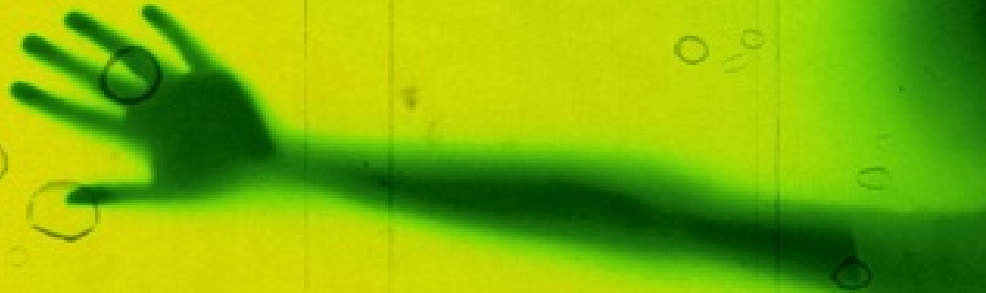


A NOVEL



**THE
BROKEN
ONES**

author of *The Dead Path*

STEPHEN M.

IRWIN

Also by Stephen M. Irwin

The Dead Path



The Broken Ones

a novel

Stephen M. Irwin

DOUBLEDAY *New York London Toronto Sydney Auckland*



This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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For Kitty.

The key to it all.

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Acknowledgments

They haunt me—her lutes and her forests;

No beauty on earth I see

But shadowed with that dream recalls

Her loveliness to me:

Still eyes look coldly upon me,

Cold voices whisper and say—

“He is crazed with the spell of far Arabia,

They have stolen his wits away.”

WALTER DE LA MARE, “Arabia”

From page 1, *The Argument*
September 1, 2011

EDITORIAL Three Years on—Still No Answers

The ability of humankind to emerge from calamity into better times has manifested again and again throughout our history. The plague-ridden and religiously extreme Middle Ages birthed the Renaissance, the opening of the world by sail, and the Enlightenment's bright lights of science. Last century's appalling World Wars, with their unprecedented casualties, spurred discoveries that have yielded extraordinary peacetime benefits: penicillin, rockets, and jet travel. It remains, however, difficult to imagine what reward could come from the dark event that occurred three years ago today, the repercussions of which continue to be felt by each of us, in every corner of the globe.

On that Wednesday—commonly known as Gray Wednesday in the West, Black Wednesday in Russia, and the innocuous Day of Change in the People's Republic of China—few of us could have predicted how different our world would be today, three years on. None of us could have been expected to; no single event has so definitively tied psychological harm to economic depression and technological failure. The hallmarks of disaster, though, were instantly apparent: at just after 10:00 GMT, the earth's poles switched. Every compass in the world swung 180 degrees, and two hundred and sixteen passenger jets either collided or simply fell from the skies, with their navigation systems fatally flummoxed. No one knows how many smaller aircraft also fell, but estimates range between seven and sixteen thousand. Almost all post-Cold War satellites met a similar fate, with their onboard computing systems instantly and simultaneously failing, plunging global telecommunications into a new age of darkness from which we have only barely begun to recover. Few civilian organizations—indeed, few governments—have been able to launch new satellites because of the economic despair that now seems so deeply entrenched that many are regarding it as the new status quo.

We still tell our children that the sun rises in the east and Santa Claus lives at the North Pole, but we all know that north is south and the world is upside down in so many ways. The state of the global economy is dire. Unemployment here remains at 21 percent; in the UK, the USA, and Germany, it is closer to 25 percent. Japan, which was still recovering from nuclear disaster when Gray Wednesday occurred, is worse still, with unemployment at around 30 percent and rising. We don't know what is occurring everywhere; Saudi Arabia, Pakistan,

Serbia are among the countries that have sealed their borders. But in those nations which are still attempting to participate in world trade, it is not just their blue-collar industries that have been decimated by depression and suicide: all sectors of all industries were hit hard by Gray Wednesday. The lack of a reliable workforce in the mining sector has resulted in coal shortages and power outages. Oil companies have suffered similarly, resulting in a rapid escalation in the prices of crude oil and refined fuels like gasoline and diesel. Most manufacturing industries have reported significant downturns as a result of erratic supplies of material, power, and workers. Crop and livestock industries are, if anything, even worse off: the rice, tea, coffee, cocoa, and rubber industries have all shrunk enormously in scale, and the resultant explosion in commodities prices has escalated inflation in countries too numerous to mention. With the sharp collapse in the value of legal tender, people everywhere have turned to older-fashioned means of exchange. Black markets have burgeoned, and almost everyone now uses barter at least a little and sometimes exclusively, further reducing governments' tax incomes. Poorer governments mean poorly paid government workers and a commensurate vulnerability to bribery. The conviction last month of the federal agriculture minister for contempt of Parliament is the tip of a large iceberg. As companies collapse and their surviving contemporaries scramble to fill the voids, graft and blackmail are becoming well-honed tools in all sectors of business.

The challenges to national economies have been worsened by a dramatic shift in global weather patterns in the past thirty-six months. Rainfall patterns have changed on all continents, and average temperatures have swung by up to seven degrees Fahrenheit: summer heats are rising, and the past three winters in the Northern Hemisphere have been the coldest on record. Climatologists speculate that the cause of this was the switching of the poles, but detailed research may take decades to conduct and unravel. Some people are not prepared to wait that long: in Turkey two years ago, and in South Korea last month, members of religious sects committed suicide on a massive scale—four thousand lives in total. Death on a smaller, more murderous scale occurred in January, when four men and a woman drove a bus packed with explosives through the main gate to the Large Hadron Collider, near Geneva: the explosion killed them and twenty-three staff members.

