

Chapter 1 - Distraction

Vengeance

Sudan: the past.

His chores complete, the teenager squatted in waiting, the stolen knife held firmly across his knees as he caressed its blade in anticipation. The man would arrive soon. Only his mother would be wondering where he was, but it was for her that he did this, so he did not worry.

In the months of her suffering the youth's latent potential had congealed within him, the dynamics of his god-given gifts smothered by hateful men and traumatising experience until only one light remained: her love. All else had turned dark in him, its shadow pressing in on the one light until his every thought became bent to its defence.

He heard the door open and the man step through, closing it behind him. The youth gripped the blade the more tightly and leaned forward on the balls of his feet. The man would arrive in the next few seconds.

All pathways of his mind now led to this, every scheme of his heart pointing only here, until what was at first resisted had come to be embraced—and yearned for. Now, like the hungry lion, it roared for satisfaction, the darkest of all within him now considered the only defence to his light. He felt it

growl as the deeper shadow of the man fell across the twilight alleyway.

All the fluid energy and vigour of the soon-to-be man unleashed itself in silence as he sprang, each part of the plan so mentally rehearsed that his body positioned itself unconsciously in flight, angling the fang of his blade perfectly, timing the point of impact with feline precision.

His legs landed to either side of the man's head, curling themselves under the armpits even as his quarry staggered. As the man fell, the boy, with blade held in a double-fisted grip, curled over his victims head, forcing the chin to his chest while simultaneously catapulting his own arms through their fullest arc. With shattering impact the razor edged blade severed muscle, tendon and bone, becoming imbedded deep in the man's chest. Rolling free, the boy watched as the Arab landed hard on the daggers hilt, only to roll, eyes blinking and unable to take breathe, onto his back. The man would die soon.



Lust

Australia: present day

The landscape flitted by at the periphery of Terry's awareness, his fullest attentions consumed by turmoil within. On the one front a blustering storm of desire raged, cursing his conscience and ranting at thoughts of restraint. Meanwhile another wind, in quieter tones yet oddly as clamorous, berated him as fool for even entertaining such thoughts and demanded he stop, '*right now!*' He felt like a small bird buffeted between the two; tempted to land were passion blew but constantly made too fearful by consciences' gusts of warning.

Weather-wise it was a normal day, high summer in southeast Queensland. Hot, humid and with a sky of indecision above that alternated as frequently as the hours themselves between dismal clouds and brilliant blue. As a landscape it was unlike what most would expect of a sub-tropical part of the world, the arid hues of yellow and brown easily overpowering the lush greens. A contrast that spoke sadly of what Australian fate might become; a country dominated by dry grasslands, mulga scrub and saltbush, and a desert boundary that pushed relentlessly outward.

Sweat made the palms of his hands slick despite the air-conditioning. His right-forefinger and thumb, as if playing the part of the contestants in his duelling thought-fight, squeezed and twisted his ear lobe in nervous parody to his inner conflict, while his left hand unconsciously pulverized the steering wheel. He drove on, eyes, hands and feet operating the car by rote, detached from the mind in that mode of habitual routine so often the cause of accidents. He

did register the road sign though; telling him it was ten kilometres to the motel.

He glanced again at the passenger beside him. She still slept, or pretended to; which in some ways made his private turmoil much harder, in other ways easier—depending on which facet of his mind he sided with.

She was pretty, more than pretty, and, dressed the way she was, more than alluring.

At the beginning he'd been good. At least he thought he had. Even when he'd known she'd put him at the top of her wants list; or needs, going by her story. In fact at the beginning the thought hadn't even crossed his mind, not seriously. But she'd been so forward that there was no margin of doubt left as to what she was wanting. That all he had to do was respond and she'd become more than just his assistant, and then some, which had flattered as much as startled him; he'd never experienced a female predator before, not where he was the prey. He'd pretended not to notice at first, but she'd been persistent as well as forward, and working with the woman every day... Well, what could he do?

To start with, you could have asked her to dress appropriately, you are the boss, remember.

I couldn't do that, that's her business.

No. Her business was seducing you; your business should have been to put a stop to it... You knew where she was leading the first time she smiled at you longer than she should have, but you let it roll, didn't you... Now crunch-time is here buddy, and you better get off this ride before everyone gets hurt... You

can still stop this you know... Find a new secretary... What about your commitment to Brenda, what of the pain you'll cause her?

And so it went. He knew what he wanted, but deep down he knew that what he wanted wasn't right, and there was no argument to counter that, it just wasn't right. But oh how he wanted it! He glanced again at Jocelyn, and her exposed well tanned legs within easy reach of his touch.

