

THE  
BROTHERS  
WOLFE

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FREMANTLE PRESS

*For my old man.  
Of all the ideas I talked to him about over the years,  
this is the one he told me I should write.*

If knowledge hangs around your neck  
Like pearls instead of chains,  
You are a lucky man.

*Alan Price, 'O Lucky Man', 1973*

Deals are my art form. Other people paint beautifully or  
write poetry. I like making deals, preferably big deals.  
That's how I get my kicks.

*@realDonaldTrump, Twitter, 29 December 2014*

To understand the entrepreneur you first have to understand  
the psychology of the juvenile delinquent.

*Psychoanalyst Abraham Zaleznik quoted in Australian Business Magazine  
in 1986, cited in Trevor Sykes' The Bold Riders*



# PART I

## *1 • Windinup, May 2009*

The valley faces almost due west, sloping away from Athol on either side of a gentle dividing spur that rises towards the house. He is sitting on a deck, feet on the top step of the flight of stairs that looks down the spurline, inviting the valley into the embrace of Mitzi's house. On the northern face are rows of hazelnut and oak trees, bare of leaves in the late autumn, as are the vines planted on the southern face to catch the winter light. The pink of the lowering sun is faint through the low cloud. The first damp caresses of a mizzle make themselves felt. It could be Provence, not Pemberton, but for the eucalypts beyond the fenceline, and the chunky, unmistakable silhouettes of the black cockatoos flying to roost amongst them.

He watches the grass begin to bead with droplets of moisture.

Smiles slowly at the call of the cockatoos.

Leans into the serenity of the landscape, reaching out a hand, curling his fingers as if to draw in a trace of its essence.

This feels like an ending.

Is it?

He thinks he has lost the capacity to tell any more.

A cold gust intrudes on his reverie. He gropes for his jacket without looking. No luck. He sits a little longer, but the sun is gone, the temperature is dropping, the mizzle is thickening. As he pushes to his feet the chortles of a kookaburra trio mingle with the cockie calls.

He finds the jacket, and as he shrugs himself into it, he sees Mitzi standing in the doorway, watching, a glass of wine in each hand, a fire flickering to life in the room behind her, a quiet smile.

‘You know how to live, Mitzi.’

She passes a glass, and extends her smile ever so slightly in acknowledgement.

‘Out here or inside?’ she asks.

‘Here for now.’

They settle at either end of the old verandah sofa, watching the dying of the day.

Athol can still remember the first time he heard her voice, thirty years ago. The smoky laziness of its rhythms, the remarkable deepness of its tone. Her command of English has improved, but the voice has not changed, and that French accent is as voluptuous as it always seemed.

Mitzi raises her glass. ‘To your brother.’

‘To your ...?’

‘To my ... Question mark. I gave up trying to put a label on we two. We were bound. Are. That is all I can say.’

‘Bound? An interesting choice of word.’

‘He always defied categorisation.’

They lean in to clink glasses, and say it together. ‘Elliot.’

‘Fish food or Phuket? What d’you reckon?’

She winces at the crudity of his pun. ‘I do not like to make guesses in such a matter. Or jokes.’

‘Fair enough.’

The last kookaburra call signals darkness as Athol settles back into the sofa.

There is only one question on his lips, but for reasons he can’t quite fathom, he holds back. Perhaps, tonight, he just wants to indulge in memories, however mixed they might be.

It is Mitzi who breaks the silence. ‘He was a good man, Athol, by my lights.’

It takes Athol a few moments to emerge from his reflections, assimilate her words.

‘With Mum gone to her maker, you’re probably the only person on this earth that thinks so.’ Athol drains his glass.

‘Do not be bitter, Athol. At least not tonight. You and your brother are not quite the polar opposites that you like to imagine. He was not a simple man.’

Athol laughs. ‘No. Simple and Elliot have never gone together in the same sentence; not that I can remember.’

‘Shall we go inside?’