Nothing, however, has ameliorated the situation that Gray Wednesday has left us in. The federal Commission of Inquiry drags on, now under its second commissioner and still with no tangible results. Government-funded and private policy institutes have made innumerable recommendations to help preserve liquidity and protect jobs, but none have made any inroads toward finding a solution. Our country is not alone; the rest of the world is just as baffled. Our guests that arrived on September 10 three years ago seem fixed to stay; the psychological impact of their arrival may have to be judged by future generations. In the meantime, our economies run flat and our stomachs get emptier. The question remains: Where is the silver lining? Where, in short, is the hope?

Not many years from now

A boy emerged from the deep shadows under a dripping doorway awning, a cautious mollusk venturing from its shell. He was sixteen or so, his face a small, pale triangle above dark clothes, eyes hidden by dark lank hair and gloom. When he saw Oscar's car, he retreated into darkness.

Inside the tired sedan, Oscar Mariani gripped the wheel unhappily. Dusk: the hour when Delete addicts and street prostitutes rose to score or hook. The car's engine kept the repainted police cruiser's interior warm, and the windows were lightly fogged. Rain tapped on the roof, the sound muffled by the sagging hood lining. It was not a muscular downpour but a constant, weeping drizzle barely more substantial than mist. Oscar wondered if this rain would ever stop. It would ease, certainly, then a foggy morning might open onto a rare day of sunshine, then an inevitable storm ... and another week of this god-awful wet.

He'd parked on the cruddy street opposite the mouth of a lane so narrow it was almost an alley. Halfway down it, the red and blue lights of patrol cars intruded, slicing through the drizzle, reflecting off the dull eyes of windows and turning the droplets of water on his sedan's windows into startling instants of sapphire and blood. Somewhere down there, dogs barked.

Oscar reached for the door handle and stopped to look at the man staring back at him in the rearview mirror. The stubble on his thin face badly needed either taming with a razor or grooming into a beard. Under thick coppery hair, his tall forehead was beginning to wrinkle as thirty faded and forty loomed. But it was his own stare that held him: gray, wide-set eyes that one woman long ago had called beautiful and another much more recently had called disturbed. Now they just looked exhausted.

Down the alley, figures crossing in front of the turning emergency lights cast long, insect shadows with scissor legs and swollen heads. Another polished white police car, glistening with raindrops, rolled around the corner near Oscar and turned down the alley to join the others. By its headlights, he could see a woman in a yellow raincoat hunched under an eave near the collection of squad cars. Neve was here already.

Oscar sighed and pulled on his waxed cotton motorcycle jacket, patched in several places but warm and blessed with lots of pockets, all full. From the seat beside him he took his black hat—a wide-brimmed squat thing with all the style of a dropped towel—and pulled it low onto his head. It was ugly, but it kept the rain off.

And the rain was cold; it whispered shyly on Oscar's shoulders and hat as he put the car key in the door and gave it an arcane series of twists until it caught and locked. He headed toward the flashing lights.

Old townhouses crowded in on both sides of the alley; their small back courtyards were separated from the garbage-strewn thoroughfare by a continuous fence that was an alternating patchwork of graffitied brick, graffitied timber, graffitied metal, and barbed wire.

Despite the steady rain, the air smelled of burned things and urine. Three white patrol cruisers stood out like pearls in a coal hopper; in front of them were a Scenes of Crime van and an unmarked patrol car. Onlookers had gathered under awnings and in doorways: gray-faced people loosely hunched in tired clothes, smoking silently and watching with the attention of seagulls observing picnickers, wondering what might be left behind.

“Where have you been?” Neve asked.

Neve de Rossa was more than ten years younger than Oscar. He was tall and she was petite; the top of her head barely reached his shoulders. Her blonde hair was wet and plastered flat, its peltlike sheen reflecting the emergency lights. Her face and shoulders were taut, as if she were in a ceaseless flinch, always anticipating a blow.

“Doing my face,” Oscar replied. “I like to look good when I meet real cops.”

Neve grimaced at his rusty stubble and stepped from cover, arms tight about herself.

“Cold?” he asked.

“Need to pee.”

At a sheet-metal gate stood a uniformed constable in a clean blue slick, watching their approach from under his visor. From behind him came the loud barking of the dogs.

“You could have gone in without me,” Oscar said.

Neve’s cheeks, already pink, reddened a little more. “You’re the ranking officer.”

Oscar said nothing. He knew very well why she didn’t go in alone. There wasn’t much pride in announcing their unit. Over the past three years, Oscar’s original small team of officers and public servants had dwindled, each quietly transferring away and rarely replaced. He’d become so used to the regular hemorrhage of faces that when Neve joined his unit over a year ago he’d treated her with frosty detachment, expecting her any day to realize her error and leave. For some reason, she hadn’t. Now it was just him and her.

They showed their identifications to the constable, who didn’t bother suppressing a smirk. The metal gate squealed as Oscar pushed it open, and the dogs redoubled their barking.

The tiny yard was all mud. Puddles of dark water reflected the glum light from the townhouse’s kitchen window. Two dogs were frenzied shadows in the corner of the yard, straining in savage arcs against their heavy chains. Rain and evening had made their coats black, but their teeth shone a striking white. Their loud, brutal barks sent primal shock waves into Oscar’s gut. The air was dense with the reek of dog shit.

Up a short rise of concrete stairs, the back door was open; within was a huddle of crisis blue uniforms. Silent lightning flashed behind them. Oscar coughed. The detective in the doorway turned; she had a scarred chin and unblinking eyes. Oscar tried to recall her name. She regarded him and Neve coolly, then said loudly, “Barelies.”

