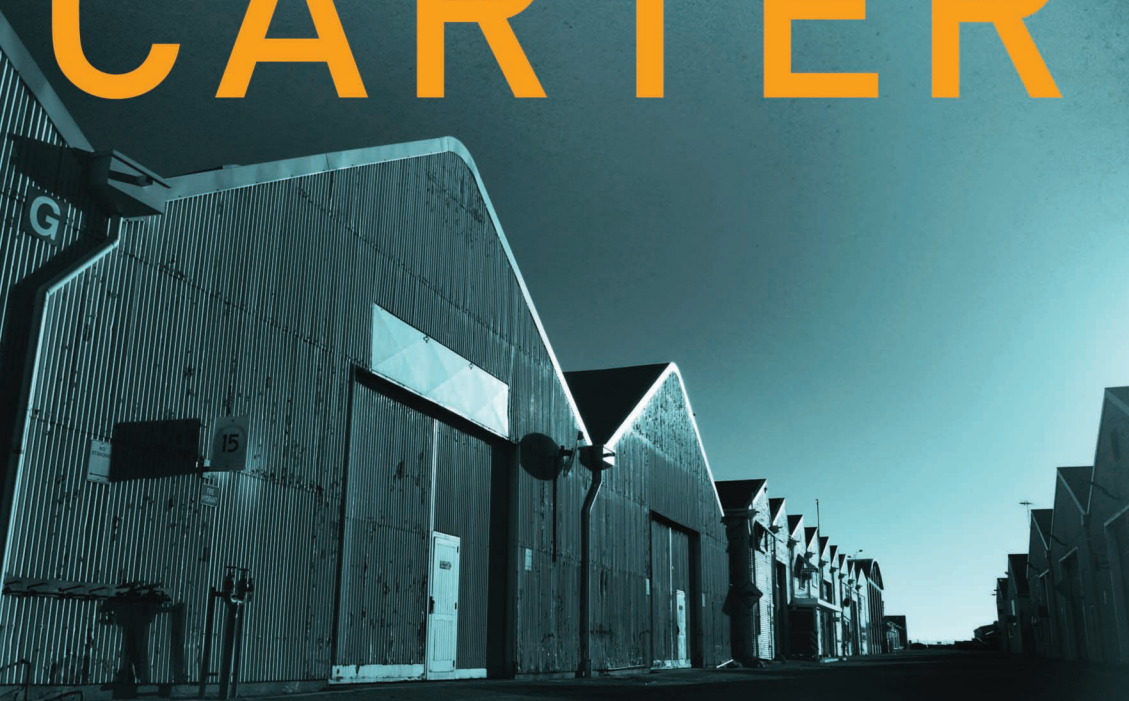


FROM THE WINNER OF THE NED KELLY AWARD  
FOR BEST FIRST FICTION

ALAN  
CARTER



A CATO KWONG CRIME THRILLER

HEAVEN  
SENT

**ALAN  
CARTER  
HEAVEN  
SENT**



**FREMANTLE PRESS**

## PROLOGUE

*I can see him from here. Talking to himself like always, arguing with his demons. It's another one of those balmy days in Fremantle, midmorning sun climbing into an electric blue sky. Any workers are at their jobs by this time. Now it's just the mums and babies, the pensioners, the hippies and the losers. The breeze caresses the hairs on my arms. Birds dart between the trees outside the church. The servant has brought me my coffee and told me to enjoy it. As usual it's a thick layer of lukewarm froth, looks nice and creamy but tastes bitter as hell. The old man wouldn't put up with this, he'd go in there and wipe the floor with them. Don't let them take you for granted, he always said.*

*He's got his hand out again. Pinching pennies from the warm-hearted suckers. Gives them his pathetic smile of gratitude. Now they've gone, he gets his tin and empties it into that pocket where he keeps his iPhone. Repositions his scrawled cardboard sign.*

