

THE
SEVEN

CHRIS
HAMMER



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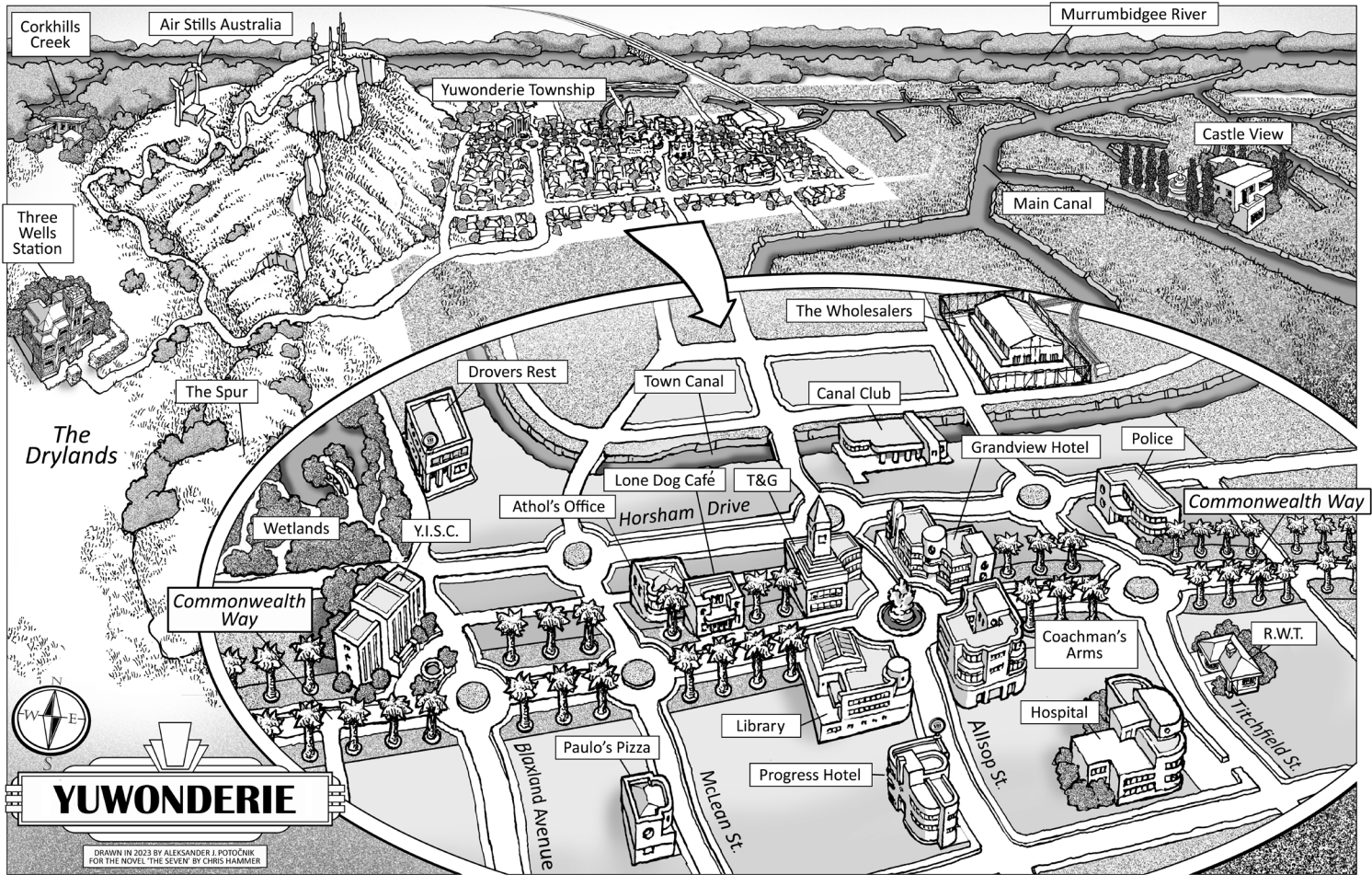
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FOR FARMSY-LEGEND!



prologue

THE IRRIGATION CANAL STRETCHES INTO THE DISTANCE, PERFECT FOR WATERSKIING: two kilometres long, ten metres wide, ruler-straight, almost as large as Yuwonderie's main canal. There's a gentle breeze wafting in from the north, enough to ripple the surface. Eggs splashes water onto his face, then eases himself into the canal, feeling its sun-warmed embrace. It's Sunday, and his supervisor at the Wholesalers has let him off early. The others were already here waiting, preparing, Eggs keen to go first, his friends happy to let him. And now all is ready for this summer's challenge: the curve. He has the ski, the towrope handle. He wriggles his feet into the soft rubber toe pieces, leans back, pushes the tip of the ski above the surface, curling himself into a ball, an astronaut on a launch pad.