Oscar’s lips tightened. The nickname still rankled. Three years ago, when the Nine-Ten Investigation Unit was created, some wag thought “Nine-Ten” sounded enough like “Nineteen” that everyone soon began calling his unit the Barely Legals, an epithet thought doubly amusing because it also connoted a lack of law-enforcement power, which, like a good joke, was at least half true.

The kitchen was so small that a man could touch opposite walls with outstretched arms—but not now in the crush of pressed blue trousers, shining blue raincoats, and gray wool suits. Oscar instinctively pushed through first, making room for Neve. She shrugged off his help. The ceiling was high and stained by decades of smoke and hot grease. The fridge was the

yellow of an old tooth. A single bare bulb glowed feebly from the end of a perished rubber cord. The furniture looked salvaged. A figure lay on the floor, obscured by the forest of blue and gray torsos and legs. Flash: another photograph.

“Detectives Mariani and de Rossa.”

A hush fell, and the ranks parted to let a tall officer stride into the kitchen. Haig’s iron-grafted mustache was neatly trimmed, and his visor was the polished black of a cavalry horse’s hood. On each shoulder epaulette was bright “birdshit”—three silver diamonds and a gold crest.

“Inspector Haig,” Oscar said, glancing around the room at the blue uniforms crowded around the single body. “Outnumbered?”

Haig’s smile was like a split in ice. “This one’s homicide. Clean and clear. Save yourself and”—he nodded at Neve—“the young lady trouble.”

Oscar shrugged and waited.

Haig’s wide jaw tightened. “Ian?”

“Done,” said the police photographer, scurrying aside.

The dead man lay in a puddle of blood that was seeping away through the joint between two curled sheets of old linoleum. His once white dressing gown was stained in a dozen places with vibrant red rosettes of blood. He lay in a flamboyant pose, legs akimbo, an arm above his head, his surprised face turned half to the light above. One eye was a blank stare, the other a collapsed, leaking sac. The hem of his robe had ridden up a fat thigh to reveal pale flesh so streaked with veins it looked like a side of marbled beef. One stubbled cheek gaped open in a strange new mouth, a slit rimmed with blood. His neck, hands, arms, and buttocks had all been stabbed. Some of the wounds still leaked. In the blood sat two upturned dog bowls forever out of the dead man’s reach, their ground-meat contents turning rufous as they absorbed his liquid.

“Darryl Ambrocio Tambassis.” Haig hardly had to raise his voice to be heard above the dogs outside. “Forty-one, unemployed. Still warm. Around thirty stab wounds.”

Oscar looked at the dead man’s hands; the nearest lay curled like a pale crab, and there were three clear stab wounds in its puffy flesh.

“Did you find the weapons?” asked Oscar.

“The knife is already en route for testing,” Haig said. He hesitated. “Weapons?”

“The wounds on his hands are two different profiles,” Oscar said. “One type has two sharp edges, the other only one. Two knives.”

Oscar felt every eye in the room on him. The air seemed statically charged.

Haig’s smile turned even colder. “Shouldn’t you be interviewing your suspect, Detective? You’ve only got”—Haig checked his watch—“eleven minutes.”

“Thirty,” corrected Oscar. The deeply flawed legislation allowed him thirty minutes at the scene with the suspect.

Haig shook his head and pointed his large, well-manicured thumb at Neve. “She’s been here twenty already.”

“I was outside!” Neve protested.

“Neve,” Oscar said quietly.

Neve returned a glare, but bit down on her words. Oscar looked at Haig. “Suspect?”

“Wife,” Haig replied. He motioned for his officers and the others to allow Oscar and Neve deeper into the house. “Ten minutes,” he said, and turned away.

Oscar stepped into the gloomy hallway. As he glanced back he was pleased to see uniformed cops grumbling as they dropped to hands and knees, looking for the second knife.

The rest of the townhouse was as narrow and murky as the kitchen. Its ceilings were disproportionately high, there were too few lights, and the lack of furniture let footsteps echo dolefully. Yet another uniformed officer leaned against the hallway wall. When he saw Oscar and Neve, he wordlessly pushed himself off the wall and led the detectives through a door into a small sitting room. It was piled high with urban detritus: a rusted walking machine, cardboard cartons overflowing with shabby Christmas decorations and moth-eaten clothes, magazines on dog breeding, dog nutrition, dog fighting. The single window was a small rectangle of cobweb gray, unwashed in years and hunched on a sill dusted with the husks of dead flies. Rain pattered on the glass. A single bulb hung by a rubber cord the color of dirt, its glow hardly stronger than a few candles would make. Junk had been pushed aside to make space for a card table at which sat a young detective constable in a trim single-breasted suit, trying to read a newspaper by the weak light. Opposite him sat a string-thin middle-aged woman whose hands were knitting themselves in worried knots. Another door was set in the far wall.

“Barelies,” said the officer in the doorway.

The seated detective looked up from his newspaper. “Seriously? You’re still bothering?”

Oscar waited.

The uniformed officer left. The young detective sighed and held out his hand for their IDs.

“Oh, come on,” Neve said.

Oscar squeezed her shoulder. She made a disgusted sound and handed over her badge.

Oscar passed across his. The young detective made a show of inspecting them and handed them back. Oscar noticed the lad was already developing a paunch.

“Bazley, isn’t it?” Oscar asked. “Haig teaching you manners?”

Bazley ignored him and turned to the thin woman. “Mrs. Tambassis?” She seemed to flinch at the mention of her name. “Detective Sergeant Marina and Detective Constable de Rossa here—”

“Mariani,” Neve corrected, “and de Rossa.”

