

ALISON GOODMAN

A NEW
KIND OF DEATH



An Extraordinary Outsourcing

The forecaster could come to only one conclusion: there was no company protocol for hiring an assassin.

He looked through his glass partition at the neat rows of junior salarymen and -women working on the next five-year plan. The failure to find a protocol was unsettling – he'd even delicately asked his network of senior colleagues, those men who had completed induction with him thirty years ago, if there was a covert procedure for such an extraordinary outsourcing. None had understood the question. Or perhaps they had chosen not to understand. It was the first time his network had failed.

The Forecaster separated the keys on his chain, rubbing his thumb over the small box shape that unlocked his desk drawer. He had not made any mistakes in his career with the Company – it was why he was sitting in this large office overseeing a department – but he knew the two plain folders in the drawer were a huge risk, to the Company and to himself.

It had started as a private project – a stretching of his forecasting muscles, a secret vanity. Always done after hours in his small apartment, it was a way to fill in the time between working days. And even on Sundays, family service day, he only had to put it aside for 20 minutes at 2PM to take the weekly phone call from his wife. Fifteen years ago she had returned to Tokyo with their only child. She had been right to do so – their son had to attend the best schools if he was to secure a place in a respectable company. The boy was working hard at university, his wife always assured him. He would receive good offers when he graduated.

After each Sunday call, the Forecaster allowed himself the luxury of sitting at his apartment window overlooking the cityscape of Harare and imagining the future successes of his son.

Perhaps a division manager before he was 45. And then the Forecaster would laugh at the audacious thought and pull the curtain across the sweeping view, turning his vivid imagination to another future: the future of the Company.

The Forecaster slid the key into the drawer lock, rotating it easily in the well-oiled mechanism. He lifted his eyes and studied the movements of his staff – dark-suited men and women converging and breaking away like a slowly-turned kaleidoscope – but no one was moving towards him. He opened the drawer. A plain folder slid into view, the small black title stark on the cream cover:

OSAGI-FOWLER PHARMACEUTICALS

200-YEAR PLAN

The Forecaster allowed a ripple of satisfaction to move through his body. He picked up the folder and laid it facedown on his desk. No one else in the history of the Company had ever attempted a 200-year plan. No one else had the talent.

Which is why, a week ago at the executive *ringi*, the unanimous acclaim of his 40-year plan prompted him to override his natural caution and approach the Director. The committee had lauded his forecasting skills, acknowledging the fulfillment of his past prophecies with sharp bobs of their gray heads. But it was the Director's rare words of congratulation that had filled him with sudden courage.

The Forecaster paused, remembering that moment: the tilt of the Director's head, the smile like that of a proud parent, and then, 'You are our secret weapon, Tanaka-san'. He still felt the fullness in his blood at such recognition.

At the close of the *ringi*, the Forecaster had lingered at the conference table until the Director was alone. Then, bowing low, he presented the folder, holding his breath as the Director read the label.

'Two hundred years, Tanaka-san?' The surprise was shadowed by a frown.

'It was completed in my spare time, sir,' the Forecaster assured him.

‘I will read it with interest.’

The Forecaster bowed again and left the room, the sudden separation from the plan as sharp and hollowing as though he were giving up a beloved son.

Now the folder was back with him. He laid his hand on the smooth manila binding. It was his best work; a brilliant long-term strategy that would bring huge profit to the Company with developments in its massive contraceptive market. In his midnight moments of fervent loyalty, the Forecaster even went so far as to call it his great legacy. There was only one thing that could destroy its projected outcomes.

He turned his attention to the other cream folder that lay in the drawer: the source of the problem. A report from the medical research arm of the Company:

THE ‘RABBIT WOMAN’ MUTATION

PROJECTED EVOLUTION OF X-CHROMOSOME MUTATION No. 7865

The Forecaster had understood the subtext of the report: the Rabbit Woman mutation, if left unchecked, would result in a lost market for female contraceptive drugs. Not for many generations, of course, but eventually women would have complete control over their own fertility. It was inevitable – a natural evolution of the species – and the Forecaster was not so foolish as to believe he could stop evolution. He just needed to slow it down. For two hundred years.