### **Homeless, Please Help, God Bless**

*What a fuck-up. That's the problem with this country right there. Bludgers and parasites. Like the old man says, they've turned the 'fair go' into the 'free ride'. Me? I'm like my dad. We're both self-made. Self. Made. Man, you can't get any closer to God than that, can you?*

*I'll take a walk. Ditch the shitty coffee and the alfresco cafe and the airy-fairies bleating about the government. Feel the sun on my face, the jingle of coins in my pocket, the breakfast in my belly. Feel my muscles bursting to be free. Think about the babe at the gym with the slick thighs and the sweat between her breasts. The tattoo on the back of her neck, some swirly writing – To Thine Own Self Be True. Hell yeah.*

*The dead kid has seen me coming. Shakes his head briefly like he's trying to expel a gatecrasher. He's wondering whether I'm worth the*

ALAN CARTER

*bother. Decides I am. He looks up at me. A flicker of recognition: does he know me, or just think he does?*

*‘Morning, mate,’ he says. ‘Got a dollar?’*

*I chuck him two and wish him a good day. After all, it’s his last.*

Thursday, 7th September. Pre-dawn.

‘It’s your turn.’

Cato opened one eye. Surely it had only been five minutes since the last time? He switched over to automatic pilot, swung his legs out of bed and sat up. He padded across the room and lifted Ella out of her cot, held her close and softly patted her back, breathing in that luscious sweet-sour milky scent. She was bawling and there was only one remedy. He carried her back to their bed. Sharon was sitting up, breast at the ready. Cato handed the baby over.

‘Thanks,’ said Sharon, eyes still closed as Ella latched on and went quiet.

‘Tea?’ Cato yawned.

‘Mmmm.’

He stood and watched them for a moment. Drank it in: this good fortune, this miracle.

‘What?’ Sharon opened an eye. ‘What are you smiling at?’

‘Nothing,’ said Cato. ‘Toast?’

‘No, no carbs allowed. I’m trying to be a yummy mummy.’

‘You’re not doing too bad.’

‘Is that your idea of a compliment?’

Cato ducked away. ‘Tea. Coming right up.’

He fumbled for the light switch in the kitchen. Took a moment to remember it was on the other side from where he was used to. New house, new wife, new baby. The last two years or so had been a mad, glorious whirlwind since Sharon Wang had entered his life. Every so often he would catch himself looking at her, at them, and that old fear would creep in. Fear that he was somehow not worthy, not deserving,

and that it would all be taken away from him. Sharon would sometimes catch him then too.

‘What?’ she’d say.

‘Nothing. All good.’ Fantastic in fact.

He could hear murmuring from the bedroom as the kettle began to bubble. He filled two mugs and headed back down the hall, aware of the brightening grey outside and the rising twitter of birds. Ella snorted and Sharon smiled down on her. Then Cato’s mobile went. It was DC Deb Hassan.

‘Yep?’ he said.

‘There’s been another one.’

The old chill returned. Cato got the details and closed the call. Sharon was looking up at him, drowsily sipping from her mug, Ella asleep on her breast.

‘What?’ she said.

Hassan handed Cato a coffee, a mask, a spacesuit and a pair of blue paper booties as he bent under the perimeter tape. The sun peeked over the eastern skyline and a breeze snaked through the Norfolk pines. Crows aarked. A white tent had been erected behind the old Carriage Cafe in Esplanade Park. The forensic team had rigged up lights and were already laying a trail of orange specimen markers, measuring, filming and commenting along the way. Cato suited up.

‘The body was found by a jogger. That’s her over there, with Thornton.’

DC Chris Thornton was sitting on a park bench, unprofessionally close to a young woman in leggings and a sports bra, pen in his hand and hanging on to her every word.

Hassan held the flap of the tent open for him. ‘Sleep well?’ she enquired. Cato’s new parenthood in his mid forties was the subject of much mirth around the office.