Staring, he marvelled for a moment at how quickly he'd caved once he'd begun toying with the notion; like a child intending to peek at its Christmas present, suddenly to find that peeking had transmogrified to opening the gift, and there it was before them.

Self-control is a precarious thing, he thought self-accusingly, test it at your own risk.

He wanted her, and knew it was a mutual want. Was that word strong enough for what he felt; craved maybe? Yet with all the mutual ardour he remained torn up inside at the immorality of it all. *You're married; you've made a commitment...* He passed a small chapel at that moment, a large sign attached to its road-facing wall, *The world will one day be gone, and the things we love of the world also, but he that does the will of God will live forever.*

'The will of God?' he said aloud, and then hastily looked over at Jocelyn, embarrassed he'd spoken aloud. She didn't stir.

He hadn't considered God in years, not in any depth. True, his wife was religious. Which he admired but didn't want for himself; too many bad memories

lingered down that road. The message of the sign discomfited him though.

Terry's father came to mind, Ronald Sinclair. *He'd disown me if knew what I was planning. Mum would cry herself into a faint.* He sighed, *why do I want so bad what is wrong?* He dragged his sweaty hand down his face, puffing his cheeks into his palm and slowly exhaling. *Why?*

He thought again about God.

His parents, Catholics, devout Catholics, had been studious in imparting their faith to their children, never lax in teaching a moral lesson or slow in punishing *sinful* behaviour. They were in Terry's eyes dogmatic and over the top. They wanted his best, he knew. Yet all in all they were parents he felt as much aversion toward as love, especially his father, as much stifled in his company and memory as relaxed. A dogged form of bitterness edged his whole outlook toward them. An odd connection and one he'd eventually moved away from—ran away from—even if it was only across the Tasman, leaving them to themselves in their larger than necessary house in Dunedin, New Zealand. Now, however, he realised what a thorough job they'd done.

I can't even do what I want without my parent's beliefs challenging me.

He immediately berated himself for that thought. He believed in God, true, but not merely because his father told him so. No, it was more that logic simply dictated that belief in God was... well, logical. Wasn't it? He felt a mild discomfort within at

that; something to do with faith obligating the believer to the Believed.

He let the thought slide, partly because it sat so uncomfortably with his current circumstances, and also because he was already thinking something else. He realised he was attempting to use his parents procrustean bed—maybe that was a bit harsh—their *severe* methods of child-rearing as an attempt to throttle his conscience and so justify what he was contemplating. The realisation made him want to hit himself in self-disgust. *Trashing your parent's morals to justify your adulterous lack of them, you miserable sod.*

Another thought began to trouble him now—with its sweetness.

Really all he had to do was stop thinking, and then he could do the deed and leave the consequences to later, whatever they would be. The thought scared him, not least because it was so tempting and easy, but also because it smacked of total irresponsibility, and he didn't take irresponsibility lightly, in himself or others. He had once, but not anymore, he'd learnt too many hard lessons from his rash youth. The irony of that almost made him laugh despite his misery. *Worrying about possible consequences, what about being responsible with your life, you idiot.*

He looked again at Jocelyn, and the sight made his heart smoulder. He had read once how the American Indians viewed the conscience. To them it was like a spinning blade within the heart that twisted when violated, causing pain. Ignored enough,

it eventually cut a furrow so deep that pain could no longer be felt, the inner voice of conscience rendered impotent. Terry wondered if that would be a good or bad thing.

You're being a fool again! What does it matter what you feel? Wrong is wrong. Listen to your shame, if you don't you're no better than a man who ignores the pain of his feet in a fire, you won't escape being horribly scarred.

Terry realised he was doing well over the speed limit and forced himself to relax. The sign up ahead told him the Motel turn-off was 800m on the left. He looked at Jocelyn, and arousal swept shame aside, countered immediately by an image of Brenda, smiling at him with that impish look that used to make his heart tingle—still made it tingle. He pushed the image out, and thought he felt the blades turn. *Why are you doing this?* The voice seemed weaker, *Can't you see this is only going to...*

He distanced himself from the voice as he turned up the off ramp and into the motel car park. His hands wanted to shake and his heart was palpitating considerably faster than usual, though not from excitement. The sensation reminded him of watching his first horror movie, that strange mental mingling of alarm and anticipation while the battle of 'should I watch or should I hide' neutralised each other, leaving the mind bereft of control over the body and placing the decision in passions realm.

Again he looked over at Jocelyn. She was just waking. The stretch she gave emphasised her curves yet didn't take away from Terry's trepidation.

Ignoring the almost nauseous feeling within, he walked over to the motel office and through the double doors that stood open there. Tall Cabbage Tree palms rose like stanchions to either side. Images of his parents flashed to mind. Speaking quickly, but with a tongue that felt suddenly sticky, he booked a room—one room.