“—are with the Nine-Ten Investigation Unit. Due to the nature of your statements as arresting officers, these detectives have been summoned.” His voice slid down into the monotone of rote learning. “They are vested with full rights and powers to interview you and anything you say to them can be used as evidence at trial. Should you wish not to answer their questions here, you have the right to a formal interview in a state police facility, courthouse, or location nominated by a justice of the peace with or without representation by a practicing solicitor. Do you understand?”

Oscar watched the thin woman’s eyes dart about nervously. They fixed for a moment on a blank patch of wall near the other door, then slid off it as if they’d met something oily and unpleasant. She nodded once.

Bazley looked at Oscar and glanced meaningfully at his watch.

“We know,” Oscar said.

Bazley picked up his paper and sauntered from the room.

Oscar removed his wet hat and wiped his hands on his trousers. “Mrs. Tambassis? May we sit?”

Seen closer, Mrs. Tambassis was not middle-aged but a hard-worn thirty or thirty-two. She licked her lips, then nodded again. Oscar and Neve sat. Oscar placed a small digital recorder on the tabletop and slid it toward the woman; she stared at it as if it were a new and dangerous breed of insect. He switched the recorder on and a red light, small as a pinprick of blood, glowed on its side. The woman’s eyes followed a worried triangular path—recorder, Oscar, Neve, recorder, Oscar, Neve—then dropped to watch her own nervously weaving fingers. The room was silent except for the muffled barking of the dogs.

“Aren’t you going to ask me anything?” she said.

Oscar gave Neve an almost imperceptible nod.

“Mrs. Tambassis,” Neve began, “you killed your husband this evening. You took two knives from your kitchen and while he was carrying bowls of food for your dogs you stabbed him. Many, many times.”

Mrs. Tambassis watched her hands. “*His* dogs,” she said quietly.

“You called the police?” Neve asked.

The woman nodded. “My phone’s out of credit, but the cops are a free call.”

“And when they came and asked you what happened, what did you tell them?”

The woman looked up. Her skin seemed as thin as wax paper; the bags under her eyes were puffy and gray. “You know. You’re here.”

Oscar could see that the front of the woman’s dress was flecked with blood; a long spittle of red was crusting dry on her neck.

“Mrs. Tambassis,” Neve continued, “can you tell us why you killed your husband?”

The woman’s eyes darted from the tape recorder to the empty wall, then back to the little red light.

“I didn’t think it was him I was stabbing,” she said. “I thought I was stabbing him.” She jabbed her finger at the blank wall.

“Who, Mrs. Tambassis?”

“*Him*. My uncle. Uncle Robert.” She spat the name like a sour thing and stared at the empty wall with scared, angry eyes.

The small room fell silent for a long moment. Even the dogs were momentarily quiet, and the only sound was the sad whisper of rain.

Oscar spoke: “We don’t see anyone where you’re pointing, Mrs. Tambassis.”

“Of course you don’t.” She looked at Oscar as if he were a fool. “He’s dead.”

Oscar could see that the woman was very pale. Her pulse thumped in the artery on the side of her neck. Shock’s setting in, he thought. The hammering knowledge that she’d taken another person’s life would soon shut down her thought processes, and they’d get nothing from her.

“Mrs. Tambassis,” Oscar said carefully. “If it was your uncle’s ghost that you attacked, why is your husband dead?”

The woman glared at him. “He must have stood in front of Darryl just as I went for him. Didn’t he?”

“And you’ve seen him before today?” he asked. “Your dead uncle?”

Her eyes narrowed, wary of a trick question. “I’ve seen him since we all started seeing

them.”

“Which was?” Neve asked.

“You know very well.”

“Tell us anyway.”

“You know this!” the woman cried. “Years! Since Gray Wednesday. Jesus ...”

Neve glanced at Oscar. Time was running out.

“Why did you attack your uncle?”

The woman stared at the table for so long that Oscar thought the stunning curtain of shock had closed already. Then she spoke again. “Because he’s always here. You know what they’re like. Always standing there, staring. Wherever I am, there he is, watching me. Yes!” she accused the empty wall, lips curled in disgust. “He’s there when I sleep, there when I wake up. When I eat, when I shop, when I p-piss. My fucking filthy shadow ...” She looked at Oscar, tears welling in her eyes. Her voice dropped to a dry whisper. “You know what they’re like. The dead bastard has stolen my life.”

Oscar felt the back of his neck turn cold.

“Let me get this straight, Mrs. Tambassis,” he said. “Your dead uncle has been tormenting you—”

“Yes,” the woman nodded. “Tormenting, yes.”

“Driving you mad.”

“Mad.” She nodded quicker, eyes bright.

“Making your life unlivable.”

“A living hell, exactly!”

“For years.”

“Years! Three years!”

“Then why did you wait until this evening to attack him?”

The woman blinked like someone who’d just missed a step on a staircase, surprised and suddenly afraid of a fall. Oscar knew this was the critical point, the terminator moment that separated truth from lie, or a well-planned lie from a spontaneous one.

“Had you attacked this vision of your uncle before?”

The woman’s eyes flicked between Oscar and Neve.

“Yes,” she decided.

“How?” Oscar asked. “Fists? Threw something?”

“Threw something,” she agreed. “A glass.”

“And what happened?”

“Well, it broke, didn’t it? On the wall.”

“It went through him?”

“Some detective.”

He kept his voice low and reasonable. “Then why did you attack him this evening with knives?”

The woman’s tongue emerged again, a cautious snake from its hole, testing the air and finding it fraught. Her eyes found the red light of the recorder; she forced herself to look at the spot on the floor and said nothing.