And there was only one way to delay evolution.

The Director had said as much in their private meeting three days ago.

The summons to the Director’s office had specified a time well after hours. A man with less experience would probably have misinterpreted it as an ill omen. The Forecaster recognized it as suitable security for such an important report.

‘An interesting conclusion, Tanaka-san,’ the Director had said, motioning the Forecaster to sit opposite him. ‘You believe the Rabbit Woman mutation will close down the female contraceptive market?’

‘Eventually, Director,’ the Forecaster said.

‘It is a pity that we cannot stop the spread of the mutation.’ The Director looked up from the folder, his face expressionless. ‘What would be your solution to this problem, Tanaka-san?’

The Forecaster stiffened in his chair. He had never been asked for a solution before; problem-solving was the privilege of the inner circle. Was this his chance to move into the Executive? Perhaps he could finally satisfy his wife’s long-distance ambitions. He heard her thin disappointment pulsing in his head; more power, more money, more prestige. But did he dare voice the expedient course of action? It had come to him in the loneliest hour of another sleepless night, the scheme inspired by a tenet from *Art of War*, the ancient study of strategy:

A general plans for what is difficult while it is still easy.

‘Such a problem must be stopped in as many cases as possible. As early as possible,’ he said, his voice loud with his own boldness. ‘To limit the impact.’

The Director grunted. ‘Yes, as many cases as possible, as early as possible. To limit the impact.’ For a moment their gazes locked and the Forecaster was sure he saw respect in the older man’s eyes.

‘A most strategic solution, Tanaka-san.’ The Director closed the file and pushed it across the desk. ‘Your record speaks for itself, but the Board cannot act on such a long-term prediction. The forty-year plan is the extent of their scope. Do you understand?’

The Forecaster had stared at the folder in front of him, and understood. First, a private meeting and now the return of the plan with a cloaked message. The honor was too great, but he would prove himself worthy. He bowed.

‘It is my turn to make a prediction now,’ the Director said, and smiled, inviting the Forecaster to join him in the small joke. ‘Continue with such loyalty and you will one day join the Executive.’

Overcome, the Forecaster almost touched his head to the desk in a low bow. ‘Thank you, Director. I will always do my best for the Company.’

The Director nodded. ‘I know you will.’

The Forecaster had not seen the Director since that meeting, but he still felt the thread of collusion that connected them.

He picked up the mutation research folder from the drawer and flipped it open to the contact details of the employee in charge of the investigation. Dr. Salvatore Famagusta. First, he would obtain a list of names from the doctor. And then, starting from that evening, he would go to the small bar near his apartment and wait for the Irishman from the mining company to come in again. A few months ago, the Irishman had bought him a drink and struck up a conversation that had ended in them bellowing out a much applauded duet of *Paint It Black*. If the Forecaster's own network could not help him, then perhaps he could use the network of a *gaijin* mercenary.

The First Deal

TWO RED-WRAPPED TAPES

Hannie Reynard was hanging upside down from her hallway ceiling in a new pair of gravity boots when a letter shot through the front-door slot. The envelope arced towards Hannie's forehead, and in the second before it hit her, she recognised the red logo of the Independent Filmmakers Fund. Fuck, they've found out, she thought as she swayed backwards. On the return swing, she snatched up the letter.

'You should get down,' Jezza called from the lounge room. 'I read in *Women's Health* that you shouldn't hang upside down when you've got your period. Makes you sterile.'

Hannie ripped the top off the envelope, tearing the letter inside. She'd been hanging too long and her hands were hot and stiff.

'Apparently all the blood goes up your tubes,' Jezza added.

Hannie unfolded the letter. There was something vulnerable about reading upside down, so she tucked her chin up against her chest and held the letter close to her face.

Dear Ms Reynard,

It has come to the attention of this office that you have failed to lodge the last two progress reports for your documentary Freaks or Frauds. Also, a substantial discrepancy between your grant account lines and your original budget has been detected. Consequently, an investigation...

