

Chapter One

Two days ago, division found a half-beaten, half-pretty, naked fifteen-year-old girl stumbling down the Hume Highway. The case got bumped to Sex Crimes, then the CO bumped it to Tom Bishop. The girl didn't speak a word of English, and after a translator arrived she didn't speak a word of anything. Yesterday, Bishop and Ellison hit up every pimp and whorehouse in a two-kilometre radius of where she was found. An hour ago, they got an address from a gonzo smut shooter as to where simulated rape videos were being shot. Only they weren't so simulated.

Ellison shifted her attention from the dirty windscreen to the clock on her phone. 'What the fuck takes so long?'

'Relax,' Bishop said. 'It takes as long as it takes.'

She mumbled a profanity and shifted her weight from one arse cheek to another.

Bishop lit a cigarette and wound down the window. The shit smell of three-day-old roasting garbage blew through the car from the rubbish bins some bastard had kicked over the night before. He fixed his gaze on the green stucco house at the end of the street. Three bedrooms. One bathroom. Paint-chipped walls. Overgrown lawns and a burnt-out shell of a car in the yard. A shithole.

The radio crackled to life. 'Any movement?'

Ellison picked it up, pushed it to her lips. 'Nothing but the street.'

Moose and Winters were around the back of the house doing the same thing they were: sweating, waiting and trying to stay alert.

Twenty minutes and another cigarette later, Bishop watched a car pull up in the rear-view. He slipped on his sunglasses, climbed out and clocked the street: empty in every direction.

Reeves emerged from the fleet and approached Bishop with a shake of his head. 'They wouldn't do it, mate.'

Ellison kicked the side of the car. 'Fuck.'

She left a dent in the door that Bishop ignored. 'Did you go to Kean?' he asked.

‘And to Beechworth and Pointon. All said the same thing: not enough evidence for a warrant.’

A breeze pushed across Bishop’s sweaty face as he turned to watch the green stucco house. His mind raced with all the horrible things that were going on inside. Still, probably nowhere near as bad as the reality of it.

He took a breath.

Fuck it.

Bishop popped the boot, pulled out a shotgun, racked it and moved toward the house with Ellison and Reeves in his wake. ‘You hear that?’ he said.

Ellison looked up and down the street. ‘Hear what?’

‘Screams. *Waiting for a warrant, we heard screams then entered.*’

Ellison pulled her weapon, checked the chamber, let the slide fall back into position. ‘Works for me.’

‘Reeves, go get lost in traffic.’

Reeves nodded, headed to his car. A moment later, it pulled into the street and the engine faded away.

Bishop wiped his face with the sleeve of his leather jacket as they crouched behind a dilapidated picket fence. Ellison handed him the radio. He pushed it to his face.

‘I want you boys to wait a couple of minutes, then meet me around the back.’

Winters’ voice filtered back through the two-way. ‘Sure, boss.’

‘Where do you want me?’ Ellison asked. She couldn’t keep still; her eyes darted every which way.

‘Front of the house, pick the door quietly.’

‘What if the shit hits the fan?’

Bishop gave it some thought, rubbed his jaw. ‘Then kick it in.’ Bent at the waist, he made it down the street and into the front yard.

There were two cars parked on the kerb and a shitbox Ford up on blocks. Bishop slid in behind it, peeked over the bonnet. Tattered yellow curtains that were once white hung in the windows and blocked any way of seeing in. He moved closer. Dry grass crunched under his feet as he crept between the house and the fence. The windows were painted black and beyond that, at the rear of the property, lay burnt grass and a makeshift fireplace surrounded by empty longnecks and cigarette butts.

He pushed against the back wall of the house and waited.

Movement.

Winters and Moose. Each held their weapon with one hand while they climbed over the rear fence with the other. The pair wore Hawaiian shirts, loud, offensive. They sidled up to Bishop. 'I take it we're going in, boss?' Winters asked.

Bishop nodded. 'There's no warrant; you boys up for that?'

'Cool with us,' Moose said. 'I'm assuming we heard screams?'

Bishop nodded. His eyes shifted to the back door. 'That thing locked?'

Winters slipped his fingers around the knob and quietly turned. Locked.

'Pick it.'