‘Like a baby.’ Cato swallowed the remainder of his lukewarm coffee and gave her the cup.

The deceased was a middle-aged man, to judge by the tufts of grey around his temples. He had been kicked and stomped, his face obliterated, his head and chest a sticky mass of dark blood.

‘Workboots,’ said Hassan. ‘Steel-capped, we assume.’

The clothes, blood aside, were in reasonable condition. The man’s trainers were relatively clean and unscuffed. The head and hands had been bagged to preserve trace evidence. Cato crouched down and took a closer look at the hands through the transparent plastic. If you disregarded the defence injuries, they were well-kept with clean and trimmed nails.

‘He’s definitely one of ours?’ said Cato.

Duncan Goldflam stooped into the tent. The forensic guru waved an evidence bag in Cato’s face with a blood-smeared playing card inside. ‘Jack of Clubs.’

It was the same signature as the previous two: the jack, placed on the body, easy to find. The killer was working his way through the suits. Maybe once he’d done diamonds he would stop. ‘Do we have a name?’

Goldflam shook his head. ‘I’m running his DNA and fingerprints to see if he’s known to us. Keep you posted.’

‘Cameras?’ Cato asked Hassan.

‘The Italian Club car park, two over the road at the Esplanade Hotel, a couple at the skate park. We’re on it.’

They stepped out of the tent, Cato taking one last look at the man on the ground, wondering how he fitted the pattern. A dark blue Commodore pulled up and disgorged its occupants: two women and two men in sunnies and suits.

‘The Reservoir Dogs,’ said Hassan.

Major Crime. This case was theirs, since day one. The older woman gave him a smile. ‘DS Kwong, another early start.’

‘Boss,’ said Cato.

DI Sandra Pavlou ran Major Crime. A year ahead of Cato at the Academy, her career had zoomed while his had coughed and sputtered after a jump-start. She’d tried to recruit him to her team a couple of years earlier but he’d resisted temptation, citing creative differences. Cato filled her in on the story so far, while her entourage made calls, played with iPads and checked themselves in reflective surfaces. The sun was well and truly up now, and early commuters slowed to take a gander. A couple of news crews were also poking around. Pavlou dispatched a minion to keep them at bay until she was ready.

‘Jack of Clubs, you say?’



‘That’s right.’

‘This one could run and run, couldn’t it?’ She sounded wistful.

‘Yes,’ said Cato. ‘If we don’t stop him.’

By 8.00 a.m., the Major Incident Room was crackling with anticipation. Another body. Another chance for the killer to reveal more of himself. Cato checked out the assembled faces, more and more of them unfamiliar. More and more of them seeming so much younger these days.

‘Listen up, boys and girls.’

DI Mick Hutchens had to clear his throat loudly and tap a spoon on his mug before they paid attention. He was a shadow of his former self – fifteen kilos lighter, hair thinner and greyer, loose skin around the neck and a slight sag at the left corner of his mouth where some nerve endings had stopped working. The commanding foul-mouthed baritone was now an easy-to-ignore throaty rasp. His purposeful stride had become a contemplative stroll that was heading towards an aimless shuffle. Even Cato was inclining to the wider view that maybe the bloke should have taken the early retirement and compo after that savage beating he copped. But no, two years past his use-by date, Hutchens’ knuckles were still gripping the door jamb.

‘Number three.’ Hutchens lifted a finger to the photo of the dead man on the whiteboard. The face was destroyed and unrecognisable. ‘Found this morning behind the cafe down at the Esplanade. The usual calling card, Clubs this time. Our friend is taking the piss. Leaving us messages like he’s “Son of Sam” or something.’

Sandra Pavlou stepped forward. She’d allowed Hutchens his moment of respect as the local office head honcho but really it was time to get down to business. Fremantle Detectives, after all, were the gophers: a bit of spare shoe leather and doorknocking capacity in the suburbs. ‘Latest, Duncan?’

