

TRUE WEST

DAVID
WHISH-
WILSON



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PART I

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1.

Lee Southern drove with his palm against the steering wheel. He liked to feel the machinery blow in its tight iron constellation while he held the picture in his mind. The Ford F350 felt like an extension of his body and like him it was seventeen years old. Lee's father had bought it on the day that Lee was born. The minute he heard that Lee's mother was in labour he drove to the Geraldton Ford dealership and bought the F350 utility with its 351 Cleveland engine and straight green paint job.

Lee rested his arm on the driver's sill and let his hand wobble in the wind. The sun was headed toward the horizon and he could smell the baked limestone crests that rose and fell alongside him like the flanks of a snake. The floor of the tuart and banksia scrublands was covered in purple, blue, pink, white and yellow wildflowers. Spring was his favourite season but he wasn't looking at the flowers today.

Lee glanced in his wing mirror like he'd been doing the

last five hours. They would be coming for him if they weren't already. Some of them on bikes, some of them in their tricked-up Landy 4WDs.

The Knights would be coming as soon as they discovered their latest five-acre plantation had been destroyed: cropped to the base of the stalk and raked into mounds and set on fire with diesel.

Lee still had ash and dirt and the smell of mary-jane smoke on his hands, jeans and t-shirt. He'd left the acreage before dawn with the orange flames pumping flak-gun smuts into the bluing sky.

Lee patted the dash of the truck and eased on the accelerator. Just thinking about what he'd done made him speed. The Knights would be looking for his father's Holden Sandman, with its swirling death's-head decals along the sides and its *Knights01* plates – bestowed upon Jack Southern as first president of the club. Now that Lee's father was missing, Lee'd been ordered to return the plates to Greg Downs, the new Knights president and probable killer of his father. Instead, Lee had gone and torched their plantation.

Lee put his hand on the wheel and felt the tappets beating their quiet rhythm and the pistons firing and all of it a controlled dance of fire and fuel. The Ford F350 truck had been parked under a tarp at his uncle Gary's block outside Dongara. It was unlicensed and untraceable – the perfect vehicle for him to escape in.

Lee reached for the dash and took out a cigarette. The truck kept on straight without his hands on the wheel because of all

the weight. It was fitted out to provide him with an income when he got to the city. Last week, Lee and his uncle Gary had cut off the ute-bed and replaced it with an iron sheet. There were blocks of pig-iron ballast in the engine bay to balance out the home-crafted towing rig they'd bolted to the iron sheet. Onto that, Lee and his uncle had welded a winch scavenged from a Mack truck. A steel box filled with dollies and canvas slings and stands, chocks and jacks. A diesel generator and air compressor. Air cushions taken from his father's fifty-foot trawler. Snatch blocks and spare chain. Heavy-duty rope and steel cable. Bridles and skates and arrow sticks. A shovel and broom and tarpaulin. A toolbox and first-aid kit.

There was a whine that became a throaty roar and Lee took the wheel and stared in the wing mirror until he saw the riders. He was rolling at one hundred but they were coming on him – two riders in black leathers floating through the silver heat mirage and leaning into the banking turn. Lee reached under the seat for his father's Luger pistol. Before his father owned it, his grandfather had ratted it from a German officer in North Africa. His grandfather had pointed it at the German officer and, because they were instructed not to take prisoners, had tested it on the officer's brainpan. The pistol was Lee's father's favourite. He brandished it at meetings and fired it down at the gun club and disassembled and cleaned it whenever he needed to think.

Lee drove one-handed with the pistol aimed at his feet and looked back at the riders who'd moved out of single file and were now in tandem. He flicked off the safety and fingered the

magazine that was supposed to hold eight rounds but because of the tight spring only held seven. The riders were signalling to one another. Lee's instinct was to speed but the truck was top-heavy and cornered badly. He eased his foot and slowed to eighty, and then seventy, and held the pistol and calmed his breathing. The Luger was semiautomatic and if he wasn't careful he'd shoot out the magazine in seconds, and then he'd be unarmed.

The road dipped into the crazed pastel colours of the coastal woodland. The only movement ahead was a raven swimming in the watery mirage with roadkill in its beak. Lee could see the city as a brown smudge on the southern horizon, and then the bikes were alongside him, and then they were ahead, and he didn't recognise the twin BMWs or the riders whose panniers were full of camping supplies. They were soon out of sight and Lee immobilised the pistol and slipped it under his seat.