Oscar said, “And why did you wait until your husband had both hands occupied holding dog bowls?”

Silence settled heavily over the room. Neve glanced at Oscar. Her expression betrayed nothing, but a small gleam of triumph lit her eyes. Oscar knew that Neve held little love for people who murdered their spouses.

“Mrs. Tambassis,” Oscar continued. “What do you know about Clause Seventeen of the Personal Sightings Act, also known as the Nine-Ten Act or the September Ten Act?”

The woman licked her lips again. A sheen of tight panic closed over her face. “I know what everyone knows. If you, if you kill someone and you say you were told to do it by”—she nodded harder, as if to say, *You know what I mean*—“by the dead, you won’t go to jail.”

“Which is just what you say, isn’t it, Mrs. Tambassis?” Oscar asked. “You say a ghost made you kill your husband.”

Her hands twisted like fighting insects.

“Do you know, Mrs. Tambassis,” Oscar continued, “how many homicides we attend where the suspect invokes Clause Seventeen? It’s become very popular. There are even people—some of them are street lawyers, some of them are just off the street—who for a few dollars will tell a person exactly what to say to the police about Clause Seventeen, should they happen to commit a serious crime. Like arson or homicide. Did you know that?”

The woman kept staring at the floor and shook her head. “I don’t have a few dollars,” she whispered.

That I believe, Oscar thought.

The woman’s narrow lips worked as her mind tried to concoct a way out. But it wasn’t coming, and fresh tears of fear and frustration welled in her overbright eyes.

“I don’t ...”

“If there is a problem with your story, Mrs. Tambassis, it’s not too late to change it.”

The woman looked at him. Her cheeks trembled, and her whole body had started to shake.

Beside him, Neve radiated energy. Oscar nodded to her.

Neve spoke clearly. “If you were attacking the ghost of your uncle, Mrs. Tambassis, why didn’t you stop when you realized it was your husband? Why did you continue to stab him more than thirty times?”

The woman’s eyes were wide and glossed with tears. Her face worked like the front of a building whose foundations had just been detonated. She glanced over at the empty patch of wall.

“Fuck you!” She spat not at Oscar or Neve but at the empty wall. “Fuck you!”

The dogs barked louder. The handle of the second door rattled softly, and the door opened a crack.

“Mummy?”

In the open doorway Oscar glimpsed the pale curve of a little girl’s face. Haig had made no mention of a child.

The thin woman’s breath seemed to catch in her throat. With great effort, she wiped her cheeks and forced lightness into her voice and said, “Go back to your room, Button. Mummy’s nearly done.”

The door began to close.

“Wait,” Oscar said. The door stopped moving. The pale hint of face hovered in the shadow behind it. Oscar turned to the woman. “Your daughter?”

Tears finally broke from the woman’s eyes and rolled down her ashen cheeks. “You don’t

need to see her.” She looked at Neve, pleading. “Don’t.”

Neve stared back evenly.

“Come in please, honey,” Oscar said to the girl behind the door. “It’s okay.”

The door creaked wider, and a small girl stepped sheepishly into the dimly lit room. She was barely taller than a toddler, but her face could have been a five- or an eight-year-old’s. It was hard to tell, because huge scars distorted one entire side of her small face, pinching one eye and lifting one side of her mouth into an ugly sneer. One nostril was far too large where part of her nose had been torn away. The disfiguring scars, still fresh, crawled down her neck like pink lizards. Oscar felt his stomach tighten. The girl had been savaged, and it wasn’t hard to guess how. The dogs were still barking.

Oscar looked again at Neve. She was watching him, and he knew what she was thinking. *And now we have motive.* Oscar knew he should have been thrilled. Instead, he felt hollow and tired.

“Mummy shouted,” the little girl said quietly. Her “sh” sound came out like a whisper in a hush. “I want to see Mummy.”

“Of course you do, sweetheart,” said Oscar, and he smiled. He was out of practice and hoped the expression didn’t look as beastly as it felt.

The girl moved quickly across the room and slid like a shadow behind her mother. The woman didn’t know where to look—she chose to stare at the digital recorder on the table. The main door opened, and Bazley looked in. “One minute.”

“Then get out,” Oscar said.

Bazley slammed the door shut.

Oscar looked at the woman. Her daughter’s hand had crept around her waist and was clutching it tightly.

“Mrs. Tambassis?” The woman’s wet eyes slowly met Oscar’s. “Did your husband’s dogs do that to your daughter?” The woman’s brow became a mire of furrows, and tears rolled down her cheeks. “Why didn’t you press charges?”

The woman lifted her chin. Her soft voice was full of contempt. “I did,” she said. “The charges didn’t stick.”

Oscar switched off the digital recorder.

“Oscar,” Neve said. “What are you doing?”

Oscar ignored her and instead leaned toward the woman, speaking low and quickly. “You hold to your story. You went for your uncle. I’ll sign off on that, and under—”

“Oh, Oscar!” snapped Neve. “What the hell!”

“—Clause Seventeen you should only be charged with involuntary manslaughter and given home detention and court-appointed counseling. Okay?”

The woman stared at him for a long moment, then nodded.

“Oscar!” hissed Neve.

Oscar dropped the recorder into one of his many pockets. He opened the nearest door and called for Bazley. He arrived, carrying a red folder. “Well?”

Oscar said, “We’re done.”

“We’re not!” Neve said.

“We’re signing her Seventeen,” he finished.

“Oscar!”