Hannie scanned the rest of the letter:

...make all records available

...appointment of an administrator

...meeting next week

She came to the signature:

Mosson J.Ferret. Acting Finance Manager.

Mosson Ferret. They'd been in the same Advanced Film Editing class about 10 years ago. Every Tuesday afternoon she'd sat behind

his knobbly line of neck vertebrae and watched the flare of the overhead light slide across his bald skull. Someone had told her that Mosson had no hair on his body at all, not even up his nose. Hannie had wondered if that meant pubes too. He had only spoken to her once.

‘You’re Hannie, right?’ He’d screwed his body around in the cramped seat until one of his back bones jutted like a dorsal fin.

Hannie nodded. No eyebrows, she noted. She leaned forward. Or eyelashes. The bareness seemed to blur the Japanese curve of his eyes.

‘Can you lend me 10 bucks?’ he said. ‘I can pay you back next week.’

‘What’s it for?’ Hannie asked.

‘I’ve got a job interview. I need to buy a shirt.’

‘What’s the job?’

‘Shit-kicker at the IFF,’ Mosson said. ‘Every other film nut will be after it, but I’m feeling lucky.’

A mutual friend later told Hannie that Mosson Ferret was the luckiest bastard alive. He didn’t return to the college, and his Advanced Editing seat was taken by Jeffrey Landis, whose neck was hidden by a thick pelt of black hair.

It was possible that Hannie would have forgotten Mosson Ferret and her \$10, but one afternoon near the end of that final year, she found his unfinished graduation work. It was at the back of a drawer in the college editing suite. Two videotapes wrapped in a red plastic bag. Two hours of brilliant film work. Just lying around.

‘The manual says you should only hang upside-down for five minutes. You’ve been up there for 10. Your head will explode.’

Hannie dropped the letter away from her face and saw the dusty underside of Jezza’s knees.

‘I’m in big trouble,’ she said. ‘Read this.’ She held the letter up towards Jezza’s hands.

‘Let’s get you down first,’ Jezza said, edging past Hannie. ‘I can’t talk to you properly when you’re like that.’

‘I’ve been sprung by the IFF,’ Hannie said.

From behind, Hannie felt Jezza grab her under the arms and push her up towards the bar across the ceiling.

‘Gee, you don’t even weigh as much as a 16-channel sound desk,’ Jezza said. ‘You okay?’

Jezza was a roadie and Hannie had seen her lift old-fashioned 24-channel sound desks by herself with no problem; the woman was built like a brick shit-house. A very good thing too, Hannie thought as she grabbed the bar and hauled herself into a shaky stomach crunch. A less Amazonian friend wouldn’t be able to rescue her – she’d be stuck upside down until all her blood hammered its way out of her ears. She leaned back into Jezza’s steady grip and fumbled to unhook the left gravity boot.

‘Can you push me up a bit more?’

She felt herself rise and quickly unhooked both feet. Jezza eased her to the ground.

‘Are you going to faint?’ she asked. ‘You look really pale.’

‘I’m fine,’ Hannie said, but her next words drained away with the blood-rush back through her body. She held out the letter, feeling for the wall behind her with her other hand.

‘Go sit down,’ Jezza said. She took the piece of paper, holding the ripped corner in place as she carefully read the words.

Hannie walked towards the kitchen, her hands slapping the damp-cracked walls for support.

‘The bastards are going to take my film off me.’

‘It doesn’t say that,’ Jezza said, following her up the hallway. ‘It says that pending an investigation, an administrator will be appointed.’

Hannie sat down at the kitchen table. Jezza didn’t understand. Appointing an administrator meant sending round an IFF Nazi. Hannie knew what he would find in his investigation too: a \$30,000 trip to Paris in the general-expenses account line. Her original project budget had only allowed \$10,000 for travel. Paris would be considered a bit off the beaten track. Especially for a documentary about three medical freaks in Australia.

‘I’m an idiot,’ Hannie said. ‘Why did I ever think I could get away with it? I’ve never gotten away with anything in my whole life.’ Except for two red-wrapped tapes. The sharp flick of memory hunched her over the table.

