

I AM
ALREADY
DEAD
DAVID
WHISH-
WILSON



FREMANTLE PRESS

Prologue

Four words that'll turn a life around.

I am already dead.

Inside out and upside down.

I heard it in a line of film dialogue, delivered by a man wearing mutton-chops and a green cardigan, who dispatched another man with a knife to the heart. It was an Irish movie, played on the outdoor screen in Kings Park. Families sprawled around the grassed corridor on deck chairs and picnic blankets, but I watched from the safety of the bush. I didn't understand the movie, but the four words pierced me, lifted me on hooks. Something I already knew but didn't have the words to say.

I repeated the words aloud, making the nearest family glance at each other, and at the bush behind them, where I was hidden. They were eating fried chicken and coleslaw in little china bowls, with plastic forks. I was hungry before those words were spoken, and then I wasn't.

I repeated the sentence again, once, twice, loud enough for them to hear every emphatic word, before they became afraid and shifted their blanket closer to the others.

With the turning of the phrase, I knew that I was a different person.

DAVID WHISH-WILSON

That night, when I went into the city, I said it while I broke a glass Coke bottle on a cement railing. I said it to the buildings that towered in every direction.

I said it as I moved through the shadows, down the graffiti canyon behind the train station where I knew they'd be sleeping, beside the skip bins that stored cardboard, and so didn't stink. It was the best kids' camp in the Northbridge streets, taken from me by virtue of the oldest boy's bowie knife. I recognised his green sleeping bag, my own knapsack for his pillow; padded out with my clothes, and my diary. The kind of words written that will betray a girl. Beautiful words and pretty things that do not belong with another.

I did not hesitate with the broken bottle. I began to stab at his face. When he screamed and the others awoke, I turned on them, tearing at their blankets and coats, searching for skin and sinew and vein.

The boy began to cry. I began to cry. I held up my hand, to hold them back. I took the bottle and gouged my palm, from thumb to pinkie finger. I waited until the blood began to pulse, in tandem with their own.

It did not hurt. *I am already dead.*

'If you want more, I'll be at the hospital, waiting for you.'

I took my bag from the boy and slung it over my shoulder. I walked the alley. My soft footsteps on the ancient bricks. I wiped away my tears. Today was my birthday. Sweet thirteen.

Lee Southern hung his leather jacket on a hook in Firmin's office. The hooks in the corridor were occupied with the coats, bags and hats of the other doorman, and bar staff.

Firmin lifted his head as Lee edged out the door. Lee paused, because a look from Firmin demanded attention, despite his unlikely appearance. The owner of Club Summertime was absurdly tall behind the cheap plywood desk, cluttered with invoices and pay slips, as though he were seated at a child's table. His hands were pale and leathery, pressed together in a forced gesture of invoking calm. His nickname was Cash, after The Man in Black who people said he resembled, but to Lee the older man looked more like Samuel Beckett in his prime: the same owl eyes and face like an ancient map, etched with every road travelled and lesson learned. Firmin was an old hand in the Northbridge nightclub scene, one of the survivors, and he'd witnessed everything in his time.

Firmin's mineral-blue eyes read Lee's own, looking for meaning. 'How's the Phoenix coming along?' he asked, genuine interest in his voice.

Lee had spent the day grinding the '65 Dodge back to bare steel, as a preface to the bondo work he'd anticipated spending the night doing – filling out the minor flaws in the surface steel

before sanding it with the long brick, a job requiring a good eye and plenty of patience. Earlier in the day he'd set the radio to RTR, his hands still vibrating with the grinder's impossible RPM, walking around the car shell while smoking a cigarette. Lee had a permanent corner of Gerry Tracker's mechanics workshop in Spearwood that he used when Gerry left at five, often welding, grinding and sanding through the night. It was good, meditative labour that took his mind off things, although dirty and hot under the bank of dusty fluoro lights. Every car presented a different set of problems, and every problem taught Lee a solution that he could employ next time. He had use of Gerry's hoist and welding tools, and if he got stuck with something, then Gerry was there in the morning, to cast an eye.