Winters got started as Bishop knelt down beside the basement trapdoor. The forty-dollar padlock was a good attempt at security, but the rusted-out latch it was connected to wasn't. Bishop pulled his flick knife and undid the screws. He looked to Winters and Moose and their Hawaiian shirts. 'Try to blend in.' And then he stepped into the darkness.

The smell was terrible. Shards of light pushed through the cracks in the newspaper-covered windows. It took a few moments for his eyes to adjust to the black. Dog cages lined each side of the damp pit.

A sound.

Bishop swung his shotgun low and to the left: a cage. Naked girl. Twelve years old, maybe. She huddled in a corner and tried to cover herself, but there wasn't much space for her to move and nothing to cover herself with.

Bishop brought a finger to his lips. 'Shh.'

Whatever language she spoke, she understood.

He dug his hand into his pocket and pulled out a flashlight. Hitting the switch, he scanned the basement: two more cages, two more girls.

The floorboards above creaked. Dust sprinkled down and fell through the light; somebody was in the house and, judging by the steps, they were around one hundred and fifty kilos' worth.

Bishop headed up the three wooden steps, wrapped his fingers around the doorknob, opened it a crack and peeked through. The hall was empty. He stepped onto the warped floorboards and closed the basement door behind him. Despite their attempts at blacking out the windows, the hall was bright. The walls were bare, yellow, the floors scuffed and dusty. Muffled sounds of fucking leaked from the front of the house. Bishop raised his shotgun and took baby steps toward the source. Each room he passed was bare and cold. Nobody lived there and hadn't for a long time.

The scene was common enough: the makers shoot fuck films in empty houses for a couple of weeks before moving on to another location. By the time the movies are shot, cut, distributed and intercepted by the VPD, the location is already two months old and pointless tracking down.

Bishop passed through the kitchen. The fuck sounds grew louder as he neared the doorframe and waited, the nightmare only inches away on the other side of the flimsy wall. Sweat ran down his face. His palms were wet. He wiped them on his jeans, took a breath ... Then his heart stopped.

A barrel pushed into the back of his neck. 'Easy,' the voice said as a hand took away his shotgun. Bishop turned and ran his gaze from the .357 up the arm of the musclebound monster. He was tattooed from head to toe, With a minor tilt of his head, the monster motioned to the other room and Bishop stepped into the lounge.

Four men.

Girl on the floor. Crying. Dirty mattress.

Table of knives.

Above the girl, a fifth man. Masked. Naked, Machete in hand.

Bishop was outmanned and outgunned. 'You're all under arrest,' he said.

Nobody was amused.

Ellison kicked the front door to splinters. Scanned the room. Aimed. Bishop hit the deck. She fired. Sprayed what was left of the monster's head on the wall.

Scumbags yanked out weapons.

Sidearm in hand, Bishop rose to his feet. The masked man moved on him. Machete above his head. Bishop fired. The blast slammed him back into the wall.

A scumbag lurched at Ellison. She fired. Missed. He tackled her to the ground.

Bishop felt a gun on him: the director. He raised his weapon as the girl on the mattress jumped to her feet. Terrified. She tried to run, didn't know where. Bishop shifted his aim.

'Down,' he yelled.

She didn't hear. Couldn't hear. The director about to shoot them both. No time: Bishop slammed the butt of his gun across her cheek. Out cold.

Scumbag fired. Missed. Hit Winters instead. He hit the floor.

They opened up. Bishop took out the director as Moose put six into the one on the right.

Ellison was still down on the floor. She had a bastard twice her size in a headlock. Veins on his forehead popped. Spit pushed through his clenched teeth. A moment later, his body went limp.

As fast as all the bad noise started, it came to a stop, leaving only the heavy breathing of the living and gun smoke lingering in the air.

Moose helped Winters to his feet. He leant against the wall and coughed.

'You alright?' Bishop asked.

Winters tore at the velcro and let the bullet-ridden vest drop to his feet. He ran his fingers over his chest. 'Think I busted a rib.'

'You'll live.'

Ellison peeled herself off the floor, scooped up her weapon.

'How about you?' Bishop asked.

'I'm good.' She motioned to the brick shithouse on the floor. 'Better than him anyway.'