‘Then why did you do it?’

Hannie rubbed at a dried spill on the worn Formica top. She couldn't tell Jezza the real reason why she'd suddenly stopped pre-production of her film and flown to Paris. How could she explain the ugly betrayal of her body and the creeping loss of confidence?

'It's not fair,' she finally said. 'Everybody uses their grant to go overseas. Why am I the only sucker who gets found out?'

'Probably because everybody else gets their figures right,' Jezza said. 'You've got to admit, spending 30 grand on a holiday is a bit out of order.' She sat on the stool opposite Hannie and hooked her work-boot heels over the footrest so that her long legs frogged on either side. 'Sister Mary Joseph used to tell me that God forgives all sins except failing maths.' She laid the letter on the table between them.

'I've wrecked my big chance,' Hannie said. 'Now they're going to put some idiot in charge who hasn't got a creative bone in his body.' Or worse still, she thought, someone brilliant. Someone like Mosson Ferret.

'I thought they'd already put some idiot in charge,' Jezza said.

'Of course they did, but he got fired. The IFF never got back to me about it.'

'Well, they have now, like a ton of bricks,' Jezza said. 'I just hope your trip was worth it.'

Although the spill on the Formica had not shifted, Hannie pretended to dust it off with the flat of her hand. The trip had cost her much more than her grant. She had rented a flat above a cheese shop on the Rue de Montmartre, with the old vomit smell of blue-vein embedded in the carpets. It was the specialty of the shop and every morning she and Robé had devoured it with fresh hard-crust bread that had slashed their gums. Sharp cheese and salty blood. Robé had said the penicillin was already built in and had laughed at her anxious gum inspection. 'I will adore you even if every tooth falls out of your head,' he'd said, gently licking her lower lip. She should have known then that he was a con artist.

'What am I going to do?' Hannie said.

She twisted her fingers into her hair and pulled on the long

strands. After so many years of working for other people, she'd finally got the funding for a solo project. Sure, she'd used some of Mosson's grad film in the IFF application, but she'd only done it to get her break. Everyone knew you got your break any way you could, then you proved yourself. Under the table, she pressed down on her stomach to stop the sudden quickening of self-doubt. *Freaks or Frauds* was going to launch her directing career – she had worked so hard to make it happen. It was true Paris had been a big mistake, but she could get back on schedule, and she still had a chunk of the grant money left. Oh, God, she thought, tightening her grip on her hair, had Mosson watched the application films and seen his own stuff? Was that why he was coming after her? A snap of pain jolted her hand away and she stared at the red-gold knot wrapped around her fingers.

‘What’s wrong?’ Jezza asked.

‘I’ve got to get filming.’

Hannie shook her fingers free of the hair and opened the drawer under the kitchen sink. She scabbled through the knife compartment. ‘Where are the bloody pens when you need them?’ She pulled out a red Biro.

‘Okay, let me think,’ she said, flipping the IFF letter over. ‘I need crew and equipment.’ She tapped the pen on the tabletop. ‘What are you doing the next couple of weeks?’ she asked.

‘I’ve got a bump-in at the Arts Centre tomorrow, but that’s about it,’ Jezza said.

‘You up for some lighting and sound work?’ Hannie asked.

‘Sure.’

‘Great. If Tiny’s around, I’ll ask him to do camera.’ Hannie wrote down the names and the costs. ‘Condo Spinner will fix me up with equipment. He owes me a few thousand favors.’

‘What are we filming?’

Hannie paused. She had finished researching two of the women she wanted to interview, but both of them lived interstate. There just wasn’t enough time to get a film crew up to Sydney for the Human Slug, let alone Brisbane for the Kangaroo Lady. At least the third freak lived in Melbourne, but Hannie only had a tenuous lead on her: a newspaper article.

‘We’re going to film a woman who can resorb her own babies,’ Hannie said. She wrote *phone Herald, about Rabbit Woman* on the back of the letter.

‘What do you mean, *resorb*?’