'It's down to bare steel. Very *Mad Max* – I like the look. Might put a few coats of clear on it and leave it that way.'

'Client go for that?'

'Hell, no. It's a stock restoration. But I can dream.'

'I trust your eye. Think that'd work on the FB?'

Firmin had a collection of old cars, stored in a Malaga warehouse that had more security than the Perth Mint. He was always threatening to throw some work Lee's way, but hadn't so far.

'The blue-and-white one? The one you want to chop down, section and hot-rod?'

'The one.'

Lee danced his head, a way of saying maybe. He didn't want to think about it now. He liked to work on one restoration project at a time, enjoying the way his mind threw out ideas at random moments. Every job demanded more than at first appeared. When

he lifted off the Dodge shell a month ago, he'd discovered that the chassis was rusted through, and out of square. Some idiot had also fibre-glassed the floor pans, to disguise more rust. The Dodge looked good from the outside, but it would crumple like a paper bag on any kind of impact. It'd taken three weeks of cutting and welding supports and plate steel before the chassis and shell were any good. Fortunately, the client had deep pockets, and Lee was getting paid by the hour.

Firmin lit a cigarette, the polite conversation over. 'You're on the door with Rowdy Tim. Eight to two. I've already warned Rowdy, but when you see him, make sure he isn't carrying his revolver. I'm not sure how to do that – give him a hug or something.'

Both of them laughed. Rowdy Tim wasn't the hugging kind.

'You heard anything more on the street?' Lee asked, pretty sure the answer was no. The Hastie brothers were too smart to voice their intentions. The threat to storm the door and help themselves to a drink had been made to Firmin, and one or two other bar staff, just before closing last night, when the brothers felt humiliated at being asked to leave, even though the lights were off. They wanted a lock-in drink for old times' sake, which wasn't going to happen. Theirs was a childish threat, but even so the repercussions could be bad. If word got around that the door of Club Summertime could be rushed, or that the doormen weren't up to the job, then every hoon with a reputation would be lining up for a crack. Tonight was about saving face, and for that reason the cops couldn't be on standby, and neither could they stack the door with bouncers – it'd come across as weak.

The Hastie brothers understood the coercive power of violence.

Their MO was about escalation – doing what most people wouldn't do, so that a mere threat became effective in getting their way. The 'mad dog' was only one of the roles that the Hasties might have chosen, but having chosen it, they played it to the fullest.

Lee checked Rowdy Tim's gym bag on his way downstairs. The bag smelled of stale onions and mouldy socks, with the eye-watering fumes of Lynx rising through. The bag was heavy, and Lee located the weight. He found the revolver, an old .38 snub nose, inside a plastic lunchbox beneath a squashed vegemite and lettuce sandwich, a dented mandarin and a crushed KitKat – Rowdy Tim still lived at home with his mum. Lee opened the chamber of the revolver, thought about taking out the bullets, but decided against it.

The music battered at the heavy steel door separating the stairs from the floor of the club. As usual, tonight would be Nirvana, Pearl Jam, Beastie Boys, Pixies, Red Hot Chili Peppers and Guns N' Roses on high rotation. Lee opened the door and was hit by a wall of Billy Corgan – rising over the dancefloor singalong of what looked like a hens' night possie – just the kind of punters the Hastie brothers were hoping for. Lee nodded to the regulars and read the room as he moved through it, looking for body language that marked potential violence – the stiffness or exaggerated ease, the strange silence that accompanied predatory looks, or the sneer latched upon another. The Summertime clientele was mainly suburban kids on the tear, and the set-up was beer barn, despite the heavy cover-charge and nightclub lighting.