The smoke burnt Bishop's throat. He lit a cigarette and called to Moose. 'There's three girls in the basement; get them out and call an ambulance.'

As Moose left, the adrenaline in Bishop's body began to bleed away. He dry-rubbed his eyes. When he opened them, it was to the sight of a naked child, battered, bruised and out cold by his feet. Bishop lifted her onto the couch. She weighed next to nothing, and his leather jacket looked enormous draped over her small body. Greasy hair lay over her face; he slipped a strand behind her ear.

'What is she, thirteen?' Ellison asked.

'If that.'

A cracked window from a stray bullet let a warm breeze flow over the room, drying the blood on the walls. In the distance, sirens blared.

Chapter Two

'Why didn't you wait for a warrant?'

'We heard screams coming from the house.'

Jim Patterson's arching eyebrow pulled up half of his face. 'Screams?'

'Can I smoke in here?' Bishop already had one in his mouth and was looking for a light.

'No,' Arden said. 'You can't.'

'Won't be much longer, detective,' Patterson said.

Bishop pulled the cigarette from his lips and slid it back into the packet. He looked at Patterson, then shifted his eyes to Arden with a sigh. It was the standard post-incident Ethical Standards debriefing. Bishop had run through the same story twice and, by the look of Arden, she wanted him to go through it again.

'Were you the only one who heard the screams?' she asked.

'My partner Jane Ellison was with me. She heard them as well.'

'What about ...' she thumbed through some papers '... Moose and Winters?'

‘They were at the rear of the house. You’ll have to ask them.’

‘After you decided to enter the premises, tell me what happened.’ It was clear to Bishop: Ethical Standards was Arden’s first assignment out of uniform. She was trying too hard. ‘What happened next, detective?’

Bishop sighed, looked to Patterson. He knew Bishop’s story wasn’t going to change, no matter how many times he told it.

‘Arden, do you mind giving us a minute?’

Her chair scraped the concrete as she pushed back and a moment later the door closed behind her and the room fell quiet. Patterson stood and stretched out his busted leg. The pain eased, but only a little. He was two years older than Bishop but joined the VPD the year after him. He graduated top of the class, did the customary six months in uniform before shifting to undercover where he exposed a drug smuggling ring out of Tullamarine Airport. The bust netted seventy million in heroin and it made him a real-life genuine star. The bosses were grooming him to be the next power player, possibly even commissioner, so a young Patterson found himself being transferred to a different department every twelve months to learn policing from all angles. It was during his brief stint in Homicide that Bishop met him. They were partnered up together and got thrown a Jane Doe that nobody expected to solve. They traced that girl to a guy, and traced that guy to another guy and the whole thing led to bringing down a people smuggling operation out of KL. Patterson took most of the glory. Bishop didn’t care. Patterson’s promising future went all to shit when his leg was blown apart by a religious zealot with a shotgun preaching peace, love and child sex slaves. Patterson was taken off the street and put into Ethical Standards. The leg never recovered and neither did his career.

Patterson turned the tape recorder off.

‘I was sorry to hear about Jennifer,’ he said.

‘Alice.’

His face contorted. ‘Shit, I’m sorry. Now I feel like a real prick.’

‘Don’t worry about it,’ Bishop said.

Half a smile came to his face. ‘It’s my job to worry.’

‘You worried about me?’

‘Should I be?’

Bishop shrugged. 'My report's clean.'

'Doesn't mean it's faithful.'

'Look,' Bishop said, 'I made a call. The girls are safe and only the bad guys got hurt.'

'That's a common theme in your reports.'

'Making arrests.'

'Suspects getting hurt.'

Bishop looked at him sideways. 'Am I under investigation, Lieutenant?'

'We're just two cops having a chat.'

'Bullshit. What am I doing here?'

Patterson leant back in his chair. Picked up Bishop's personnel file. It was three inches thick. 'I read this and I see two things. I see a career detective who's brought down some heavy hitters. Benny Eastwell, Rob Black – Jesus, you hunted Terry Vass halfway across the country and copped two bullets in the back for your trouble, and you still brought him in. I look at this and see a hero cop with more commendations than twenty cops put together. Then I read between the lines and do you know what else I see?'

Bishop shook his head.