To steady himself, he checked the gauges and dials. Temperature and oil pressure were fine. His speed was regular. Another kilometre clicked over on the trip meter—three hundred so far. The fuel gauge was the only problem, headed toward empty. The V8 engine was thirsty and he only had forty-five dollars in his pocket. The plan was to hit the freeways as soon as he got to the city and hopefully snag a tow.

The rig rattled and the suspension creaked and the sun was warm on his arm. He liked the colour of his skin when it got a belting of sun. The regular creamy chocolate-milk colour went a deep iodine red. It was the same colour as his father's

skin that was year-round reddish-brown like the dirt in their yard and which made the black of his father's hair and the blue of his eyes more startling real.

Lee began to pass cars coming the other way, overtaking the long-haul road trains headed to the Pilbara mine sites laden with WABCO tyres, dongas, fleet vehicles and water tanks.

The brown bomber he'd taken before setting the plantation alight was wearing off – the first waves of fatigue and nausea began to tremble through his body. He hadn't eaten for thirty-six hours. He had thirteen bombers left but wanted to save them – the last of his father's stash. His father often went a week without sleep. He was fine for the first few days until he began shooting the speed every hour, and then his head went sideways and his paranoia grew. Lee would get the guns together and hide them in the shed, except for the Luger, which never left his father's belt.

There were pine plantations now. Lee wiped his eyes and then there were strawberry farms, plots growing cabbage and lettuce, and he could see the conical hats of Vietnamese in the fields. He tuned the radio and found a university station that was playing a Beasts of Bourbon track. Lee's music was in the trunk out back – Saxon, Slayer, Anthrax, Black Sabbath, AC/DC, Metallica, the new Megadeth, a whole lot of mixtapes.

The only music in the deck was one of his father's Johnny Cash compilations, bought at a Paynes Find service station when Lee was eleven and they were returning from one of their missions: leaving caches of weapons and food in the desert for when the invasion came. The Beasts of Bourbon

track ended and now it was a new band called Guns N' Roses, and Lee tapped along, and then he saw the Volvo pulled into a cutaway with its bonnet up. Lee slowed the rig and pulled onto the hard shoulder, rolled into the graded dirt behind the car.

She was sitting on a red pudding rock in the sparse shade of an old tuart, smoking a cigarette and looking at a road map. The woman put the map down and followed him with her eyes. Lee climbed from the truck and hitched his jeans and ran a hand over his cropped head. Her expression didn't change as she tapped ash onto the dirt, and it was only her eyes that were smiling. She was about twice his age. Her skin was pale and she wore tight jeans and leather boots. She didn't get up – just flicked glossy hair off her face and waved at a fly.

'That truck. Those jeans. That smudged t-shirt. Your face. You look like a Calvin Klein advertisement.'

Lee didn't know what that meant but he smiled, because she was smiling now, reaching out a hand for him to lift her up. She weighed hardly anything at all.

She dug her heels in the bauxite gravel and stepped in a careful fashion toward the Volvo, as though she wasn't used to walking on anything but carpet and cut grass.

'Something went bang, and then everything seized up, and I glided in neutral until I found this spot.'

'Is anyone coming for you?'

The question seemed to concern her, and she bit her lip and looked at her hands then stared him in the eye. 'I was going to flag down a police car. They come down the road quite regularly.'

She wasn't from around here, and couldn't know the police routines, but he understood and nodded toward the car. 'You want me to take a look?'

He knew as soon as the words left his mouth that it was the wrong move, offering to fix her car when he had a perfectly good towing rig right there. Then he remembered her description of the engine going bang, and that could only mean one thing – good news for him and bad luck for her.

Lee touched the inside of the bonnet that was cold under his fingers. The engine was cold too, meaning she'd been there some hours. He leaned over the driver's seat and turned the key. The engine wouldn't crank. He dropped the bonnet and wiped his hands on his shirt. 'Was she running a bit off before the bang?'

'Yes, like a three-legged horse.'

'First you blew a head gasket, and then you lost water and overheated, and then you threw a piston into the cylinder head. That was the bang. I'm sorry to say this, lady, but your engine's finished. I can tow –'

'Please. That'd be marvellous. Will you take a cheque?'