‘Kind of sucks the baby back into her own body. Apparently rabbits do it all the time when there’s a drought or if they get overcrowded.’

‘That’s revolting,’ Jezza said, pushing herself away from the table. ‘I don’t want to see that.’

‘We’re not going to film her doing it. We’re just going to talk to her,’ Hannie said. ‘I’ll see if I can get an interview next week.’

Jezza folded her arms across her chest. ‘Does she suck back the bones too?’

‘I suppose so. I’m not sure how she does it.’ Hannie looked up from the piece of paper. ‘Are you okay? I didn’t know you were so squeamish.’

‘I’m not.’ Jezza hunched her shoulders. ‘It’s just, you know, she’s sucking back her own kid.’

‘Well, at least she’s not paying some backyarder to do it,’ Hannie said. ‘It’s too bad we all can’t resorb.’

‘We’d never have to worry about the condom busting or the pill not working,’ Jezza said. She sat up straighter. ‘We’d never have to worry about getting pregnant again.’ She shook her head. ‘Nah, I can’t imagine it. Some prick would make it illegal.’

They both laughed, Jezza hanging on to the front of her stool for balance.

‘Maybe this Rabbit Woman can teach us all how to do it,’ Hannie said.

Jezza shrugged and dropped her feet to the floor. She’d obviously had enough fantasy for one day. Hannie, however, imagined herself as a Rabbit Woman. Always able to choose between the bold unfolding of birth and the curled stillness of death. She sighed. Too bad the Rabbit Woman was only a freak.

A 10-DOLLAR KINDNESS

Mosson Ferret leaned forward until his forehead touched the cold glass of his office window. This job, he thought, was becoming one long meeting. And meetings gave him migraines. He looked down at the street below. Rush hour at 6 PM. Didn't anyone leave at five o'clock anymore? He pressed his forehead harder against the glass. Maybe he could crush the pain.

'Mosson?'

He turned around. The sudden movement cymbaled through his head and down his spine, the pain softening into nausea. Sol was standing in the doorway holding a manila folder and a videotape box against his chest.

'Are you okay?' he asked.

'I'm fine,' Mosson said. He leaned on the back of his chair, his palms damp against the vinyl. 'Is that the Reynard file?'

'Yeah. And her application tape.' Sol walked over to the desk and placed the file and tape on a stack of folders. 'I've rung her twice, but I only get her answering machine.'

Mosson grunted. 'Give it another go on Monday.' He looked down at his watch. 'You should get going.'

'Yeah, I'm on my way. Are you staying back?' Sol asked.

Mosson swallowed against the sour dryness in his mouth and tightened his grip on the chair. Just fuck off and leave me alone, he thought. But he was a manager now, so he said, 'Not for long. I've got a bit more work to do on the Reynard budget. You get going, though. I'll see you Monday.'

Sol waved and left the room.

Mosson swiveled the chair around and lowered himself onto the seat. Holding his neck and head very still, he crab-walked the chair around until he faced the desk. Thank God he had remembered to put another packet of extra-strength aspirin in the top drawer. He found the box and pulled out the foil strip, tearing off four tablets. Four at once. It was a trick he had learned from Pippa. She was a nurse and had told him that four aspirin

would dilate the constricted blood vessels in his brain and stop the migraine. Not too good for your gut lining, though, she'd said. Mosson ripped the tops off the tiny sachets and dumped the tablets into his glass of water. He watched the discs spin downward then spring back up, trailing particles.

Pippa was a bald fancier. She always wanted to hold his head in her hands when they screwed. A bit uncomfortable, but not as bad as that costume designer. The one who had wanted him to shave off her pubes and stick them on his head with wig glue. On the first date.

Mosson stirred the white water with his finger, poking the last bit of tablet to break it up. He knew that once he took the aspirin, it would only take 20 minutes for the pain to go. He could last 20 minutes. He drank the mixture, pausing to swirl the undissolved dregs into the final mouthful.