On the bank, Johnny Titchfield is driving the farm truck, while Pete Allsop is the go-between in the back tray. Eggs gives the thumbs-up, Pete yells, 'Take the slack!' and Johnny edges the vehicle forward, along the path above the right-hand bank, the tightening rope emerging from the water. 'Gun it!' yells Pete, and Johnny floors it. The truck lurches into motion, and Eggs is all

concentration: the wrench to the shoulders, the pressure on his legs, pushing ever so slightly to get up and stay upright in the narrow canal as the truck gathers speed, hanging on, edging the ski to counter the rope's sideways pull. Avoiding the banks. And then he's up, in equilibrium, accelerating down the canal, Pete yelling his encouragement, Johnny struggling to keep the speed constant on the runnelled track.

Eggs feels the thrill of it, the exhilaration, water spraying and wind in his face, tearing down the canal, orange trees to his left, grapevines to his right. Now they're moving fast, the truck reaching cruising speed, and there's not a lot to it, the narrow canal allowing no room for slalom. He enjoys the moment, taking a hand from the crossbar to wave to Pete, to demonstrate his mastery. A family of ducks sees him coming and bursts into flight as he slices through them, laughing.

So far, so easy, but now they are almost at the curve; it's time to concentrate. He can see it approaching, and then it's almost upon him, Pete yelling, 'Two hundred!' The canal angles to the right—not by much, twenty degrees at most, but the turn will take precision: carve too early and he'll clip the apex; too late, and he'll swing wide and career into the left-hand bank at fifty kilometres per hour.

'One fifty!'

Time is starting to slow. Eggs can see the red flag, the sighter they've planted at the bend.

Johnny is backing off on the speed, letting Eggs's momentum carry him forward. They've debated this, thought it through, how best to take it. The trajectory is self-evident: go wide to the left, cut across the top of the turn, giving himself the width of the

canal to straighten again. It's the speed that's tricky. If the truck slows too much, the rope will slacken and Eggs will lose impetus, ski sinking below the surface—but if Johnny doesn't back off enough, then as the truck takes the curve ahead of him, it will impart a slingshot effect as he rounds the curve, propelling him uncontrollably towards the outside bank. None of them knows yet what speed is optimal. They've talked and talked, but this is the first time they've tried it.

'One hundred!'

He's told Johnny and Pete to take it slow, this first run. Better to run out of steam and fade into the water than to hit the bend too fast. If he feels himself being slung wide, if the speed is too much, he'll need to bail, strike the water, not the earth, but he has no idea if that's possible, if there would be enough time. And now, as time slows even more, the narrowness of the canal presses in on him: so easy to negotiate in a straight line, so difficult to take a turn. A split second, that's all he'll have.

He's in position, close to the left-hand bank, feeling the rope tighten, the acceleration.

'Fifty!'

The countdown is redundant; he barely hears it. Johnny is still going too fast.

The apex, the red flag.

A thought: Johnny is speeding on purpose, putting him in his place.

Resolve comes to him: he won't pull out, he'll defy them.

The rope thrumming now, as if with malevolence.

And still he hangs on.

Do or die.

‘Now!’

He carves into it, feeling the ski responding, the power coming through beneath him, his shoulder close to the water, pushing on his thighs, the acceleration growing. The truck is around the corner, the energy flowing down the rope, through his arms, into him, the force elemental, past the point of no return. And through the apex, his head and shoulders floating for a split second over dry land, lifting his head ever so slightly to avoid hitting the flag, the rope still pulling, no slack in it, Johnny not easing off enough, Eggs carving so hard his shoulder is clipping the water.

‘Yes!’

