

1

The prison was quiet and Tom Bishop couldn't sleep. He did one thousand push-ups and stopped when he heard footsteps echo down the hall. It was 12:37 AM.

'Open, two, four, nine,' a voice called out.

The metal locks disengaged and the door pulled open to reveal the round silhouette of a guard. Bishop recognised his shape – it was Gale. Not too bright but he didn't pretend to be otherwise. 'Get dressed. You're being transferred.'

Bishop glanced around at his small four-by-eight cell. 'I was just beginning to like it here.'

Gale didn't smile. Apparently he was not in a laughing mood. He watched closely as Bishop pulled a T-shirt over his battered body. It was a mess of gunshot wounds, tattoos and scars; a mix of regrets and mistakes.

Gale hooked the cuffs around Bishop's wrists, and squeezed them tight. They pinched into his skin but he didn't complain. Sounds filtered from behind cell doors as he and Gale moved through the prison. Guys up late watching television, others listening to talkback radio, and the occasional poor bastard sobbing into their state-issued pillow.

Gale didn't seem to question a prisoner being transferred in the middle of the night; either too lazy or dumb to give it a second thought. Bishop questioned it. There were ways of doing things and this wasn't one of them.

They reached the transport bay entrance. Gale shifted around Bishop, unlocked the door and pulled it open. Hot summer air hit Bishop in the face. He took a few steps forward and, out of the darkness, emerged an unmarked prison van, black, with no windows, idling as white exhaust fumes disappeared into the night. He slowed his pace, to buy some time, to work out what the fuck was going on. It wasn't long enough and a couple of shuffling steps later Bishop was at the rear of the van. The doors were open and on the benches were a couple of prisoners. Bishop recognised their faces but didn't know their names. Shaved heads, overweight, tattooed and each sharing the same vacant eyes. It was the look of career inmates: one devoid of hope or any future. Bishop climbed inside and, before he could sit, Gale slammed the door and locked it.

The van idled for a couple more minutes. Muffled voices leaked through the reinforced walls. The gears changed and the vehicle moved forward. There

was a slight pause while the prison gates opened, then, not long after, they were on the open road. Occasionally, the driver would tap the brakes and the hard faces of Bishop's travelling companions would be lit in a dark shade of red from the tail-lights. None of them said a word. Bishop glanced at his watch; they had been on the road for twenty-five minutes.

Then it happened.

Another vehicle gunned up behind the van.

It overtook on the right and pulled in front.

Tyres squealed.

The van's driver hit the brakes.

The wheels locked up and dragged along the asphalt.

The van's arse end swung out sideways.

Everybody slammed against the wall.

The van was on the verge of tipping over. It hung there for a moment before the tyres burst, sending it over on its side and scraping along the quiet road with a trail of sparks in its wake. After a quarter of a kilometre, the wreck slid to a stop and, when it did, part of its internal mechanics leaked pressurised air and everything fell silent.

A blue Ford crept up, its left side crumpled, and grazed black with paint from the van. Its headlights shone on the wreck. The passenger-side door opened, with the sound of twisted metal. Three men with shotguns and balaclavas descended on the upturned van. They moved fast. The driver poked his head out – dazed and confused, he was the first to go. A shotgun blast took off half his shoulder and sent him jerking back into the cabin. Then the three of them focused on the rear doors. The tallest of the shooters placed small charges on the hinges and they all stood back. The explosion was localised, controlled and quiet, the sound of the heavy steel doors falling to the ground louder. One of them crawled inside and dragged the occupants out. The two lifers first and then Bishop. The three of them were groggy from the crash and struggling to be steady on their feet.

The smallest of the shooters unholstered his sidearm and put two rounds in the chest of the first lifer, followed by two in the chest of the second. Then, almost as an afterthought, he stepped back and put one in each of their heads. The sound echoed into the darkness and then all three shooters focused their attention on Bishop.

‘Open the boot,’ one of them said.

The tallest of the shooters made the trek back to their busted-up Ford, popped the boot and dragged a man out of it and to his feet. The glare of the headlights made it difficult for Bishop to see anything but, as the poor bastard was pulled closer, his features become clear.

Male.

Caucasian.

Mid thirties.

Shaved head.

Blue eyes.

Solid build.

Unshaven.

Prison uniform.

Bishop tilted his head. They could have passed for brothers and they could definitely have been confused in a line-up, if for some reason things went that way. The shortest of the shooters, the one who had done the lifers with two in the chest and one in the head, drew his shotgun and pushed it in the man’s face.

Panic washed over him. ‘Please don’t,’ he said. He was about to say more, but the shooter pulled the trigger and the back of the man’s head sprayed out into the night sky.

The shooter turned to Bishop. ‘Congratulations,’ he said, ‘You’re dead.’

Twelve hours earlier ...

2

Every day was the same. Awake at 5 AM followed by an hour of push-ups, sit-ups and stretches. The cell doors opened at 6 AM and Bishop blended in with the line of criminals as they made their way through the halls to the mess. He sat alone, ate alone and watched his back. When he was first incarcerated, a

couple of nobodies in for armed robbery heard he was ex-police and tried to make a name for themselves by jumping him out in the yard. Two of them were in hospital for six months and the other would spend the rest of his life slurring his words. The other prisoners left Bishop alone after that.

Classes, counselling, and other types of rehabilitation sessions followed breakfast, and after lunch, the inmates serving at Her Majesty's pleasure were free to fill their time as they pleased. Many of them sat around watching television, getting fat and talking shit about their hero days of robbing, raping or killing.