'I see bruised suspects and others in body bags. I see corners cut and laws bent—'

'I never broke the law.'

'You've skimmed the edges of it. The question I ask myself is, who is the real Tom Bishop? The hero cop on these pages or the violent man hidden between the lines?' He put the lid on his pen and the pen in his pocket.

'Well, there is one thing I've been wanting to get off my chest,' Bishop said.

Patterson smiled. 'Good.'

'It's a little embarrassing.'

'Go on.'

Bishop filled his lungs and slowly let the air escape. 'Yesterday, I parked in a handicapped zone.'

'Come on. I'm being serious.'

'I feel really guilty about it.'

Patterson leant against the chair and stretched his leg. 'Get out of here.'

Bishop stepped into the hall. Uniforms passed him in one direction as they came on shift, while others hurried in the other with knock-off drinks on their minds. A door opened and closed down the hall and Chief Inspector Patrick Wilson stepped out. Bishop knew the room: one table, one chair and a television to monitor the interview rooms like the one Bishop was just in.

'You hear all that?' Bishop asked.

'I heard,' Wilson grumbled. 'I'm starting to think that maybe you shouldn't have come back so early.'

'It wouldn't have changed anything that happened today.'

'You went in without a warrant.'

'I had probable cause.'

Wilson smirked to himself. 'So you say.'

'Everything worked out,' Bishop said.

Wilson shrugged. 'There's something you should hear.' He stepped off and Bishop followed. He was a big man with the body of a boxer who, after his career, had let himself go. He still moved like a boxer and he could still throw a punch.

They moved through the internal maze of paint-chipped corridors and came to an unmarked door. Wilson used a key, unlocked it and they both stepped through. Bishop's eyes adjusted to the darkness. He saw through the two-way mirror and into the interrogation room. The animal Ellison had tussled with earlier sat cuffed at the table. He had a hard face and an even harder looking bald head covered with dents from previous bad decisions. Track marks led up his neck along a collapsed vein and faded around the same place that the scabs on his face began.

‘Haven’t been able to shut him up,’ Wilson said. ‘Nothing but yak, yak, fucking yak.’ He picked up the telephone and told whoever answered that they were ready.

Ellison entered the interrogation room. At twenty-nine she was young to be a detective and probably lied to herself that the promotion was due to hard work rather than the VPD trying to fill a quota. She had six brothers, all cops, and no social life. Bishop knew she was smart; the heavy make-up and clothes led most people to believe otherwise.

She skulled a can of Red Bull and stared the junkie down.

His eyes had trouble focusing. ‘If I rat, this going to shave any jail?’

‘If it pans out, I’ll put in a word,’ Ellison said.

The junkie sized up his options and realised that he didn’t have any.

‘What do they call you?’

‘Roach.’ Ellison uncuffed him. ‘You got a smoke?’

She tossed him a pack. His cracked lips hooked onto one and pulled it from the deck. ‘Whatcha wanna know?’ he said as he lit up.

‘Tell me about this Justice.’

Roach slumped in his chair. ‘Why do you want to know about him?’ he said quietly. ‘I know other things. Lots of other things. I can tell you about those.’

Ellison took a seat. ‘I don’t want to know about those. I want to know about Justice.’

Roach, scared, chewed a dirty nail. ‘He leads a network of bent coppers.’ His eyes dipped to the floor, disappointed for having said the words.

‘Who is he?’

‘Nobody knows. All you hear is whispers and shit talk. Somebody, somewhere disappears. Somebody gets knocked. Nobody ever says nothing.’

‘How did he get to you?’

Roach dragged on his cigarette. ‘Last week, I’m out and about with my boy Beanie drinking, cruising for cunt. Good times, y’know? Then he gets a call and he’s all fidgety, like he’s got to score up, but he don’t, cos he’s already high

as all fuck. Says he's got to go do this thing. Wants me to go for support or backup or some fuckin' shit.'

'What's Beanie do?'

'Big dicks, little dicks, clean dicks, put a hole in the world dicks. You want a gun that'll do any of the above, Beanie's your man.'

Ellison waved her hand for Roach to move on.

'We headed out of the city.'

'Where to?'