Twenty minutes to kill. Mosson picked up the Reynard tape. Application films were always half an hour long. He would be okay by the time it finished. He slid the tape out of its case. The IFF assessment label was covered in Jeremy's ornate handwriting. Poor bastard. One minute you're manager of a department, next minute you're out on your arse.

Mosson started to read the assessment, but the edges of the label suddenly faded away, leaving a pinhole view of the word *outstanding*. He closed his eyes. Migraine sight loss always scared the hell out of him. He took a deep breath and looked at the label again. The left side was missing. Maybe watching the tape wasn't such a good idea.

He pushed the video back into its case and placed it in his open briefcase, next to the two banana and honey sandwiches he'd bought at lunchtime. He could watch the tape over the weekend. The budget audit, however, was already two weeks overdue. Mosson flipped open the Reynard file.

Jeremy had left it in a mess, the same way he had left the whole department. His big mistake had been making the Melbourne Cricket Ground the official address of his phony film company. Mosson snorted. An old operator like Jeremy should have known how to cover his tracks. After all, redirecting funds

into a fake account was the oldest trick in the book. Mosson flicked through the pages of the file until he found the budget printout. Three months old. Time to get an update. He typed *ReyBudl* into the computer and hit *Enter*.

The spreadsheet flicked onto the screen and Mosson pressed the *PgDn* key. He looked away as the figures flashed by. And who did Big Bob decide was going to fix Jeremy's mistakes? Mosson Ferret, of course. Mosson too-bloody-good-with-budgets-to-let-him-transfer-into-production Ferret. Mosson stared at the column totals, but the numbers twisted and jumped. It was no good. The aspirin bomb had been too late. He'd have to go home and take a couple of Mersyndol.

He queued the budget for printing and sat back in his chair. There was no way he was going to make it to the movie tonight. He'd wanted to see *Witness* again, on the big screen. The Classic was showing it as part of a crime and religion double bill. Mosson closed his eyes and saw the key scenes: the opening shots of the Amish funeral, the boy recognising the bad cop in the photo, the final witnessing. Such beautiful cinematography. Once he had dreamed of being that good.

The printer clicked into operation. The first page of the budget slid into the tray. Mosson picked it up and studied the travel line. There was something very wrong with this woman's accounts. What was her first name? He flipped the pages of the file back to the personal details. Hannie. Hannie Reynard, graduated Melbourne Film College in 1998. The year he would've graduated if he hadn't taken the job down in accounts.

Where was her photo? He scrabbled through the loose pages at the back of the file. It was the standard glossy black-and-white publicity shot. Someone had stood on it and the dusty sneaker print added texture to a small face overwhelmed by long wavy hair. He recognised that hair – she was the girl who had sat behind him in Film Editing. One of the many suburban princesses who had populated the classes.

A vague sense of obligation made him frown. Had he slept with her? He shut the file. No, he was sure he hadn't, but something about her face made him think of bodies. She made

him think of his body, and that was strange because he tried to ignore that particular six-foot hairless freak show.

Twenty minutes later, in a taxi on Punt Road, Mosson finally remembered what he owed Hannie Reynard. He smiled. Owing 10 bucks was easy. Not like owing an apology for a pissed grope at a student party or a one-night stand. She probably didn't even remember she had lent him money. He would give it back to her anyway. These days he didn't owe people. He looked out of the car window. The taxi had stopped in the long line of traffic waiting to cross Hoddle Bridge. Mosson squinted, blurring the view of the Yarra until it became the opening shot of a thriller. He would take it easy on Hannie Reynard, pay her back for that ten-dollar kindness. He sat back in the car seat, satisfied with his generosity, and felt the pressure in his head change. The aspirin bomb had finally worked.

By the time Mosson walked into his kitchen, the sharp edges of the migraine had been smoothed away until it was a cool round space in his temple. He slid his briefcase onto the bench and looked around the room. The cleaning lady had washed up and mopped the floor. Mosson stretched his neck back, easing into the absence of pain and dirty dishes. He opened the lid of his case. The smell of wet banana and cardboard registered a second before he saw the wet circles on the folder; the honey-transparent printout; the slimy videotape wrapped in soggy bread.