And he’s around, the canal stretching out for another dead-straight kilometre. The rope’s tension is back to normal and he lets go with one hand, pumping the air with his fist, Pete yelling in victory, Johnny blasting the horn. Satisfaction. Fulfilment. Accomplishment. Victory. Eggs takes a look over his shoulder, the red flag waving its own congratulations. He turns back, sees it too late, the shape in the water, the white sack.

Too late to turn. He jumps, leaping sideways, out of the ski, just before it ploughs into the sack, lifting and tumbling as he hits the water, closing his eyes, shoulder first, going under. But not too deep, not too awkwardly, some water up his nose, nothing more. Not hitting the bottom. No damage done, the exhilaration still with him. Treading water, stitching the unforeseen obstacle into the narrative, an embellishment to an already compelling story. His mind is moving quickly, rehearsing the version he’ll recount at the pub, as he begins to stroke back to retrieve the ski, waving to the truck, showing he’s uninjured. It’s stopped some ways down the track. Pete is out of the tray, sprinting towards him, slowing as

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he sees Eggs is unharmed. Eggs turns, searching for the ski, sees it a little way further along, floating towards the bank, not far from where it struck the sack. Curious now, he swims towards the object, wonders what it could be. Something solid: he remembers the thwack of the ski colliding with it as he hit the water. Solid, but buoyant enough to float. Where did it come from? He needs to get it out, can't believe they didn't see it when they reconnoitred the course, planted the flag, did their dry run.

It's mostly submerged, barely breaking the surface. He's about to reach out, to touch it, then stops. It's not a sack. The white is a shirt. White smeared with mud. And streaks of blood, drifting. The back of a head, brown hair wispy in the water. Holy shit. A body—he's hit a body. He treads water, recoiling, then slowly starts to back away. It's real. A dead person.

chapter one

Miss Bessie Walker
Castle View
Via Narrandera

Mrs Elizabeth Walker
Worthington Point Mission
New South Wales

September 1913

My dearest Mother,

So I have arrived and am found acceptable. I believe I detected a sense of relief as I dismounted from the carriage: my clothes respectable, my teeth intact, my hair restrained. Their eyes swept my face, keen to detect any sign of my lineage, pleased when they saw that, like my hair, it is subdued. They complimented me: on my posture, on my diction, on my cleanliness. On the lightness of my skin. I smiled, demure, speaking softly with my head bowed. They asked if it were true that I could read and write, and seemed pleased,

if a little perplexed, when I confirmed it. The mother set me a task, a test, to demonstrate my ability. Afterwards, she declared my work passable and herself satisfied. She assigned me an additional duty there and then: that of her secretary, so that she might dictate her correspondence to me. She blames rheumatism for her inability to write, and her failing eyesight for her struggle to read. She is fooling no one, but I have no wish to embarrass her.

She is a tiny thing, worn down by life. Her name is Madeleine, and she informed me with pride that it was French, while in the same breath forbidding me from ever using it to address her. I must call her Madam, as if she is some great lady, this is some other century, and I am her possession. None of that is true, not legally: she is no more an aristocrat than I am a chattel, but the relationship at times is not so very different. It is her house and it is she who provides my food and my board. She is my mistress and I am her servant.

For a while, I found myself at something of an impasse, not sure exactly how to approach her and how to calibrate this new station of mine, until I realised what it was that she truly wanted from me: not obedience, not subservience, but gratitude that they should take me in. I was initially a little taken aback by this. I had thought it a work contract, nothing more, nothing less: they would give me food, board and payment in return for my cooking, my cleaning and, so it would seem, my 'secretarial' duties. I am indeed grateful for the work, but I feel as if she believes my gratitude should run deeper and be demonstrated more effusively, as if she has sacrificed something, as if her generosity in employing me deserves some greater declaration of loyalty. Having deduced this, I put it into practice, declaring aloud the debt I owe her. It sounded hollow to me, yet no matter how ambivalent I felt in uttering the words, they

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worked and she relaxed. Her sacrifice has been acknowledged, our relationship defined.

In truth, it is not so very bad. It is clear she is not used to having a maid. She works at the house herself and smiles and jokes, before withdrawing as if remembering she is meant to be playing a role, but I suspect her nature is not so very aloof: she has spent too many years engaged in domestic toil to rise too far above it, no matter what her ambitions or the expectations of her son.