The forensics OIC lifted his head. ‘No hits so far on the fingerprints or DNA. He has no previous.’ Goldflam addressed his answers to a vacant spot somewhere between Pavlou and Hutchens. ‘We’re doing a print lift from the right cheek to get the make on the boots. It’s looking like Steel Blue, size tens. Otherwise, still sifting. We’ll probably be able



to wind the scene down by the end of tomorrow, or the day after, at least narrow the perimeter.'

'Post-mortem?'

'This afternoon,' said Hutchens. 'Two o'clock. The Professor's expecting you.'

'Double-booked. Do you fancy it, Mick?'

Hutchens shook his head. 'Double-booked. I'll let Sergeant Kwong do it.'

Pavlou looked at Cato. 'Sure. Maybe take Trimboli with you. Okay?'

Amy Trimboli was Pavlou's new golden girl. 'Fine,' said Cato. 'Where is she?'

A blonde head bobbed out from behind a couple of tall male shoulders. Booky specs and endearing dimples. 'Right here, Sarge.'

Pavlou turned back to Hutchens. 'Mick, local council elections are coming up soon, right?'

'Yep, across the state.'

'Well, things might get a bit heated here in Freo. We don't want these killings to become somebody's bandwagon.'

'Can't see how we can stop it, if that's what they want to do.'

'Maybe some hearts and minds, talk to the incumbent and his rival. Get them on side. We've got enough to think about without them whipping up a media circus.'

'Good point.' Hutchens caught Cato's eye. It looked like he was going to do some more delegating.

Pavlou dished out the rest of the jobs and the meeting broke up. Hutchens nudged Cato and lifted his chin in the direction of Trimboli. 'Watch her.'

'Why? She seems harmless enough.'

'Don't be fooled by the golly-gosh student act. She's aiming for the top.'

Like it was a crime. Such qualities would be deemed admirable, if perhaps slightly distasteful, in a male. In a woman it was downright dangerous — Australia in the twenty-first century. 'I'm surprised she's on your radar.'

Hutchens tapped his nose. 'Mark my words. She's being groomed.'

Cato changed the subject. 'How's Mrs Hutchens?'

'What's it to you?'

Retirement, thought Cato, definitely. Hutchens was losing it. 'I'll let you know how the P-M went. When are you back from your meeting?'

'What meeting?'

'The one this afternoon that's keeping you from the mortuary?'

'Fuck that. Didn't want Pavlou to think she's the only busy bee around here.' A grin, twisting down at that munted corner of his mouth. 'It keeps you in the centre of things too.'

'And that's a good thing, right?' said Cato.

'Not wrong. Not above a bit of grooming myself.'

Groomed by DI Hutchens. Cato shuddered.

Hutchens clapped him on the shoulder. 'And can I leave the pollie wrangling to you too?'

Norman Lip had been watching everything from the room on the third floor. He'd woken in the early hours, needing to piss. Too many single malts in the Norfolk dungeon and that woman in town for the pharmaceuticals conference, coaxing him back to her hotel room for a right royal fuck. The wonder of Tinder. She was snoring softly on the bed behind him now, older than he'd first realised but, on balance, not a bad result for a few swipes of the thumb. Stumbling back after his slash, he'd seen the coloured lights flashing through the curtains and sneaked a peek. He'd been transfixed ever since. It was clearly a murder: he'd watched the tent go up around the back of the cafe. The forensics people ghosting about in their jumpsuits. The detectives with their phones, tablets and clipboards. The tape being wound around the trees. This was what he'd been waiting for: his chance to prove himself.

There was a rustle of bedsheets as she stirred behind him.

'You're still here. Come back to bed, gorgeous boy.'

'My name is Norman,' he said.

'Fuck me, Norman. One more time before breakfast.'

He did as he was told. Wondering idly about that figure he'd seen also watching events from the darkness of a car angle-parked in Essex Street. A face glimpsed briefly by the light of a passing police vehicle. The figure sliding down into the seat, intent on not being seen. Norman saw it as a joining of destinies, as casual and powerful as the swipe of a thumb on Tinder.