Athol grazes hungrily from the array of cold meats, homemade bread and various delicacies laid out on the low table in front of the fire, and works his way through a second glass of red. A thought occurs as to when and how the spread appeared. While he was on the deck? Pre-prepared? Sent over from René’s restaurant seems the most likely. But he does not ask. Mitzi’s utter self-containment has always intimidated him.

He nods at her offer of a top-up.

‘You’re no connoisseur, are you Athol,’ she says as she pours. ‘This is our best vintage.’

‘Wasted on me, I’m afraid. I’m a wine nuffie, and a foodie’s nightmare. Thanks anyway.’

‘Like Elliot. I tried to educate him, but I had to give up.’

‘A hangover of our Presbyterian upbringing, maybe, such as it was. I think the Masons were a bigger deal for Dad than the church. But that’s our roots.’

‘You couldn’t shut him up about hashish though. He savoured it. Could talk about it ad nauseam. Just the way my brother and I can talk about food and wine.’

‘I just smoked it with him, back in the day. He probably figured the connoisseur type talk would be over my head.’

‘The hash merchant,’ she says, with a rueful smile.

‘What?!’



‘You don’t know this story? That’s what I heard him called, before I’d ever met him.’

‘I’ve got no idea what you’re talking about, Mitzi.’

She selects a single olive; the first food she has taken. Leans back in her armchair, watching him all the while as she eats the fruit, takes a sip of wine. Athol cannot decipher the look. She unfolds from the chair, moves round behind him, to stare through the glass doors into the darkness. His glass is still more than half full, but Athol reaches out to take the bottle from the table and top it up. He senses a night just beginning.

## *2 • Calais to Marseille, December 1979*

Being on the road is Elliot Wolfe's natural state. He has a flat in Earl's Court, but he has been on the move since leaving Claremont as a nineteen-year-old at the tail end of the swinging sixties. Three years on the real hippie trail, and some adventures he only boasts about in very select company. Then the last few years organising and transporting the 'pretend hippies', as he contemptuously calls his customers, in the fleet of garish campervans and minibuses that he owns. His 'Lost World' brand, advertised in student magazines of the Antipodes and the Americas, has carved out a niche in the 'alternative and adventure' travel sector. In fact, Elliot is prone to claiming that he invented it as a market.

He once did this Calais to Marseille run in seven and a quarter hours to rescue a tour group whose minibus had died. But this time is very different in nature, and in purpose. Of late he's developed a sideline that is shaping to put his main business in the shade – if he decides to pursue it after this trip.

Never look a gift horse in the mouth. It's his favourite saying, even if it makes no sense to him at all. He'd always maintained a network of small-time local dealers to discreetly keep his travellers happy; the drivers knew where to go. And he'd always been aware of the logical possibilities, without actively pursuing them. Until the first medium-size deal fell into his lap, almost literally. Hashish. His own drug of choice as it happened. Which led to another two runs, Tangier to Malaga. No dramas.

Then last month, the first delivery to Sergei in Marseille. Scary dude, no doubt. But very professional, good to do business with, he

told himself. That shipment was the big side of medium. This run is serious.

A brief stopover at the bank in Paris to stash his own passport in the safety deposit box and collect the New Zealand one he uses for these escapades. A flight to Lyon in the name of the man on the passport, Guy Richards. A hire car there, also in Richards' name. A detour to Montpellier to pick up the cargo. He has never covered his tracks this elaborately before, and now, on the last leg to Marseille, he has never been so edgy.

Scary dude.

Wonder if that bird of his'll be there again? She's something else. Languid. That's the word. Wonder if that means she's on the gear. Nah, she's got her shit together, I reckon. And that voice of hers. So deep.

He slaps the steering wheel. 'Mind on the job, Elliot.' He says it out loud. 'It's time to deal.'

### *3 · Perth, January 1980*

Athol pointedly ignores his mother's chin lift and twirling forefinger urging him to get up and circulate. With the ill grace only a teenager dragooned against his will can muster, he balls his fists deeper into his pockets and slouches yet lower in his chair.