The place was almost at capacity, which was significant because of the Hastie brothers' threat. They'd want to cause the maximum

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chaos, create the most fear. The fact that doing so constituted, in the brothers' minds, the equivalent of a job interview, would be funny in any other context, except that Lee was on the door beside Rowdy Tim, who wasn't always reliable. The brothers had been away somewhere for the past year and wanted their doormen jobs back. If they could take the door, then it was, they hoped, a probable case of 'if you can't lick 'em, hire 'em'.

Lee exited the bunker-like entrance. Despite the heat he hefted his leather jacket and zipped it to his chin – the hide was a crude but effective stab-proof barrier. He wore his steel-caps and in his pocket carried a pair of knuckles, ready to be slipped on. He nodded to Rowdy Tim and looked up at the security camera, winking at Firmin, who would be watching.

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Lisa sat in the park on a cement bench and smoked. The bench was strategically placed beneath a ye olde imitation gas lamp, whose electricity pumped a dull yellow light. The Northbridge park had been a gay beat for more than a hundred years, and the lights did little more than illuminate pools of grass and paving, threaded with dive-bombing insects. The Moreton Bay fig trees behind her were large and shadowy – there were plenty of places to hide.

Lisa watched the man. His Landcruiser stood out because of the way that it was parked. Most people parked their cars closest to the lights to discourage the attention of street kids, but the Toyota had chosen a darkened corner when there were plenty of other spaces available. This was the first thing that she noticed. The second was that in the twenty minutes she'd been watching, nobody had exited the car. Four times now the front seat had been illuminated when the man lit a cigarette. She saw him then, middle-aged and large, the windows closed despite the heat. When a patrol car swept the block, coming at him from behind, she watched the man sink deeper into his seat. The minutes passed, but he didn't climb out. For a few seconds he switched on the overhead light and dipped his head and moved his arms over something – a bag, perhaps?

Lisa looked at her watch. It was two minutes before ten. She had a feeling that the time was significant and was proved correct

when at ten o'clock the man exited the car, carrying what looked like a sawn-off rifle that he slipped beneath his donkey jacket. He stood in the shadows and patted himself down, examining his silhouette against the faint light. He was tall and blond and wore his hair long. He had a thin face and a strong nose, but it was hard to get a clearer picture. He hadn't noticed Lisa, one among many within the borders of the park.

The man moved toward the club. At the edge of the park he crossed the road and entered the wash of streetlight, reaching the steps leading to the club door, waiting as a group of young women in jeans and cowboy boots, all baggy singlets and bangles down their arms, drunkenly made their exit. One staggered and braced herself on the giant doorman, who righted her and smiled, before turning her toward the street. The long-haired man now climbed the stairs. Lisa was too far away to tell if any words were exchanged with the doormen, but the man certainly ducked his head in a nod before entering the gloom behind, where he would pay his money to the booth-jockey and get his wrist stamped.

Lisa didn't know what the man was planning, and she didn't care. She was off-duty tonight, having worked the twelve-to-eight shift before changing out of her uniform into street clothes. It would be easy to get a message to a patrol car and have them stationed outside the club, but that would ruin the fun.

She wasn't there to make arrests or improve Northbridge's reputation. She wasn't there to add to some sergeant's arrest statistics either, although that would be the smart move, given her low rank.

Lisa was enjoying watching the younger doorman, who sat

relaxed on the railing beside the entrance, smoking and chatting with the other bouncer, who looked stiff and worried, checking his watch every couple of minutes. The young doorman wore a leather jacket, jeans and boots, where the bulkier man wore a uniform of sorts – black trousers and a matching polo shirt emblazoned with the words ‘security’ in white letters, together with fat, clumsy shoes. His trousers were too short in the leg, or the cuffs were rolled too high, revealing white socks that even from a distance didn’t match.

Lisa watched the young doorman light another cigarette. In the unguarded moments between responses to the other man, he looked coolly down the street and across the park. Each time he did so he clocked Lisa, who didn’t look away.