He had barely sized me up and voiced his approval than he was away again, out with the sheep, mustering. His mother tells me he has barely been at home these past few weeks, for he has been camping with the men, herding the flock, bringing them to the shearing shed in preparation for their clipping. It was only on my second day that he returned once again in the evening, badly in need of washing, feeding and sleeping. His name is Horace and he is now the man of the house. Madeleine tells me he intends to marry, have children and live on the property. She is thrilled by this, by the prospect of grandchildren, and has suggested my role may soon enough transform into one of nanny and, later, governess.

He visited me in the cookhouse, checking to see if I was settling in. I'm not sure he was so much checking on my welfare as coming to inform me that this year's wool clip will be prodigious, to boast that the Titchfields are growing wealthy, that they have planned a new house as grand as any in the district, that now his father is dead he can set the family on a better trajectory. There will be more servants, more qualified and more experienced; I represent just a first step. He is a hearty young man, so full of his plans and enthusiasms that he cannot help but share them as they come bursting out of him.

The land hereabouts is very flat and dry, the grass brittle brown even before summer's onslaught, with few trees to offer shade. The graziers have cleared most of them away; I cannot say why. The sheep gather under the survivors, wandering back and forth between their shelter and the creek's waterholes. The river proper is some miles to the north. Out of this featureless plain rises a high and rocky hill, known locally as the Castle. It still has some trees upon it, although near its peak there is a cliff of sheer rock. It is a strange and wonderful sight, as if it carries some unspoken portent. Our people must have a name for it; I wonder what it might be.

The house itself is more solid than grand, no squatter's mansion, but by no means poorly constructed. It is a single storey, with sash windows and elevated floorboards, and a lovely parlour, from which I am banned except to clean. There is a separate dining room with an imposing table; Madeleine was quick to inform me it is made of cedar from the coast. There are three bedrooms: one for her, one for her son and one for her daughter, away at school at present but due to return soon. There is a small study at the end of the house, the office from where Horace administers the farm business. There is a series of sturdy outbuildings set back from the main house: a cookhouse, a washhouse, a little shack for me. These are where I will spend the majority of my days. A tad further in one direction is a killing shed, and further yet twin outhouses. They have built a new one for the family and I am to have the old one. It would seem that, according to some unknown rule of society, servants should not void down the same hole as their betters!

Will I be happy here? I am not so sure.

This evening, after I helped clear the table, Madam came to me in the cookhouse, where I was washing the dishes. I do feel she

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is lonely out here, starved of feminine company. She confided in me a great secret, one that I am not meant to know and that I am forbidden to share: nothing is settled yet, but some local families want to bring water to the district, and prosperity with it. An irrigation scheme, they call it, similar to that being developed north of the Murrumbidgee.

She said her husband was the visionary who first saw the potential in the pan-flat country of the district, so similar to the landscape north of the river. ‘Why should we not have something like that?’ he had asked. Madeleine spoke of this scheme in reverent tones, as if reciting the Scriptures, or recounting some heavenly vision set out by her late husband, the prophet of the Riverina: the rail line extended, small landholders invited to share the bounty, a town rising from the plain, with halls and shops and schools and churches. There would be cricket teams and football clubs and an annual agricultural show and visiting theatre troupes. The desert made green; the land drought-proofed. She said I was indeed fortunate to be here at the beginning of this new epoch, that I might witness his dream become a reality.

She left me there to finish my chores, telling me she didn’t want me to read to her after all, that she was too tired. I don’t mind her. For all that she tries to elevate herself and put on airs, I think there is a kind soul residing within her.

I trust all is well with you, and I look forward to your letters.

Your loving and obedient daughter,
Bessie

chapter two

DETECTIVE SERGEANT IVAN LUCIC LOOKS ALONG THE CANAL, TRYING TO VISUALISE what has happened, whether the murder took place here or it's merely where the body was dumped. Probably the latter, but he doesn't want to count anything in or out. The local police have done a good job of taping off the area, preventing contamination, but the body has gone and he can understand why: the heat. He wipes the sweat from his face with a handkerchief, glances at the sky, the power of the mid-December sun uninterrupted by cloud cover. It would have been unrealistic to leave the remains in situ. Just one of the many differences between being a big-city cop and covering the whole of regional New South Wales: the vastness of the territory and the time it takes to get anywhere. The victim—a local accountant, Athol Hasluck—had been discovered the day before, about midday Sunday, but it wasn't until the evening that the head of Homicide, Dereck 'Plodder' Pakenham, assigned the investigation to Ivan. He and Detective Constable Nell Buchanan left Dubbo first thing in the morning, driving straight to the crime scene, a six-hour drive; Yuwonderie closer to Melbourne than

to Sydney. And so twenty-four hours have passed between the discovery of the body and their arrival; it's already in the morgue and they'll have to rely on the photographs taken by the local police.