Bazley held out the folder, amused. “Jesus, Mariani, why not get a rubber stamp—”

Suddenly, there was a meaty slap, and Bazley’s eyes widened. Oscar was surprised at how whip-fast his own hands had moved, one slapping and grabbing a handful of stomach skin and twisting hard, the other restraining the young man’s wrist. He was surprised, too, at how angry the comment had made him. Something to think about.

His voice was mild, though. “Detective *Sergeant* Mariani. Not Jesus. Maybe the facial hair threw you.”

Bazley was pale. “You’re a crazy f—”

Oscar squeezed tighter, pain cutting off the detective constable’s words.

“I’m going,” Neve said, fed up.

Oscar released his grip and Bazley skittered backward, clutching his belly. He kicked halfheartedly at Oscar. “Loser,” he hissed.

Although it was whispered, the word smarted. Oscar signed the form, threw the folder down beside the young detective, and went after Neve.

He edged past the dogs to the gate and down into the lane. The rain was heavier, and the sky was dark gray. Night was settling fast and the surrounding buildings were black cliffs. A shining hearse was now parked outside the fence and two undertakers in suits were lifting the murdered man’s covered body into its back. Half of the police officers had left; only two squad cars remained. Neve hadn’t waited—she was already stumping up the alley. Oscar sighed. He’d let her cool down; in ten minutes, she’d be fine again.

“A shame.” The voice was edged brightly with good humor.

Oscar looked around. Haig idled out of the metal gate, hands in pockets. Very few inspectors left their offices for the shitty streets. Haig seemed to relish it. He was also the only inspector Oscar knew who preferred a uniform to a suit.

“How’s that?” Oscar said.

“Well, I thought you had one there.” Haig reached into his jacket for a small tin box of cigarillos. “Clear motive. No lawyer. A story that was, let’s face it, uninventive at best.”

Haig shielded the cigarillo from the rain with his cap brim as he lit it, then, almost as an afterthought, held the tin out. The smell of good tobacco made Oscar’s mouth water. He shook his head. Haig was not a man to be indebted to.

“Why wasn’t Tambassis prosecuted when his dogs ripped that little girl’s face off?” Oscar asked.

Haig returned the cigarillo tin to his pocket and exhaled blue smoke. “Who knows? Record keeping has gone to hell in the last few years. He must have slipped through the cracks.”

Oscar knew how those cracks were greased. Another reason Haig liked to arrive in person.

“You gave Bazley pause for thought,” Haig said.

“No respect for rank.”

Haig looked Oscar up and down. “Coming from you, that’s quite rich.” He took one more puff, then threw the hardly smoked cigarillo into the fast-flowing gutter water. Oscar couldn’t help but watch longingly as the precious cylinder fizzed and floated away.

“Bazley is young,” Haig continued. “He doesn’t understand why an officer would poison his own career to save a criminal.”

Oscar met Haig's stare. "But I'm sure he's learning how to fast-track his career by becoming one."

Haig's eyes were chips of blue ice. The soles of Oscar's feet prickled, like he'd just stepped to the edge of a chasm. Then Haig turned, unlocked his cruiser, and slid into the driver's seat. He took off his spotless cap, revealing a healthy pink scalp under closely cropped slate-gray hair. "Poor Mariani. Trying to lead the lost to safety with his little broken compass." Haig's car started with a purr, nothing like the asthmatic wheeze of Oscar's sedan. He looked again at Oscar and smiled. "Touch one of my officers again, you might just disappear."

Haig closed his door. A moment later, the white cruiser slipped like a pale shark up the narrow street. Oscar felt eyes watching him and turned. The female detective with the scarred chin stood beside the metal gate. Kace was her name, Oscar remembered. She watched him with mild curiosity. He wasn't flattered; she'd regarded the stabbed corpse of Darryl Tambassis wearing the same expression.

"I hear they're shutting you down," she said.

"I heard that, too," he replied. He'd been hearing it for two years. He nodded at the graffitied fence. "What about the dogs?"

"We'll find someone to take care of them."

As if her curiosity were now satisfied, Kace looked away. Oscar noticed a graffito on the fence. It had been spray-painted through a stencil: it showed a cartoon ghost wearing a crown at a jaunty angle. Its grin was friendly, but instead of eyes it had dark, empty sockets. The jolly spirit was in intimate congress between the legs of a buxom woman whose own eyes were wide either in heavenly ecstasy or abject terror. The caption read, "Ghosts Fuckin' Rule."

Suddenly, from behind the fence came four cracker snaps of gunshots. Oscar jumped. Kace watched him, smiling coolly. The dogs had finally stopped barking.

Neve was waiting near his car, her arms shoved deep into her pockets. Rain slicked her hair down onto the shoulders of her jacket. She was trying not to shiver.

"We need to buy you an umbrella," Oscar said.

"I have an umbrella." Her jaw was tight. "What we need is a prosecution."

Oscar unlocked the passenger door, then his own. The air inside the car was cold now, and their breaths condensed into fragile drifts of fog.

"We had her, Oscar. Neatly painted into a corner." He'd expected Neve to have calmed down, instead, her words were clipped razor sharp. "She couldn't afford a lawyer. Ten more seconds, she'd have cracked. We had her."

Oscar looked down the alley. The last police cruiser's red taillights came on, and then disappeared down the narrow thoroughfare. He threw his hat on the backseat. "What good would it have done? We prosecute her for murder, she ends up in a cell with six other women, and that little girl loses her mother."

Neve nodded impatiently, as if she'd heard it all before. "Yeah, yeah. One less victim clogging up an overloaded system. But she stabbed him in the eye. She *did* murder him."

"I thought you Catholics didn't believe in divorce."