'Out of the city, I dunno; up bush. We roll up on this joint and Beanie's getting all nervous and shit like a little bitch, so I tell him to man the fuck up.'

'Did he?'

'After I slapped him, he did. We knock on this door and this real trained-up looking guy opens. Now, I was only there for a few minutes, but I could see that these guys were definitely the don't-fuck-around types. They didn't say much, but they didn't need to. Their black eyes did all the talking.'

'How many?'

'Three or four.'

'Was it three or was it four?'

'Do I look like a mathematician?'

'Alright, go on.'

Roach flicked his cigarette to the other side of the room and let the smoke escape his nostrils. 'One of them went to Beanie's car and got the guns.'

'What kind of guns?'

'I didn't look.'

'If you had to guess?'

'M16s.'

‘That’s a hell of a specific guess.’

Roach looked around. Paranoid. ‘That’s not all. They had maps. On the walls in the place, they had maps, blueprints, timetables and shit. They’re planning a robbery.’ Roach leant back in his chair and put his hands behind his head. ‘Six AM tomorrow morning. Justice will strike.’ He was pretty pleased with himself. ‘So what about my jail?’

‘What about it?’

‘This shit’s going down.’

‘What shit?’ Ellison said. ‘Some fairytale about a network of bent cops? Some bullshit about a robbery tomorrow morning? You don’t know who they are, what they’re robbing. You don’t know shit.’

‘Beanzie will tell you; go ask him. He hangs out on Brunswick Street.’

‘Is Beanzie his real name?’

‘No.’

‘What is?’

Roach couldn’t remember. ‘Fuck.’

Ellison left the room.

‘Hey,’ Roach’s cracked voice yelled. ‘Six AM. It’s meant to happen at 6 AM. Fucking 6 AM, 6-fucking-AM. Tomorrow at 6 AM.’ And the more he said it, the more insane he grew at the sound of his own voice.

Wilson flicked the switch and muted the interview room audio.

‘Do you believe him?’ Bishop asked.

‘The commissioner believes it and I believe what she tells me to believe so we’re looking into it.’ Wilson cocked his head and smiled. ‘What do you say? Do you want in?’

‘Every second crim whips out that story when they’re busted. Justice is nothing but a dead end.’

‘It’s not the first time you’ve chased a dead end that led somewhere.’

Bishop dry-rubbed his face. He was tired and Roach had given him a headache. 'Put Ethical Standards on; Jim Patterson would chew this up.'

'Jim Patterson is only looking to get his head on the telly. He's still trying to save the career he had before his leg was blown off. The commissioner wants this taken care of quietly. If it gets out that a group of officers pulled a robbery and we knew about it, it'll fuck us up for years. There will be budget cuts across the board. Then we've got low-paid officers, then we've got corrupt officers. We need to find Justice and stop whatever is happening tomorrow at 6 AM.'

'I'm not in any shape for this.'

'If this thing goes down, a lot of people are going to get hurt.' Wilson put a fatherly hand on Bishop's shoulder. 'I don't have anyone else I can trust.'

Bishop gave a weak nod. 'Alright, I'll look into it.'

'Good,' he said, slapping Bishop's shoulder. 'Give me updates. Any lead, no matter how insignificant, forward it on.'

Wilson headed to his office and Bishop waited until the locker room was empty before taking a shower. His forty-year-old body was an embarrassment, covered with the history of his life in a mess of tattoos, scars and gunshot wounds. Even after a shower he could still smell the gunpowder on his hands and hear the ringing in his ears from the mess at the green stucco house.

Bishop rode the elevator to the lobby. It was brown and empty and he was half way across it when the Desk Constable called him over.

'The hospital sent this over,' he said and handed Bishop a clear bag.

He could see the contents through the plastic. The possessions of a young girl: purse, keys, bracelet. All of them smeared in blood.

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Bishop parked a block from his apartment. Down the street, a kid, fifteen years old, pants low, hat high, was struggling to jemmy a car window. Rubbish piled around the wheels; the vehicle hadn't moved in months.

Bishop called out: 'Hey.'

The kid turned, took one look, thought Bishop was nothing to worry about and went back to work on getting arrested.

Bishop unclipped his badge and held it out for him to see. 'Hey, dickhead.'