Lee struggled for the right answer. He wanted to say yes, but a cheque was no good. He didn't have a bank account and didn't know how to cash a cheque. It was part of his father's ethos to avoid banks unless you were robbing them.

'How about you fill up my truck at the next servo, and some of the jerry cans, and we'll take it from there.'

He expected her to look worried at his answer, exposing his operation as half-arsed, but she smiled and put out her hand

and Lee wiped his hand on his jeans and they shook on it.

‘I ride with you?’

He realised he was staring at her and broke off the handshake and nodded. ‘Go back into the shade until I’ve put her in the sling. Won’t be long.’

Lee turned toward his truck. His uncle Gary had shown him how to hitch a car but he’d never done it himself. The Volvo was a rear-wheel drive and he’d have to sling it to the back axle. He headed for the steel box and made a picture of everything he’d need, which in this case was only a canvas sling. He lit a cigarette as he walked and took out a brown bomber from his pocket and swallowed it. He would be making conversation for the next hour at least, and needed the spur-on. Lee wished the woman wasn’t so friendly with him – he needed to concentrate on the road, and then get to where the paying work was.

2.

The woman's name was Sophia and he liked her better with every passing minute. She had a throaty voice that deepened when she chuckled, which was often. Their conversation took his mind off what he had done and what he was running from. She sat on the bench seat and touched his arm to make her points. Even though she was thirty-six years old, the same age his mother would've been, she didn't flirt like the leery women his father drank with at the Tarcoola Tavern. Lee had been with plenty of girls, but they were just that – girls – with the exception of Emma, and he didn't want to think about her.

There was an awkward few minutes when Sophia tried to draw him out. She wanted to know about his mother and father and where he was from. Lee stiffened in his seat and his arms went rigid on the wheel – his father's voice in his head. *This woman is an outsider.*

There was a time a few years ago when Lee started the day with a bucket bong, just to get through it all. The bush

weed came from their plantations and it was strong and clean but it began to turn him weird. He started to suspect that his schoolteachers were federal police, sent to observe him. He'd once topped every class, but he stopped handing his homework in. It wasn't until one of their plantation-sitters cleaved open his friend's skull with an axe, just because he'd begun to suspect his friend was a spy, that Lee realised the effect the bud was having. It was the family business, all for the cause, but he stopped smoking that day and had never gone back to it. Getting paranoid-weird wasn't dangerous for some citizens, he supposed, but for his father's people, who were all trained in violence, the consequences were lethal.

Lee put the thoughts of Geraldton out of his head. He tried instead to enjoy the sound of Sophia's voice and the blood that was pumping through his limbs in a syncopated rhythm and the way his skin hummed because of the brown bomber kicking in. He drank from a carton of iced coffee and waited for her to finish her hamburger, which had covered the wrapper in her lap with shreds of beetroot, carrot and lettuce. Her can of Passiona sat in the cup holder, untouched since she'd tasted it that first time. The tank was full of petrol and the reserve tank and jerries were full and the woman was pretty entertaining, telling him about her ex-boyfriend, who was some kind of lawyer from a rich family. How she'd found photographs of him in a shoebox in their walk-in closet. He was facedown in all of the photographs, with his hands and feet bound to bedposts, and there were switch marks on his back. In one photo he had a broom handle up his arse. The

photographs didn't worry her as much as you might think, she said, it was more his reaction when she laid them on their bed. He flat out denied it was him in the photographs. He denied it even after Sophia said that it didn't matter, because it was a turn-on to see a man explore the boundaries of his need, and that she wouldn't mind exploring them with him. But he kept denying it and then he started to get angry and finally he told her to leave. It was *over*, he said, and if she ever mentioned the photographs he'd cut her throat. All in less than a minute. Her chuckle at the absurdity of his reaction. The coward. Who'd vowed to spend the rest of his life with her, but who didn't want her to see him as anything other than the sailing club stalwart and legal rising star that she'd known since her teens.

She didn't regret the break-up, except for the fact that he'd taken back their Mercedes. But what could she do? He was a lawyer with deep pockets who could sue her.

Which gave Lee an idea; the speed coming on strongly now, making him want to impress her, making him want to do *something* to staunch the nerves in his belly.

They were in the city's northern suburbs, headed down Wanneroo Road where the banksia scrub had given way to a horizon packed with orange terracotta roofs.

'Take the coast road,' she said, 'there's less traffic.'