'Shit,' Mosson said. Hot heavy fluid flooded the space in his temple.

Mosson picked up the tape and ran to the sink. He peeled off the bread and the cardboard casing in long wet strips and dug creamed banana out of the tape sprockets and the capstan hole. He tore too much paper towel off the roll and scrubbed the black plastic, dabbing around the label. Then he held his breath and lifted the plastic flap. It separated from the magnetic tape with a soft sucking squelch.

'Damn,' Mosson said. He pressed his fingers into the ache above his eye socket.

It took half an hour, 20 cotton buds, and the last bit of methylated spirits in the bottle to clean the tape, but Mosson was

sure he had saved it. He propped open the flap with a toothpick and left the tape to dry on the second shelf of the bookcase beside his sofa. He promised himself he would watch it the next day, but it would be nearly three months before Mosson watched the Hannie Reynard application tape, and by then banana and honey had a totally different meaning.

LAST ON THE LIST

Hurtle nods politely to me as he walks up to the picnic table. From the way he's moving, it's obvious he's wearing a left shoulder holster. Hurtle Williams doesn't usually carry a gun and, by the looks of his tight jacket, he's got no idea about using a holster. I could have a bullet through his brain before he'd even got his hand under the lapel.

He rang me two days ago on the mobile.

'I've got some work you might be interested in,' he said. 'It's good money.'

Hurtle knows I need good money. I haven't had any proper jobs for a year and a half. Not since the fiasco with Lucius Marron. I had the job set up perfectly. One head shot from the townhouse roof opposite Marron's house. I'd spent weeks watching and working out his routine, my escape routes, the wind buck, the dragon's breath. Everything taken into account except for a bit of new bird shit on the tiles. Marron saw me go arse over tit and came running to the rescue. 'Don't worry, mate, you'll be okay,' he said, and took me to St. Vinnie's in his new Mercedes. You can't kill a man after he lets you bleed all over his new Mercedes, so I didn't go through with the job. Pauley Barker ended up doing it. Now the word's out that I'm past it – 49 years old and already on the scrap heap.

'Morning, Trojan,' Hurtle says.

I nod. He lays a piece of paper on the table in front of me, facedown, then sits on the bench opposite.

'It's women,' he says, tapping the paper. 'Seven of 'em.' He looks away, scanning the east side of the park.

I pick up the list. Two hits in Melbourne, two country Victoria, one in Sydney, one in Grafton, and a Perth. A lot of travelling. The money's going to have to take that into account to make the job worthwhile.

Hurtle leans forward. 'Are you interested?' His right leg is jiggling under the table.

I've known Hurtle for eight years and worked with him six times. All big jobs. He's a bit basic, but a good middleman with a rep for being straight. In all that time, I've never seen him this nervous. He's got the strained look of a hunted man.

I pull a pen out of my jacket pocket and write a dollar sign with a question mark on the back of the list. I push it over to him.

'A mill for the seven,' he says.

A million bucks. Fuck me gently. I raise my eyebrows.

'There's a time limit,' Hurtle says. He looks down at his hands. 'Three of them are pregnant. Client doesn't want them to drop.'

Jesus, pregnant women.

'That's 10 kills, not seven,' I say.

A bad joke. A bad contract. I can just picture the hysteria when the media gets hold of it. Not to mention the cops – they take kills like this personally. No wonder the money's so good. No wonder Hurtle's so nervous; no one else is willing to take on the job. A couple of years ago I would have knocked it back too, but Hurtle knows I can't be so picky these days. I'm probably last on his list. If I don't come through he's blown his finder's fee. Bloody last on the list. Not too long ago I would've been first.

Hurtle is so tense he can't even rustle up a smile at the joke. 'It's all got to be done in three months,' he says.

'That's a bit stiff.'

I stare over at the new playground: blue plastic seesaw horses and a castle made out of khaki logs. The main entrance to St. Kilda Park is in the southwest, which makes the playground in the north; the sector of death. Not a great place for the kiddies to play. The council should have thought about the Feng Shui.