At least the locals had thought it through, retrieving the body from the opposite bank, having concluded it almost certainly entered the water from this side, the one with car access. Good thinking on their behalf, something to be acknowledged, to be commended. He makes a mental note.

He looks, but doesn't try to move past the tape and get closer to the canal. Crime scene investigator, Dr Carole Nguyen, is on her way from Sydney, and she won't want him trampling evidence. There's not a lot to see anyway: a few scuff marks on the bank; a couple of small triangular flags planted by the police; the canal stretching into the distance, curving slightly in the other direction. Innocuous. The boys' ski sits next to the water, abandoned. He looks skywards, the cloudless dome confirming the forecast: no rain on the horizon. No chance of evidence being washed away. He wonders if he can justify getting in police divers. If it were Sydney, there would be no debate: the investigator and the divers would have been here yesterday. But the capital is a seven-hour drive, or a chartered flight, and his budget is limited.

He walks back to where Nell stands talking with the local copper, McTosh. What sort of name is that—Ernst McTosh? The sort that got you bullied at school, maybe. Why not change it to Macintosh, make life easier? The sergeant is small for a policeman and whippet-thin, receding red hair cropped close. Not an ounce of fat. A marathon runner or a cyclist. Ivan knows the type: a competitor, not a contemplator. A bloke with something to prove. He can see it in the officer's don't-mess-with-me stance: legs spread

wide, arms crossed, a small man trying to look larger. Ivan has no problem with that: the bloke is doing everything he can to help, including preserving the crime scene.

‘Anything?’ asks the local man.

‘Nothing you haven’t already noted.’ And then, remembering: ‘You the one who thought of retrieving the body from the opposite bank?’

‘Aye.’

‘Good thinking.’

‘Thanks.’

‘Tell me, this place,’ Ivan says, looking around, gesturing with arms wide. ‘Why here?’

‘Don’t know,’ replies McTosh. ‘Out of the way. Out of sight of the road, once they were around the curve in the canal.’

‘They?’

McTosh shrugs. ‘Him. She. They . . . Sorry.’

‘You’re probably right.’ Ivan turns back to the canal. There is a red flag down on the curve, different from the police markers. He gestures. ‘What’s that? Is it a farmer’s?’

‘No. The boys. A sighter for their waterskiing.’

Ivan nods. ‘So you interviewed them?’

McTosh looks unsure, perhaps wondering if he’s exceeded his authority, whether Ivan is about to praise him or reprimand him. ‘A preliminary statement, yes. Not much to it. They found the body. Called it in.’

‘That’s useful,’ says Nell, smiling reassuringly. One of her many skills: putting people at ease.

‘Ta,’ says McTosh. ‘I’ve sent Constable Simmonds to fetch the boy who found the body. You can ask him yourself.’

‘Thanks,’ says Ivan, swatting at a fly that’s been circling persistently, irritated that the sergeant is taking liberties with his investigation. He tells himself to relax, that the man is only trying to help. ‘So the main road is, what, around the curve there and about another two kilometres or so along the canal?’

‘Two-point-three,’ says McTosh.

‘No gate, right? Accessible to anyone?’

‘There’s a gate, but no lock. Boys were almost certain it was open when they got here. Thought it a little unusual, but nothing extraordinary. There’s no stock, just the trees and the vines, so no real need to keep it shut. We’ve dusted it for prints, got a few impressions. Nothing matching on the database. We’ll check against known users: owners, workers, irrigation company.’

Nell is smiling again. ‘Excellent. You’re right on top of this.’

‘We do our best,’ says McTosh, not quite able to disguise his pleasure.

‘This land,’ says Ivan. ‘Same owner both sides of the canal, or is it a boundary?’