Lee panicked for a moment. He hadn't been to the city for many years and didn't know his way around. He didn't want to call attention to the fact that his sole compass was the knowledge that if he kept to Wanneroo Road then he'd end up in the city centre, and from there he'd be able to see the freeway.

So he answered, casual as he could, 'Where does your ex live?'

He could feel her looking at him. 'Take the next right, over toward North Beach. He lives in City Beach.'

Lee decided to come clean. 'I don't know where I'm going, so you'll have to guide me there.'

She laughed. 'I thought so. At first I assumed you were returning from the city – I noticed your city plates, but you're giving off a different vibe.'

The city plates on the truck were stolen from a tourist van outside the Tarcoola a month ago, and he wondered if she wondered. 'What kind of vibe?'

'Like a refugee from a Tom Waits song.'

He glanced at her and put his eyes back on the road. He didn't know what the hell she was talking about, but she didn't let him wonder too long. 'So you don't have a phone number people can call you on when they get stuck?'

He shook his head. The traffic had begun to thicken as workers returned from the city.

'No phone number, no map, how are you going to get customers?'

All Lee had was a memory that'd stayed with him since he was a child, visiting the city while his father did a shady deal with an elderly man in a suburb called Kenwick. They were supposed to head back to Geraldton, but his cashed-up father suggested that they divert to Fremantle to get some Cicerello's fish and chips. On a hard shoulder off the Kwinana Freeway was a tow truck – a Bedford with a homemade rig. The driver

was seated on the roobar, smoking a cigarette and reading a newspaper, oblivious to the traffic that hurtled alongside. It was only a moment but it stayed with Lee, and last week when he knew that he was city-bound, the image crystallised into something more real.

‘You’ll need this at the very least.’

She put the UBD street directory on the seat between them, tapped ash into the Passiona can. The road lifted over a crest and suddenly there was the Indian Ocean, vivid blue and silvered with southerly chop. Lee had just travelled three hundred and fifty K, but this was the same ocean that pounded the shoreline behind the dunes where he lived with his father – the bush block strewn with cannibalised car bodies and guard dogs that hunted rabbits in the scrub at night. The sight of the ocean made him feel at home.

‘Beautiful, isn’t it?’

She was looking at his unguarded expression of relief. He grunted and wiped his eyes, felt his shoulders loosen, realised he’d been propped forward like a worried child.

‘We’re on the coast road now, which leads to Fremantle. Until they build the freeway north, use this or Wanneroo Road to get up here. You really don’t know your way around the city? Where are you planning to stay?’

Lee didn’t like the question, and he didn’t answer it. The ocean was replaced by grassed verges, power poles and peppermint trees. The light was soft and buttery, and the air was cooling fast. They rolled through a lowland park that was green and damp and was probably once a swamp. Say what

you wanted about Lee's father – Jack Southern knew the land. He'd always schooled Lee on what the environment had been like, even in the city, which he considered a malignant growth. When the invasion came, it'd be the country that'd sustain the renegades, and they'd better learn to feed off her, and feed her back.

'Not far now.'

They were alongside the ocean again, and there were the familiar sand dunes and coastal heath, shrouded in pink and purple light.

'This is City Beach, and up on the hill's my ex's place. Hard to see because of the glare, but it's that white box on the corner with the ocean view.'

Lee couldn't see any house, just a big white block with tinted windows facing west. Didn't even have a roof on it, or a garden, or even a fence. Like Sophia said, a big white box.

The truck laboured up the dual carriageway that carried traffic from the beach, and Lee listened to the engine under strain like he had a stethoscope in his ears. It all sounded good, and he took the cigarette that Sophia offered as she lit one for herself. It was hard to read whether the expression on her face was excitement or anxiety, but either way she pointed him left, then left again. There was nobody on the street and each of the houses had high walls. They drove past the white box. Apart from a potted palm on the drive the front was bleak and anonymous. The rendered white wall was double his height and the garage had a white roller door.

Lee scoped the street for dog-walkers, but it was empty.

Every house had security cameras, however, trained on the drive and the yard.

‘Not real inconspicuous, this truck, is it?’ she said.

Lee agreed. He pulled around the corner where there were no cameras and got out. His number plates were hinged, as his father had taught him. He covered the plates on Sophia’s car with rags and lifted up his own, got back in the truck and reversed around the corner and down onto the drive.

He looked at her. ‘You sure?’

The barest nod of her head.