The kid took off as fast as his oversized pants would allow him. A moment later, he was gone.

Bishop's apartment: three rooms, a balcony, no view and hints of her every place he looked. Shoes left where they had been kicked off. A coat on the back of a chair. A coffee cup with lipstick traces.

Her memory, everywhere. It suffocated him.

Chapter Three

Ten months ago

Tom Bishop heard the screams from down the hall. He heard them from the lobby. He even heard them from the car park. The call that pulled him out of bed came thirty minutes ago, and at first he thought it was just a couple of guys pulling a bullshit joke. But even the best bullshit has a hint of truth in it.

There were a couple of hours left before the sun rose and the station took the time to catch its breath before the onslaught of a new day. Lewis met him in the lobby, blood-soaked tissues rammed up his nose. 'Thought we should give you a call. Just in case,' he said.

'Where is she?'

Lewis pointed to the end of the hall, and they headed toward the source of the racket. With each step, the screams faded, making way for a relentless wall of abuse that was just as unpleasant.

'We picked her up about an hour ago. B&E on a boutique store in Toorak with two other juvies. Took me and a couple of baggy pants to subdue her.'

Lewis slowed to a stop at the office door. Bishop peered through the small glass window at a worn-down girl who couldn't have been much older than seventeen. In another place and time, she could have been on the cover of a magazine; at the moment, her looks were hidden by anger and pain.

'No criminal history,' Lewis said. 'I figure she probably just did this for some attention.'

Bishop lit a cigarette. 'What's her name?'

‘Alice Cameron.’

He pulled in a lungful of smoke, wrapped his hand around the doorhandle and stepped through.

Her eyes snapped to him. ‘Who the fuck do you think you are?’

Bishop dragged a chair from another desk and sat next to her. ‘I’m Tom Bishop,’ he said.

Her face softened. ‘I imagined you different.’

‘How so?’

‘A bit more like the cops on television.’

‘I can have some headshots made if you like?’

‘I imagined you funnier as well.’

Bishop leant over and uncuffed her. ‘They tell me you think I’m your father.’

She rubbed her wrists. Not because she needed to, but because she thought she should. Too many movies. ‘They tell me that as well.’

‘Who’s your mother?’

She took her time with an answer. ‘Her name is Stacy,’ and waited for recognition to cross Bishop’s face, but there was none.

‘About seventeen, eighteen years ago? Ring any bells? Stacy Cameron?’

He held his breath. It was just for an instant, but it was long enough to give Alice the answer she had come to find.

‘Guess I’m your little girl,’ she said. ‘Are you proud?’

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Neither of them knew what to say in the car, so neither said much of anything. They watched the city roll by in the stillness of the metropolitan night. Occasionally, light from a neon bar would bounce off their faces and fall back into the darkness as they passed. It had been raining for three days and had finally stopped earlier that night.

Alice rolled down a window and lit a cigarette before leaning back in her seat and closing her eyes. Bishop leant across, snatched the butt from her lips and flicked it out the window.

‘What the fuck?’

‘Watch your language.’ He said it with enough authority to make her sit up and keep her mouth shut. ‘It’s not very ladylike.’

She shifted her gaze to the shards of rising sun that splintered the gaps in the buildings. ‘How did you and Stacy hook up?’ she asked.

‘Your mother hasn’t told you?’

She shook her head.

‘It’s not much of a story. I knew your mother for about twelve hours. We met in a bar in Port Melbourne, had too much to drink and had sex.’

‘Sounds like Stacy.’

‘Guess we weren’t too big on the birth control.’

‘Still sounds like Stacy,’ she said. ‘What do I call you?’

‘What do you want to call me?’

‘I don’t think we’re at Dad yet, are we?’

Bishop shook his head. ‘No, I don’t think we are.’

‘How about Tom?’

Nobody called him Tom. Half the guys he knew probably didn’t even know his first name, and those who did would never think to use it. But when she said it, he liked the way it sounded.

Bishop pulled into an all-night convenience store on Sydney Road. The bell rang as he stepped through the doorway and an overweight man with a kind face looked up from his paper and smiled. Bishop tried to return the smile but it came off crooked. He headed to the rear of the store and found the toiletry section next to the car care products and picked up a box of tissues, face wipes and some make-up. He struggled with them on his way back to the counter and dumped them on the bench.