‘No, same owner.’

‘You know who they are?’

‘Everyone in the district knows that. The Titchfields. Very prominent.’

Ivan sees Nell raise her eyebrows. ‘As in Otto Titchfield MP?’ she asks. ‘Country First?’

‘That’s our boy,’ says McTosh, a touch of irreverence in his voice. ‘Not so very happy with having bodies deposited in his canal. Let me know that. As if we have some say in where they get dumped.’

Nell laughs, and Ivan smiles. He’s beginning to warm to McTosh after all. He lets the moment linger before returning to the serious

stuff. 'What about the boys—the waterskiers? He doesn't have a problem with them being here?'

'One of them is his son. Johnny Titchfield. He was driving the truck. Finished boarding school, back in town for the holidays. Off to uni, so I believe.'

'Fair enough,' says Ivan. 'The dead man—identified as Athol Hasluck. Any doubts about that?'

'None whatsoever. Formally identified by his wife Jacinta. I recognised him myself.'

'So you saw the body?'

'Aye.'

'Cause of death?'

McTosh frowns, perhaps not happy at the memory. 'Stabbed. Once through the heart. Also marks on his hands and lower body. Not cuts, though. They looked like burns to me. The post-mortem will tell more. Scheduled for this afternoon.'

'What do you know about him?'

'A respectable guy. Forty-nine years old. Local accountant. Grew up here. Went away to uni, worked in Sydney and Wagga. Moved back about ten years ago. Most of his clients are small growers, local businesses, that sort of thing. Did my tax every year.'

Now it's Ivan who raises his eyebrows. 'You knew him?'

'Sure. Mostly through that: getting the tax done. But you'd see him around. Not into footy, but a keen cricketer.'

'Any connection between him and the Titchfields?'

A shrug, eyebrows speculative. 'No idea if it means anything, but the victim's wife, Jacinta, she's the younger sister of Lucretia Titchfield, Otto's wife. But you know, town this size, coincidences

like that abound. Athol and Otto must be about the same age. So there's that.'

Ivan thinks about Yuwonderie. Seven hours south-west of Sydney, five hours north of Melbourne, five hundred kilometres inland. The middle of nowhere. Without the irrigation, it wouldn't even exist. Just the sort of town where everyone knows everyone else, where half the town would be related to the other half.

'What about a professional relationship between Otto Titchfield and Athol Hasluck?' Ivan asks.

'Doubt it,' says McTosh.

'Why not?'

'Oh, nothing against Athol. But he's a retail accountant. Mums and dads and small businesses. And not back in the district all that long. The Titchfields are old money. Here for generations. One of the Seven.'

'The Seven?' asks Ivan.

'Toffs, or so they see themselves.' There is a hint of resentment in McTosh's voice, some remnant of the working-class Celt. 'The original landholders, from back before the irrigation scheme was put in a hundred years ago. Made them rich. The bunyip aristocracy.'

'Millionaires, then?'

'Certainly. Many times over.' McTosh looks like he's about to say something more, then pauses as if reconsidering. 'Athol's family, the Haslucks, they're Seven as well, but he's a junior member.'

'So not a multimillionaire?'

'Not him.'

'Titchfield. Hasluck. Who are the other five?'

'Blaxland, McLean, Heartwood, Horsham, Allsop,' McTosh fires back.

'Know them by heart,' observes Ivan.

'My job—important I understand the lay of the land,' says McTosh.

Nell looks towards Ivan; he nods, giving her the go-ahead.

'When Athol Hasluck did your tax, was he straight down the line, or was he into pushing the envelope?'

'Straight down the line. Knowledgeable, but risk-averse.' McTosh pauses, then cracks a knowing grin. 'Then again, I'm a copper; unlikely he'd be bending rules for me.'

'True,' says Nell.

'You knew him,' says Ivan. 'You know the town. Any theories about who might have done this?'

McTosh shakes his head. 'None. Completely out of the blue.'

Ivan looks up, alerted by the flash of sunlight off a windscreen. A police car is coming along the track beside the canal. A second fly has joined the first, flying circuits around Ivan's head. Two years in the bush and he still finds them infuriating.

'That'll be the boy now,' says McTosh.

'Give us a moment,' says Ivan. 'We'll be right over.'