Once he'd dispatched his team to follow up on CCTV and local doorknocks, Cato bought a strong flat white from the cafe over the road to help keep the sleep deprivation at bay. Eight months old, and Ella had taken over his life. As, for that matter, had Sharon Wang. They'd consummated their relationship within about ninety minutes of her getting off the plane from China. Approximately the time it took to clear customs and drive back to Cato's house beside the beach in South Fremantle. After overstepping the mark to help Cato out on his Shanghai murder enquiry, Sharon had been transferred from her job as liaison in the Australian Federal Police outpost in Beijing. It was meant to be a punishment, hands up the bums of drug mules and escorting drunk passengers off the inbounds from Bali. Some punishment. It had been life-changing for both of them, instant soulmates. And so, for Cato, one became two. It was about six months into the new job that Sharon learned she was pregnant. The South Fremantle cottage, way too small for a family, was rented out and they moved into a bigger place in White Gum Valley a few kilometres inland. And then Ella arrived and two became three: all-consuming and gloriously so. Along the way a snap wedding with a celebrant and a few friends down at the South Beach pagoda. Colleagues were commenting on the new-model Cato, a smile that never strayed far from his face and a bounce in the step, even after a broken night.

Cato found himself staring at the murder board. At the photos of the victims one, two and now, three. At the lines, arrows, circles, and lists of names. The question marks. Victim one: Dean Anthony Pearson, aged twenty-two, no fixed address. Found six weeks ago near the B Shed down at the wharf. Tracking his mobile phone usage, they'd retraced his steps over previous days: a depressing and repetitive circuit of the port city underclass hangouts — the fast-food joints, the train station, the parks. If he'd been wearing a Fitbit he'd have well and truly covered his ten thousand steps a day but none of his movements provided any solid clues to his demise. He'd been stabbed twelve times in the chest and stomach. The tears in his sleeping bag, the angle of the wounds, the blood pattern, all suggested he'd been asleep when the blade first struck. Knife blade eighteen centimetres, serrated, and never found. The Jack of Spades on display, tucked into the zipper of his blood-soaked jeans. At the time they'd assumed a drug or alcohol

connection. Significant traces of both had been found in his system. The playing card didn't make sense but was put down to gangsterish melodrama on the part of the perp.

Then came number two: Maureen Bryant, aged forty-seven, occasional resident at managed short-term accommodation off Hampton Road, the busy north-south artery running into Fremantle. According to the accommodation manager, Maureen was a refugee from a violent marriage and she had developed an addiction to prescription painkillers and tranquillisers. The painkillers were for her shoulder, dislocated by her husband a few years earlier and never right since. She regularly went off the rails, disappearing for days at a time and often ending up either at the hospital or in police custody in a confused state and sometimes injured. No mobile phone to help the investigators retrace her steps. Maureen had been discovered a fortnight ago in a bus shelter on Marine Terrace beside the sailing club, with a ligature of nylon washing line tight around her neck. The rope was new, made in China, and available in most DIY outlets. As yet, untraceable. A half-empty goonie of sauvignon blanc with hers and other, as yet untraced, DNA on it. The wine had been traced back to Liquorland in South Fremantle, paid for in cash by a medium-height, muscular, youngish man whose face was shielded from CCTV by the peak of a baseball cap. The Jack of Hearts was wedged under the noose around Maureen's throat. The playing cards were among the secrets being held back by the police and, as far as the media knew, the first two murders weren't linked. But Cato had the feeling that now, with number three, the lid was about to come off.

'So what's your thinking, maestro?' Hutchens pulled up a chair and eased himself into it, like he was hurting somewhere.

'I think he's been watching too many bad films. It's all a bit staged and ostentatious, like he's been reading *Murder for Dummies*.'