It is the fag end of his third summer stint working in the family shop, as he calls it. He has thus far resisted all his father's attempts and stratagems to get him to 'engage' in the family business. But a three-week spell in January, when they are short-staffed and the days are quiet, goes some way to placating the old man, and beats the shifts at fast-food joints that some of his mates do for their pocket money. And this event is being counted as a work day, otherwise he would have really dug his heels in about being a part of the carry-on.

Though he professes lack of interest, Wolfe's Menswear is in his DNA. He has been in and out of the Hay Street and Bay View Terrace stores since before he can remember, and listened to accounts of his father's day-to-day travails in the rag trade over more dinners than he can count. He knows enough to feel in his bones that today's grand folly is exactly that. Dad chasing the zeitgeist but never catching up. Suits and gentlemen's leisure wear are Wolfe's go, not jeans and allegedly funky shirts. Surely there are enough old farts and younger wannabees still left in Perth to keep the tills ticking over?

He only takes in snatches of his father's speech, as he contemplates his shoes, drawing them in to let some old lady pass. He's heard it all before, the founding of 'this great emporium' by his grandfather, et cetera, et cetera. It's jazzed up a bit by his father making embarrassing attempts to sound hip. After all, this is supposed to be

the launch of 'Wolfe On The Go', a 'men's boutique for Perth's young movers and shakers'. Dad, please! he groans inwardly.

His mind drifts to thoughts of scoring a bag from Rob tonight. To a week of freedom before the drudgery of the summer job becomes the nightmare of Year Twelve. To anything but this. He half hears Grandpa's name being invoked yet again, then cringes as his father concludes ... he didn't catch the segue, but something about 'my father Rupert Wolfe's torch will be passed one day soon to my sons, Elliot and Athol.'

He is aware of heads turning in his direction at the back of the room as the thinnish crowd applauds his father, but he keeps his eyes on his shoes.

'Do you know the truth of it?'

What the?!

He'd hardly been aware of the old lady settling into the seat beside him after she'd stepped around his feet.

He turns to the voice, and after a flurry of uncertainty recognises his Great-Aunt Ida.

The leech. That's what mum always calls her. Dad prefers to ignore his aunt, and to avoid talking to or about her if at all possible. But for reasons Athol's never been able to fathom, just the sight of Ida seems to make his mother apoplectic. She almost hissed the leech epithet at him earlier, when the old woman had appeared, an odd presence amongst the hip crowd his father's advertising agency had assembled for the launch. The family lore is that Grandpa Rupert had gifted her some shares in the company as an act of charity, and that she'd been living off the proceeds and the reflected glory ever since. Athol's only ever encountered her at company occasions like this, never at a family gathering.

'Sorry. The truth of what?'

'Of all this.' The wave of Ida's cane encompasses the room. The building. Everything Wolfe.

‘I’m sorry, I’m not sure what you’re talking about.’

‘I’m sure you aren’t, young Athol. It’ll all be buried, lost in the mists of time, most likely. We’re good at that here in Western Australia, aren’t we. Burying the past. The State of Excitement, the government’s trying to call it these days.’ There is a mischievous twinkle in her eye as she enquires, ‘Enjoying yourself?’

Her wink disarms him. He cannot help a shamefaced grin.

‘I could tell you some stories about your grandfather and his “emporium”. If you’re interested.’

#### *4 • Marseille, December 1979*

She is not Mitzi. That is yet to come.

She is no longer Marie, peasant girl, playing amongst the hazelnut trees with Kazoo the truffle dog.

In this incarnation she has become Angie. It is a skin she would shed if she could.

It is the first time in weeks that she has been let out of the house. It is the same clear winter sky, the same sea that she can see from there, but here in the café they seem bluer, richer.

Guy Richards. In her mind she hears it in French. Ghee Risharde.