It was a bad joke, and badly timed. Neve stared out the windshield, almost vibrating with

tension. Oscar couldn't recall ever seeing her quite so wound up. In the street, shadows were detaching from shadows. More rough trade coming out now: hookers and rent boys, black marketeers and thieves. Oscar put the key in the ignition; the starter motor ground dismal before the engine coughed and caught. "We're fine. When did they convict Dixon? Week and a half back?"

Neve looked at him. "Dixon was five weeks ago."

Oscar covered his surprise by pretending to adjust his seat belt. Had it really been five weeks?

He felt Neve still watching him. "I know why you do it," she said.

"That's enough," he said quietly.

"Letting these fucking criminals walk won't undo what you did three years ago."

"Enough."

Neve wrapped her arms tighter around herself and stared at nothing. Oscar put the exhausted sedan into gear and eased out into the street. As he turned the wheel, his headlights picked out the young man who'd been watching him when he arrived. As Oscar drove closer, the boy took a shy half step back into the alcove. Ignore the dismal shit, Oscar thought. But he couldn't help himself. After he'd passed the doorway, he glanced through the smeared window at the boy. Reflections of Oscar's headlights fluttered over the youth's pale face like white wings: a brief touch, then gone.

Oscar pressed hard on the accelerator, keen to flee the whores, junkies, scarred children, and the dead.

How nice not to smell smoke. No matter how much he hated returning to headquarters there was always the one upside of filtered air. Coming here was like a respite in a clean, scrubbed oasis. Even the hospitals suffered rolling blackouts, but here in City Station the air was warm and cleansed of the harsh smoke tang that, over the past three years, had burrowed its way into almost every room, every brick, every piece of clothing, every pore. People burned anything to cook and heat, although most didn't have a proper wood-burning stove, so many ended up accidentally torching their houses and themselves.

He tried to engage Neve in small talk as they wended between the empty cubicles of the Industrial Relations Branch to his so-called department's so-called office, but she remained silent. They reached a tiny corner desk adjacent to the emergency exit: two chairs, one old computer, a cluster of cell-phone chargers, and a hat stand Oscar had brought from home. There had once been a laminated sign that proclaimed the cubicle the Nine-Ten Investigation Unit, but one day the sign had simply vanished, leaving only four blue gobbets of Blu-Tack. The next day, even the Blu-Tack had disappeared. He hung his wet hat on the stand and switched on the computer. Its cooling fans clattered dispiritedly.

He turned to Neve. "Listen—"

"Back in a minute."

He watched her walk toward the far corridor, which led to the toilets. He sat. His in-tray held his payslip and an interoffice envelope, the kind scrawled with the names of previous recipients and sealed with string looped between two buttons. Oscar ignored them and typed a brief report of the Tambassis interview. With every word, he grew angrier. Haig and Neve

were both right: Tambassis had strong motive, a piss-weak story, no lawyer. An easy conviction. There were few people whose minds had not been twisted when the ghosts appeared on Gray Wednesday. Many couldn't cope with their new, ghastly shadow hospitalizations for self-harm erupted, and psychiatrists and telephone helplines were overwhelmed. In the short time it took to understand that the ghosts weren't leaving, suicide rates skyrocketed. And many began taking others' lives. Violence and murder cases soared and courtrooms became jammed with perpetrators who claimed that their ghosts "drove them to it." There were stories of ghosts leading people to lost brooches and buried tins of money, so why not to murder? Clause Seventeen had been included in the Personal Sightings Act to exonerate people whose mental health had been genuinely fried by the appearance of the dead. At first, the courts had loved the clause: it was the perfect pressure valve for a justice system on the brink of explosion. But there lay the curse of Clause Seventeen—since nobody can see any ghost but the one that haunts him, if a suspect stuck firm to his story, who could argue that his specter *didn't* drive him to kill? Courts and cops alike soon realized that blaming the dead was becoming the blanket excuse for murder and units like the Barelies were hastily created. It was Oscar's job to sort the psychologically traumatized from the cunning. Yet here he was, signing another get-out-of-jail-free card. Not doing his job. He clicked Print.

As the old Epson in the middle of the office wheezed into life, he felt eyes on the back of his neck and turned. The shadows near the stationery cabinets were deep; the outer corridor was dark. He was alone. The printer clacked loudly and paper began to hum through the machine. Oscar turned again to his desk, and leaned back in his chair. He had discovered that if he angled and twisted just so, he got a glimpse of buildings, and so could tell his father without lying that his office had city views. True, there wasn't much to see; the skyscrapers were almost all dark spires, and only the occasional streetlamp worked. In the distance, near the Captain Cook Bridge, the glass flanks of a distant high-rise flickered an angry, wasp-wound red. Fire. Oscar waited for his cell phone to ring, but it slumbered in his pocket. Nine. Ten calls were becoming rare. Some uniformed cops simply skipped the protocol of calling the Barelies to a crime scene even if the suspect pleaded Clause Seventeen, and received no reprimand. Oscar wondered if he should have removed himself the day the sign disappeared.

"On your feet, Mariani!"

The thunderous yell at his shoulder made Oscar jump.

Jon Gest was as big as his voice was deep. He was like some huge Victorian-era engine made flesh: a heavily cast machine of wide catenaries and lumpen mass, capable of grinding rock or pistoning tonnage without fatigue. Unstoppable. He was grinning.

"Jumpy bastard. Guilty thoughts?"

"About why your wife keeps calling, begging to be satisfied by a real man."

Jon's grin faltered, and he sat heavily in Neve's chair—it sagged precariously under his nineteen stone. "It's true. Leonie knows." He shook his head and ran his fingers through his hair. "My heart hasn't been in the marriage since my true love rejected me." He grabbed Oscar with hands the size of hams and planted a wet kiss on his cheek. "Love me, Oscar. Love me back!"

