family. It’s going to be bigger than Ben Hur.’

‘Talked to the boss about this?’ said Cato.

‘His phone’s turned off. I’ve been asked to start the ball rolling.’

Cato wasn’t surprised by the early move. She was right: it would be big but was it complex yet? Maybe all they had to do was bring in Matthew Tan and it would still be a three-day job. He could see no real harm in Lara attending the squad meeting later that day but he knew that his boss was as territorial as they come. He gave it a moment’s thought then invited her to the meeting. At worst he would suffer a bollocking from Hutchens and that wouldn’t be the first time.

‘Beauty,’ said Lara. ‘We’ll see you at five.’

Wind buffeted the car and the windscreen wipers struggled with the deluge. Power lines swayed and bits of trees bounced down the road. Cato’s mind returned to the call he’d taken just before he left the office: his sister, in tears, and all Cato could do was to promise he’d really try his best to be there.

Deb Hassan signalled a right off Leach Highway just before Shelley Bridge. A few minutes later they pulled up in front of a Louisiana plantation-style mansion with frontage to a black, storm-whipped Canning River. Cato and his colleague hurried up

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the path and rang the doorbell. It was only a few steps but still enough for them to get drenched. There was a yap and the door opened. Both poodle and girl had matching yellow bows. The girl was in a blue silk kimono and had a recently bedded look. According to the file, she was Lily Soong, a family friend, eighteen.

‘Yeah?’

Cato showed his ID. ‘Seen Matthew, Lily?’

She turned her head and yelled. ‘Matt!’ A grunt from up the stairs. ‘It’s the pigs. For you.’