The sergeant walks towards the approaching vehicle, leaving Ivan and Nell. Ivan watches him go, wondering why a man with such a fair complexion isn't wearing a hat in this heat.

'Thoughts?' Ivan asks Nell.

'Why here?' she asks. 'If he was killed here, why this location? And if he was dumped, was it just a convenient spot, or was it designed to send a message to the Titchfields, or make some sort of statement about them? Or about Hasluck?'

‘Anything else?’

‘No real attempt to hide the body. If the boys hadn’t found him, a farm worker would have.’

‘Why in the water?’ Ivan muses.

‘Hoping to wash off DNA or fibres?’

‘Possible.’ Ivan looks out across the fields. Three crows fly above the net-covered vines, cawing loudly, emphasising the stillness of the day.

Nell is staring down at the canal, concentrating. She looks up, sharing her thoughts. ‘Seems an unusual way to kill someone. A single stab wound to the heart. Confronting. Difficult. Deliberate. Up close and personal.’ She sighs. ‘We’re in the country; no shortage of guns.’

Ivan agrees. ‘If they *are* burns, and he got them at the same time he was stabbed, this seems an unlikely location. More likely he was killed elsewhere, dumped here.’

Ivan can see Nell’s disquiet and understands why. More questions than answers.

‘Good they got us in straight away,’ she says. ‘Didn’t leave it with the local detectives.’

‘Titchfield,’ Ivan responds, eliciting a wry expression from his partner. ‘He’s a big deal, right? Lots of sway in Sydney. See him on the news all the time. Mover and shaker.’

‘Yeah. Popular in the bush. Leader of Country First.’

‘Enough to attract media attention?’

‘Body found in his canal? I’d say so.’

‘That’s what I think.’ Ivan pauses just a moment more. ‘We need to pull out all the stops, Nell. See if we can get the divers down.’

‘You sure?’

‘Yes. We need to get on top of this. Politics and the media. All the makings of a shitstorm.’

‘Done.’

He has a bad feeling about this. Bloody Plodder. The Homicide boss must know about the Titchfield connection; it is almost certainly why he assigned Ivan and Nell to the case. Either the police minister or the commissioner requested investigators who could be trusted to be discreet, or Plodder assigned them on his own initiative. But why hadn’t he told Ivan about Titchfield?

Ivan walks over to the police car. A young man is standing talking to a female officer, presumably Constable Simmonds; she’s taller than the youth and a good head taller than her boss. The lad looks late teens, shedding the last signs of adolescence, sandy hair, well built, slouching, struggling unsuccessfully to look relaxed. That’s not what catches Ivan’s attention, though. The boy’s face is bruised, a nasty colour around his eye. It looks recent.

‘Detective Sergeant Ivan Lucic,’ Ivan says, shaking the lad’s hand.

‘Benedict Bright. Everyone calls me Eggs.’

Ivan can’t help smiling. ‘They used to call me Lucky. Lucky Lucic.’

‘Were you?’

‘Not very.’ He cuts the small talk. ‘Benedict, thanks for coming back out. Trust it’s not too confronting.’

‘No, it’s okay,’ he replies, but glances sideways at the canal, nevertheless.

‘Your face? That from when you collided with the body?’

‘Nah. Fell off my dirt bike. Went out this morning, trying to clear my mind.’

‘No helmet?’

The boy shrugs. 'Private property.'

Ivan says nothing, but lets his scepticism bridge the gap. A split lip from coming off a bike is fair enough, not so much a black eye. He changes the subject back to the murder. 'Show me what happened.'

'Straightforward, really,' says Eggs.

They head back past the curve in the canal, walking along the track where Johnny drove the truck, Eggs recounting his story. Coming around the bend, concentrating so hard on staying upright, hitting the sack, discovering it was so much more. It's the same story McTosh recounted, but told with more immediacy.

By the time Eggs has finished, they're almost back with the others. The boy's eyes are on the canal, looking past the crime scene tape; he appears troubled.

Ivan chooses his words carefully. 'When I was a kid, my father used to beat me black and blue. With a belt when he was sober, with his fists when he wasn't.'

Eggs looks at him, staying silent, but there's understanding in his eyes. Then he looks away, back to the canal. 'At least we're still breathing. Not like that poor bastard.'