Oscar pushed his friend away and wiped his face. "Idiot."

"No woman wants you. You're wound up tighter than an eight-day clock. I'd be surprised

you could convince your one-eyed baldie to puke, let alone make a kitty shriek.” Jon chuckled and began hunting through Oscar’s desk drawer, flipping aside bulldog clips and spent batteries. “Where are they?”

Oscar reached into the lowest drawer, pulled out a half roll of peppermints, and threw them to Jon. “So why the visit? Bored? DCP burning the midnight oil?”

Jon worked for the Department of Civic Prosecutions. When he and Oscar had been reassigned from Ethical Standards, they’d been split up: Jon—with a law degree—was shuffled down and across to DCP. Oscar—with half an undergraduate degree in philosophy and three semesters in horticultural studies—slid even further to this tiny desk without a sign. Judging by Jon’s unpatched jacket and reasonably new shoes, he was doing okay.

“Nope.” Jon chewed. “Looking for you.”

“Aren’t you lucky?”

“*Au contraire, mon ami.* Detective work. I *detected* that you were here. And speaking of here: here.”

He handed Oscar a folded sheet of paper.

“What is it?”

Jon suppressed a smile and nodded for Oscar to open it. In Jon’s handwriting were a name and two phone numbers.

“And this is?”

“A job.” Jon smiled openly. “Friend of a friend told me. Cushy position, ranger service in the state forests up north. Decent super, sick pay, no stress, simple. Applications have closed but my mate’s mate reckons they’re still open to hearing from the right person.” He nudged Oscar with a prodigious shoulder.

Oscar stared at the paper as if it were a curiosity from another century, the purpose of which wasn’t quite clear.

Jon leaned forward, excited. “It’s plant shit, your kind of stuff. You know, like your precious damn fruit trees but on a big scale. Easy work. I mean, the pay’s not great, but nothing runs on money anymore anyway, right?”

Oscar nodded. “What about Neve?”

“Neve’s smart. She’ll be fine.”

Oscar looked at the phone numbers a moment longer, then up at Jon.

“Couldn’t get me anything in DCP?”

Jon’s expression faltered.

“Oscar.” He sat back in his chair. “Man, sometimes ... I just don’t know.”

“Haig threatened me tonight,” Oscar said.

Jon sighed. “Here we go.”

“Oh, come on, Jon. *Haig*. Would you want to leave the service with him still here?” Even to his own ears, Oscar’s voice sounded childish and petulant, but he couldn’t stop himself. “We had him.”

“We didn’t have him,” Jon said. His voice gained a hard edge. “We half-had him. Maybe quarter-had him. Then we totally lost him. I don’t want to go over all this again. Good Christ. He’s an *inspector*. He won.”

“He tried to have you killed.”

Jon shook his head, exasperated by a subject that had long ago become boring. “Look, on

I don't believe that—”

“Stabbed.”

—and two: so what? I'm here. If he did try, he failed. And now we're out of Ethical Standards and we're no threat to him. We're safe. Isn't that enough? I'm not saying the slate is clean, but Christ, does it matter anymore? It's a whole new world now. Everything's different, everyone's got grief. You especially, man, I know. But, seriously, you gotta move on.” He tapped the note with one solid finger and stood. To Oscar it felt like a wave lifting beside him. “I thought this was a way to help with that.”

The door at the far side of the silent office opened. Neve entered, adjusting her holster and straightening her shirt. She saw Oscar and Jon, lifted her chin, and headed over.

Jon looked down at Oscar unhappily. “Leonie's birthday party. Sunday. Sevenish.” Before Oscar could speak, the big man was on his way out, greeting Neve in passing. “Detective Rossa, looking beautiful.”

“Sergeant Gest, looking married.”

Jon grinned and ambled out of the office.

Neve arrived at the desk. Her face was dry, but she'd missed a tiny patch where her mascara had run. The lights in the bathrooms weren't good. Oscar congratulated himself: he'd let a murderer walk free, physically assaulted one of Haig's detectives, pissed off his best friend, and made his partner cry. As Mrs. Tambassis had said: some detective.

“It's late, and we don't get overtime.” Neve's words were clipped.

“We're done,” Oscar said. “Could you just grab that from the printer?”

While she was gone, he opened the interoffice envelope. Inside was a memo from the deputy commissioner. The budget review of State Crime Command, scheduled for next quarter, was being brought forward to next week. One telling sentence was highlighted in yellow: “All units must provide a two-page (max) summary of operations during the last financial year (i.e., arrests, charges laid, prosecutions), including person hours per.”

Oscar felt his mouth go dry. Unemployment was running at twenty-five percent; state-funded institutions were acting like desperate field surgeons, cutting off useless limbs, and the police service was hacking with fervor. Budgets ran on statistics, and the Barelie statistics were less than favorable. As Neve had pointed out, they hadn't brought in a prosecution in weeks.

And whose fault was that?

Jon must have caught wind of the advance review and had begun hunting about for a safety net for his former partner. Instead of gratitude, another flurry of dumb anger sloshed about inside Oscar. He didn't need saving.

“What's that?” Neve nodded at the memo.

Oscar folded the paper. “Reminder not to use the east elevators after nine.”

She held out his printed report on the Tambassis interview. Oscar could see that her hand was trembling. “I don't feel comfortable signing this.”

He nodded wearily. “I didn't ask you to.”

Oscar signed it, put it in the interoffice envelope, addressed it to the attention of Inspector Moehtar, and put it in the out-tray.

“I'll drive you home,” he said. “And, listen—”

He looked around. She'd already left.

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