Bishop poured a couple of coffees, but when he reached for his wallet, the man glimpsed his badge. 'No, no, no. No charge,' he said with a wave of his hand.

'No, mate, I can't do that.' Bishop sifted through the notes in his hands.

'Next time I get robbed, you come, you come.'

'When was the last time you got robbed?'

'Last week.'

Bishop pointed to the floor. 'You got robbed here?'

'Yes.'

'You're only a few blocks from Brunswick Station.'

'Next time you come, free coffee.'

Most of the coppers Bishop knew had used their truth suits or badges to get discounts or free lunches at some stage in their lives. A couple of bucks here, a free beer there; it was part of the job, a perk the bosses didn't endorse but couldn't stop. The perk wasn't for Bishop. He always felt like he was stealing and the guilt was never worth the discount.

The old man wouldn't let the issue drop, so Bishop left some cash on the counter and walked out. He climbed into the car, cranked up the engine and put the bag of cosmetics on Alice's lap.

'What's this?'

'You can't go back to your mother looking like you've spent half the night in jail.'

'I have spent half the night in jail.'

'Doesn't mean you have to look like it.'

A smile came to her face. 'Thank you,' she said.

Yesterday's make-up came off easily and with it she lost the anger and attitude. She saw the scars on his knuckles. The badge chained around his neck. The bulge of the gun under his leather jacket.

'Why a cop?' she asked.

Bishop leant back in his seat and thought about it, and it wasn't something he thought about often. 'It was a way out?'

'From what?'

'A bad future?'

'How's that working out for you?'

Bishop smiled; she was growing on him. 'My old man, your grandfather, we used to live on the road. He was a trucker; we bounced around from place to place. Drive a load across the country, drop it off, pick up another and drive it someplace else. Lived out of the cab, ate in roadhouses, that sort of thing. But the old man liked the drink, and when he drank he liked to mouth off. One night he mouthed off and got his throat cut.'

Alice frowned. Bishop wasn't sure if it was out of disgust or horror. He figured it didn't matter; they were both bad enough and he wondered why he actually told her that. 'I wasn't there,' he said.

But that was a lie. The thirteen-year-old Tom Bishop was copping size ten steel-capped boots while trying to shield his bleeding father.

His old man wasn't easy.

His old man was a drunk.

Bishop wasn't even their real name.

His mother, Billie, was a philanthropist and being poor meant she had little to give. She volunteered at the Salvation Army, at local charities and when somebody passed away she was always the first to bake a casserole for the family. His father Roy was a petty criminal at best. Everything in their house had fallen off the back of a truck and holding a steady job was difficult for a man who slept until three in the afternoon and was drunk by seven.

When Tom was five years old, he watched his father cave in his mother's face with the butt of a longneck. The day before he had had a win at Flemington on a sixty-to-one horse and come home with \$9000. That was more money Billie had seen in her life and she came to the conclusion that they couldn't possibly spend it all themselves so she donated \$4500 of it to the local church and for the rest of the afternoon felt good about being able to help. She baked a cake, cooked a roast and when Roy woke up to find half his money in the hip pocket of a church he didn't believe in, his fist wrapped around the first thing in reach. He swung only once and before he realised what he had done it was over and there was nothing anybody could do. Billie was gone.

To escape the law, the son of a bitch kidnapped his son and they disappeared. The road was a cold experience. Partly because Roy was a cold man who didn't like people, and partly because it was no place for a child to grow up. Roy would go days without talking to his son and there were many nights where Tom would have to sleep under the truck while the old man banged some rough piece of arse in the cab. Then there were the beatings. Tom learnt to tune out during them and put his mind someplace else until Roy tired or finished. It wasn't until years later, after Roy had the life kicked out of him and Tom was in an orphanage, that the violence inside him began to show. At first, small outbursts, then much worse. His first schoolyard fight sent a kid to the nurse, his second to the hospital, and with his third he almost killed some poor little bastard who'd bagged him for not being able to kick a footy straight. He never knew when to stop; he just kept throwing punches until he was pulled off whoever was on the receiving end of his demons.