'Who's turned you down so far?' I ask.

Hurtle shakes his head. Like I said, he's a good man.

'You'd have gone to Barker first,' I say, 'then the Tapdancer, Roosie up in Sydney, Tanloe, and finally me.'

Hurtle shifts in his seat, not meeting my eyes. I'm right. I'm scraping in at five, and Pauley Barker is number one. Little shit. I'm surprised Pauley didn't take it; he's built up his rep by taking on anything. He probably came to the same conclusion as I have: the job is so overpriced, the client isn't expecting to pay it out.

As soon as the last job's done, they'll put out another contract to clean up the loose end. Only big business or one of the organisations can afford that kind of double play.

'Is the client legit or one of the brotherhoods?'

Hurtle shrugs. 'Dunno, but they came through the right channels. I can't contact them. They contact me, and it's never face-to-face. Whoever it is, they know what they're doing.'

Hong would never have accepted a job like this. Too risky. He always insisted on knowing who had hired us and, if possible, why. If you know who the client is and where they're coming from, then you can predict and outthink. Be ready for any double-cross or setup. If I take this job, I'll have to track down the client, work out some way of protecting my arse, and do all of the kills in three months. It's a big ask for a lone operator. Don't even know if it's possible. Maybe I am getting too old for this kind of life.

I look down at my hands. A long time ago in a training camp in Rhodesia, Hong and I sprung an old sergeant behind the ammo dump. He was sitting on an empty grenade crate with his hand outstretched in front of him, his eyes fixed on his fingers. I was going to give him some shit, but Hong grabbed my arm. 'He's looking for the shakes,' Hong said, pushing me in the opposite direction. 'Old army and old cops; one day you can't stop shaking and it's over.'

Hurtle turns away and looks across the park to give me some thinking time. We watch a mother and her kid walk over to the playground. Perhaps it's a sign, except I don't believe in that shit. Hong did – but then, he also believed he was born lucky. With abundant *fiú*, as the Chinks say. Whether it's a sign or not, all I know is that I need the money and the work.

'Cash transfer offshore. Two-thirds up front,' I say. 'Rest on completion.'

Hurtle straightens his back and swings around to face me. 'It's 200,000 up front, 300 grand after the fourth hit, then rest on completion,' he says.

Five hundred grand in the bank before the end-play. The gamble's worth it. I nod.

Hurtle pulls a thick envelope out of his jacket pocket and slides it across the table along with the list.

‘See you then. And Trojan, watch your back with this one.’

He pushes himself off the bench and smiles, but he’s so sweat-scared that he’s rusting his gun to his armpit.

‘What’s with that?’ I ask, nodding at the bulge. ‘Something you not telling me?’

‘No, mate, it’s got nothing to do with this.’ He rubs the back of his neck. ‘Raelene moved in yesterday.’ He shrugs his jacket smooth over the holster and walks away.

Raelene is the only daughter of Blowie Prissnap, and the lady in Hurtle’s life. Blowie Prissnap doesn’t like Hurtle. He’s been heard to say he’d rather have a cop for a son-in-law. Blowie’s nickname has got nothing to do with flies and a lot to do with blowtorches. If I was Hurtle, I’d be carrying a gun too. And maybe a fire extinguisher.

I pick up the list and read it. The last name I know. Regina Wilcox. We worked in the same bar together about seven years back. I was doing a bit of security work to tide me over after Hong was shot. Regina used to slide me a free drink every now and again. She used to do a bit of street con too, until she hooked up with some Triad small-timer: Byron, or something like that. No asterisks by Regina’s name, so she’s not one of the pregnant ones. I’ll do her last, for old times’ sake.

I open the envelope and flick through the photos. A mixed bunch of mid and long shots, but the women’s faces are clear. Regina has cut her hair short since I last saw her – makes her look like a boy.

I push the envelope and list into my jacket pocket and look around. The mother and kid have gone and the park is empty. I take a deep breath and hold my hand out in front of me, palm flat to the ground. It’s steady for almost four seconds.