New Zealander.

Is that an island of Australia?

Handsome, no?

Yes.

A cop?

She doesn't think so, but Sergei is deeply suspicious. He has put her out here as bait.

Cop or not, she does not like Guy's chances. Sergei put that ridiculous bulletproof vest that makes him look like the Michelin Man's bastard son in his bag this morning. And pocketed the rosary beads that normally stay sitting on the bedside table. The rosary beads scare the shit out of her.

Lost in her thoughts, she is taken aback, and cross at herself for being so inattentive, when Guy pulls out the bentwood chair opposite her at the tiny table.

'Hello Angie, wasn't expecting you at the rendezvous.'

His French is passable, if far from fluent.

‘Guy! You surprised me.’

He cocks an eyebrow as he grins. That double gesture. That, and something about the loose physicality of him. Sergei and his lieutenants all hold themselves so tightly, as if the world is about to pounce upon them. She makes a decision without realising there was one to be made. But she does not lose her wits.

‘You are on your own?’

‘Of course.’

‘I am not.’

His eyes do not dart. They hold hers. Another tick.

‘Can you tell me where your friends are?’

She gives the slightest of shrugs.

His eyebrow movement this time is a mere flicker, an acknowledgement of her situation.

They have each taken a step.

She attracts a waiter’s attention and orders coffees.

‘Sergei calls you the dodo, not the kiwi.’

‘What?’

‘The extinct one, no? He thinks himself witty.’

‘Do I look extinct to you, Angie?’

‘He does not mean you well.’

Another step. Not yet irretrievable.

‘I wish only to make a transaction with him. My understanding is that our first was mutually satisfactory. Whether this second is our last or not is his call.’

‘Sergei is not a man to sit on his hands. I think he may have found out who your supplier is.’

She has declared her hand.

They watch each other across the two feet of table as the waiter deposits their coffees.

‘I may not be required for the third transaction?’



The corners of her mouth lift slightly. She indicates with her eyes the bag slung over his shoulder. 'You have with you the essentials?'

It takes an effort, but he grins again. 'Always.'

'Keep smiling, Guy,' she says, with a flicker of her fingers that suggests the air around them. 'It is not for me to tell you, but would you like to hear my suggestion?'

'I suspect I'm not going to like it, but I am listening.'

'I do not know what Sergei is planning. I am his woman, not his confidante.'

Elliot can't help interrupting. 'His woman? Truly?'

'He believes that I belong to him. And as things stand now, it is as good as true.'

'We are both in an awkward situation then, it seems ... You were saying?'

'You have fallen into his lap, you and your hashish. He welcomes your goods, but I heard him say to his main man that he does not like to do business with hippies.'

Angie only closes her eyes for the duration of a deep breath, sharply in, slowly, almost reluctantly out.

Elliot is well used to moments of hyper-clarity in which all the angles of a deal and the imperatives of self-preservation are resolved and crystallised into decision and action. He prizes this instinct above all else. He trusts it absolutely.

Normally.

Her beauty undermines his trust in himself.

Her brow is knit with tension, but somehow this only enhances her ...

Perfection?

He senses the word he feels, and is wary. But nor can he deny it. She has the symmetry and sculpted poise of a catwalk model. But that is not it. It is the promise of her bearing; the way that she

carries herself. An innate, unselfconscious gracefulness, regardless of this circumstance.

All this in the span of her single breath.

A roll of her fingers on the glass tabletop.

‘There is no time for explanations, Guy. They will already be wondering why I am lingering so long at this rendezvous. I have no essentials, but the time has come for me to leave.’

‘Leave me?’

‘Sergei. If I make it. And that is my suggestion to you also.’ She summons a casual laugh as she gets to her feet, unobtrusively slipping a purse into her pocket from the handbag she leaves on the table. ‘Finish your coffee. I am just going to the ladies.’ Then a change of tone. ‘The cathedral. North-west gate. Four twenty. I will not expect you.’