Bishop hit the gym. Three hours of heavy weights and cardio kept his mind busy and, after the beatings, gunshot wounds and bad decisions, the movement kept his injured body alive. After a shower and a shave, he headed over to the computer room and watched re-runs of the news on the ABC's iView. He had no visitors, no friends and nobody wrote him any letters. Broadcast news was his only link to the outside world.

Dinner was at 5:30 and everybody was shuffled into their cells by seven, with lights out at ten. The routine helped to keep his mind off the monotonous days. But the nights were the worst. He would lie on his bed and stare at the ceiling, with bad memories swirling around in his mind. Flashes of ugliness and failure plagued him while the memory of muffled cracks of gunfire rang in his ears.

For 1195 consecutive days, that was Bishop's life.

*

There were five of them on the parole board and Bishop had forgotten their names by the time the first one opened his mouth. Words like *violent*, *brutal* and *excessive* were thrown around, and after fifteen minutes, Bishop's twenty-seven-year-old Legal Aid lawyer finally climbed to his feet.

'Tom Bishop has been decorated with the Valour Award and the Medal for Excellence. He was a hero cop.'

'You're speaking in the past tense.'

'Three years ago, the Victorian Police Department was plagued with corruption. Bribery, armed robbery, prostitution, murder. All headed up by a high-ranking member, who called himself "Justice". Tom Bishop exposed this man as Chief Inspector Patrick Wilson. If it wasn't for Bishop, Justice would still be active. You should be thanking this man for what he has done.'

A woman with a hard face shifted in her chair. 'His actions led to the deaths of seventeen people.'

'Including his daughter, who was murdered.'

'That does not excuse what he has done. How much evil can one man do in the name of good before he becomes evil himself? I find it hard to believe that there is any redemption for this kind of person.'

One of the men pushed his rimless glasses into his face and hunched over the desk. 'Mr Bishop, if released, what would you do for employment?'

'I've only ever been a cop,' Bishop said.

'Obviously, that career path is no longer open to you.'

'I don't know how to do anything else.'

The man pulled the glasses from his face, leant back in his chair and sighed. 'Mr Bishop, do you believe you belong in prison?'

Bishop scratched the back of his shaved head and thought about the question long and hard. 'Yes, sir, I do.'

His lawyer let out a long sigh the whole room could hear and sat down. His mind was already shifting to the next case on his docket.

There was a knock at the door, A man opened it and produced a badge. 'Detective Patterson from Ethical Standards,' he said.

'We're in the middle of a hearing.'

'I need a word with Tom Bishop.'

3

The guards led Bishop down the hall while Patterson limped behind. Fifteen years before, Jim Patterson was a rock star in the department. He enrolled in the police academy straight out of university, and nine months later graduated top of his class. He did six months in uniform before being transferred into undercover, where he infiltrated a narcotic smuggling ring operating out of Tullamarine airport. Six weeks later, he made a dozen arrests and seized seventy million dollars worth of heroin. The Department made Jim Patterson their poster boy, their hero, their golden boy. Then his career went to pieces

when he kicked in the wrong door and got his leg blown to pieces by a religious zealot with a shotgun. He was taken off the street and transferred into the only division that would have him and his busted leg: Ethical Standards.

In the aftermath of the Justice scandal, Patterson seized the opportunity to become a star again. Together with Premier Adams, he had conducted an inquiry into police corruption that spanned the entire department. From the traffic cops, all the way to the top, no badge was safe. It resulted in over three hundred and fifty members being arrested or pensioned off. The media dubbed it *'The Cleanout'*, and Patterson positioned himself as a hero charged with bringing honour, integrity and truth back to the police force. He was the golden boy once more.

They reached a small interview room that reeked of disinfectant and stale piss.

Patterson sent the guards out, took a seat across from Bishop and stretched his leg, easing his pain a little. 'How's the hearing going?'

'I think they're going to let me out.' Bishop patted down his shirt, took out a pack of cigarettes and set one on fire. 'I've been on my best behaviour.'

'I'd prefer you didn't smoke.'

'I'd prefer you got to the point.'

Patterson smiled. He opened a manila folder and laid out a ledger in front of Bishop.

'Three months ago, Brandon Lewis from Fraud found some irregularities in the VPD's budget. I set up a meeting but he didn't show. Two weeks later, his body washed up in the Yarra. Autopsy revealed a belly full of Melbourne Bitter and the death was ruled accidental.'

'Bad day for Lewis.'

Patterson laid out more ledgers and spreadsheets on the table. 'I bought up all his case files for the past two years and couldn't find anything in regards to what he told me about the budget. So I started doing some looking on my own.'

Bishop glanced at the pages; he wasn't very good with numbers. 'I don't know what any of this means.'

Patterson stabbed the printouts with his finger at various points. 'Have a look here and here.'

‘Look, mate, I wasn’t kidding before, I have no idea what any of this means.’

‘The money allocated by Treasury to the department is 1.4 billion dollars a year. But only 1.37 billion has reached the streets.’ Patterson tilted his head to see Bishop’s reaction. ‘Do you see it?’

‘No.’

‘There’s two hundred and fifty million dollars missing.’

‘It wasn’t me.’

Patterson let it slide and shifted his attention back to the papers in front of him. ‘I looked into it. A name came up ... Justice.’

Bishop paused, looked sideways at Patterson. ‘Patrick Wilson had a long reach.’

‘Wilson’s been dead three years.’ Patterson tapped the papers on the desk. ‘As of last month, this skim is still active.’

Bishop clenched his fist; busted knuckles pointed out in random directions. ‘Patrick Wilson wasn’t Justice.’