'Prefer your serial killers a bit more subtle do you?'

'Something like that,' said Cato.

'But for all that, he's good at covering his tracks. So far anyway.'

'Maybe the P-M will throw something up.'

Hutchens drummed his knuckles on the desktop. 'You know the Velvet Hammer's up at HQ talking media?' The Velvet Hammer was the widely held nickname for DI Pavlou. It suited her: a soft voice and

demure presentation backed up by a killer finish. Underestimate her at your peril. 'They're going to up the ante in time for the evening news.'

'No surprise,' said Cato. 'Might even be a good idea. Somebody somewhere is missing victim number three. And somebody must know who's doing this.'

'Funny, these days I seem to care less and less.'

Cato thought he saw a tremble in Hutchens' bottom lip. 'Boss?'

'Do you know what occupies my time these days?'

Cato had a pretty good idea. The Commissioner was rolling out a new policing model: a social media initiative bringing communities into more direct contact with their local police team. Part PR spin, part public safety and domestic security advice, part shortcut for dobbers. It improved the stats but was yet another administrative headache for already over-burdened middle managers like Hutchens.

'Frontline 2020?' guessed Cato.

'They've put me on fucking Twitter,' muttered Hutchens. 'Tweeting in the treetops all day long.' He crossed his eyes and mimed pressing a keypad. 'LOL, just bagged another crim. Hashtag *sleepeasyFreo*.' Hutchens put a steadying hand on Cato's shoulder and stood up. 'Yeah, I know. Time to give it away.'

Cato rose from his chair, patting his pockets for car keys. 'I'd better get off to the P-M.'

'Enjoy,' said Hutchens as he drifted down the corridor.

'No tattoos, birthmarks, scars or interesting blemishes.' Professor McKenzie pushed her spectacles up her nose with the back of her rubber-gloved hand. Her Glaswegian accent was as steely and sharp as the scalpel she held.

'X-rays? Teeth?' said Cato.

'Aye, we've done those.' Her assistant, a surfie named Tim, finished photographing and measuring the wounds. 'We're running the teeth through the database but, to be honest, there wasn't much left after the going over with the steel toecaps. The X-rays don't show any old wounds, injuries or broken bones.' She breathed out through her face mask. 'Plenty of new ones though.'

'Any other first impressions?' Detective Constable Amy Trimboli

was taking notes directly into her iPad. There was a sheen of perspiration on her upper lip even though it was relatively cool in the bowels of Charlie Gairdner Hospital, and her gaze kept sliding to Tim the Surfie. So far, Cato had found Amy relatively inoffensive and easygoing. She'd been respectful without being obsequious, intelligent without being smart-arsed. You really couldn't ask for much more from a colleague in Major Crime.

'I'd put him at around fifty. Well-nourished. Non-smoker, not a heavy drinker. And, as far as I can see, not an obvious drug abuser, although that might change once we open him up properly. Reasonable muscle tone, he kept himself in pretty good shape.' She rested a hand on his abdomen. 'What a waste,' she murmured.

'Doesn't sound like your average homeless person,' said Cato.

'What makes you think he's homeless?' The Professor reached for the rib secateurs.

'That's who the killer seems to be targeting, so far.'

Tim the Surfie raised an eyebrow while he adjusted the drainage flow.

The Professor shrugged. 'Aye, not typical, but we're seeing all sorts on the slab these days. Lawyers and bankers with the insides of a street meth addict.' She tested the snippers, waving them in the direction of the deceased. 'What you see is not always what you get.'



Detective Sergeant Philip 'Cato' Kwong is light on sleep but high on happiness with his new wife Sharon Wang and their baby girl.

But contentment is not compatible with life in the Job, and soon a series of murders of Fremantle's homeless people troubles the city, and Cato's newfound bliss.

As an ambitious local journalist flirts online with the killer, it becomes apparent that these murders are personal — and that every death is bringing the killer one step closer to Cato, and to those he loves.

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