‘He have an alarm system?’

‘Yes, but he never turns it on. Don’t think he even remembers the numbers.’

Lee passed his cap and indicated that she pull it low. He took a crowbar and a slim jim from the toolbox and levered the crowbar under the left side of the roller door and cracked the steel bracket, then did the same on the other side. He lifted the roller door and waited for an alarm. A car passed on the street but he didn’t turn his head. The little black Mercedes was parked alongside a Porsche 928. He got the slim jim down inside the Mercedes driver’s window and lifted the lock. He used the crowbar to shank off the steering cowling. He found the ignition wiring and pulled it out of the key-turn, joined the wires and turned the engine over.

Barely thirty seconds had passed. He climbed into the truck’s cab and Sophia climbed out. No words were spoken, which impressed him. Like she’d done this before.

Lee put the Ford into gear and rolled up out of the drive,

and then he heard the breaking glass. She was smashing up the Porsche, which didn't impress him. But he was on his way. Seconds later, she overtook him on the corner and smiled and waved and settled in front. Every now and then she accelerated ahead but always fell back. The truck was sluggish under load and he didn't remember Perth being so hilly. This was limestone country, made of ancient sand dunes hardened over time. Drill down into it, his father had told him, and there was a freshwater sea. The thought of his father and the adrenalin that was dumping from his bloodstream were balanced out by the amphetamine that kept Lee's head clear and made his body shiver.

Sophia was taking rat-runs down leafy streets. He lit a cigarette and wiped his eyes. When they crested a final hill he couldn't believe the size of the place. There was the city shimmering in the distance. All around it were suburbs as far as he could see. A faint smog settled over the great sand plain, and the range to the east was burnt looking, and beat down. They were some of the oldest rocks in the world. The range had once been mountains but for billions of years of abrading heat and rain. The grids of houses on the sand plain looked as permanent as tents.

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It was dark by the time they reached Sophia's home in Mosman Park. Stirling Highway was busy with traffic, and the streetlights made his eyes sting. Most of all he wanted to stay

with his plan of doing a complete run of the Kwinana Freeway, to find a place to park up and wait. Lee didn't have the petrol to cruise the roads and needed a position where he could see if someone was broken down and needing help.

Lee parked beside a gnarled old peppermint tree and Sophia rapped on the window. He nodded to her and climbed out of the truck. The air smelled of resin on account of the Norfolk Island pines that rose above the homes up and down the hill. They were still in limestone country, and he could smell the briny ocean, or perhaps the river. This was clearly a rich area. Most of the houses were two-storey brick buildings with balconies and tin roofs. There were some blocks of flats in the distance that looked like termite mounds.

Sophia was talking to him but the sound came from a great distance. Lee nodded and pulled the winch lever and lowered the Volvo to the ground. He got on his knees in the dust and unhooked the canvas sling and pulled it loose. He stowed it in the steel box and fixed the padlock. He stood back and rubbed his eyes, felt himself shifting in the sea breeze.

'Look at you. You're so tired you're wobbling. I won't take no for an answer. At least take a cold shower and wake yourself up.'

The Mercedes engine ticked as it cooled. He could smell the sour oil that leaked from its belly.

'You need to change the oil in the Merc,' he said.

She laughed. 'That can wait.'

He let her take his elbow. They walked arm in arm down the drive, arched over with some kind of vine. It was an oddly

formal way of walking but Lee didn't mind. He could feel the heat of her skin in the press of her elbow against his forearm. She released him at the porch of her weatherboard home when a security light came on. Moths began to circle the light. Then she had his elbow again, and he was in a long hallway with cool dark floorboards. The place smelled of jasmine and everything was white. She flicked switches as they entered deeper into the house. The backyard was full of flowering bottlebrushes that had dropped red bristles onto the bricked patio. The kettle began to hiss, and then it stopped hissing, and instead a fridge opened and he watched Sophia pull the cork from a bottle of white. She poured two glasses then passed him one. The wine tasted cold and sweet and he drank it down. That made her smile, and she led him to the bathroom that was all yellow tiles with prints of cockatoos and native flowers. There were towels and bras hanging out of a washing basket. The room smelled of coconut. The shower began to run and then he was alone. He stripped down and walked into the jet of hot water. He leaned his head on the tiles and let the water bash his shoulders, watching the cinders and dirt eddy at his feet as the stink of the fire was washed from his body.