When he was fifteen years old, he escaped from the orphanage. It wasn't the first time, but this time it stuck. He picked up a job as a labourer on a construction site and quickly fitted in. It was Tom's first taste of a normal life and he liked it, enjoyed it; he relaxed. Even started dating a local girl. Her name was Dianne; he made her laugh and she taught him how to read. But no matter how good things were, he could never escape the violence. It lingered over his shoulder. Behind him. Lurking. The darkness was always with him, and one night the beast inside Tom Bishop came out when Dianne's father got drunk and slapped her. It took four uniforms to pull Bishop off and, when they did, Dianne's father looked more like a side of beef than a man.

Patrick Wilson was one of those uniforms. Already a thirteen-year veteran, he had seen the darkness before. He also saw glimpses of his son Daniel in Bishop. They both had the same honesty. Wilson and his wife Mona had watched their little boy slowly fade away from leukaemia when he was five years old. Neither of them ever really recovered. Wilson threw all his time and effort into the job and rose quickly through the ranks, while Mona doted on her nieces, nephews and any hard luck case she could find to plug the hole in her life.

Wilson called in all his favours. The assault charge disappeared and Tom went to live with him and Mona. There were rules and Tom liked them. For the first time, he had structure in his life. School, chores and a routine. Gradually, Wilson taught him discipline. He taught him self-control and that, if he was going to unleash the beast, to unleash it on those who deserved it.

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It was light by the time Bishop brought the sedan to a stop outside Alice's home. The lights were still on from the night before. Somebody was up and about.

Alice let her gaze fall self-consciously to the floor. 'So this is it?' she asked.

'I guess it is.'

'Would you like to come inside?' It wasn't so much an invitation. He got the feeling she didn't want to go herself.

Bishop took a breath. 'I'm sorry. I just don't know how to be a father.'

She wanted him to say more. When he didn't, she pushed open the door and was halfway out when Bishop grabbed her arm. He reached for his wallet. 'You need any money?'

'No,' she said. Bishop could almost see the hope fade from her body as she pulled away from him. She navigated the cluttered yard of garden furniture and relics of children's play equipment and didn't look back. Bishop watched her struggle to find her keys. She dropped them at the door, scooped them up and then finally got them to work. Inside, it didn't take long for the yelling to begin, most of it indistinguishable, all of it unpleasant. Bishop listened for a moment before putting the sound out of his mind and the car into gear. He made it past a couple more dumps before pulling in again, his eyes on the rear-view with Alice's place in frame. He scratched the back of his head, cursed himself and turned off the engine.

A minute later, he was at the door. Knocked twice. When nothing happened, he knocked a third time. The door was cheap; if he knocked any harder, his fist would go right through it. The yelling ceased and a moment later the door swung open.

Stacy Cameron hadn't aged well. By the looks of it, she had been around the block more than a few times and had the frayed edges to prove it. She stepped back, checked him out and seemed to like what she saw. 'Well, well, well. Tom Bishop,' she slurred. 'Fancy seeing you here.'

'Can I come in?' he mumbled.

One glance at the joint was all Bishop needed. In a flash, he took in the mismatched junk-store furniture and the holes in the walls from the assembly of men that had passed through on sloppy drunken nights.

Stacy leant against the fridge, slipped. She was drunk and pretending she wasn't. 'What do you think of our little pride and joy?' she said as she shoved a cigarette between her lipstick-smudged lips. She sparked her lighter and on the third crack got a flame. 'You look like you're doing alright. Give us fifty bucks.'

Bishop stared at her. She bored him.

Across the worn carpet, Alice stood in the doorway and, when she saw Bishop, she was embarrassed for smiling.

'Want to get out of here?' he asked.

Alice scooped up her handbag from the back of the couch. 'Let's go.'

'Where the fuck do you think you're going?' Stacy raised the back of her hand.

'I wouldn't,' Bishop warned her.

The don't-fuck-around tone of his voice was enough to stop her dead. She looked to her daughter and let out a sob. Alice saw right through the performance, and by the time Stacy realised it, they were already out the door and halfway to Bishop's car.

Bishop explained to his daughter that he was a single man. He told her he wasn't father material. He told her she could stay with him for a few days until they sorted something out, but when she smiled he knew he'd do whatever she wanted.