

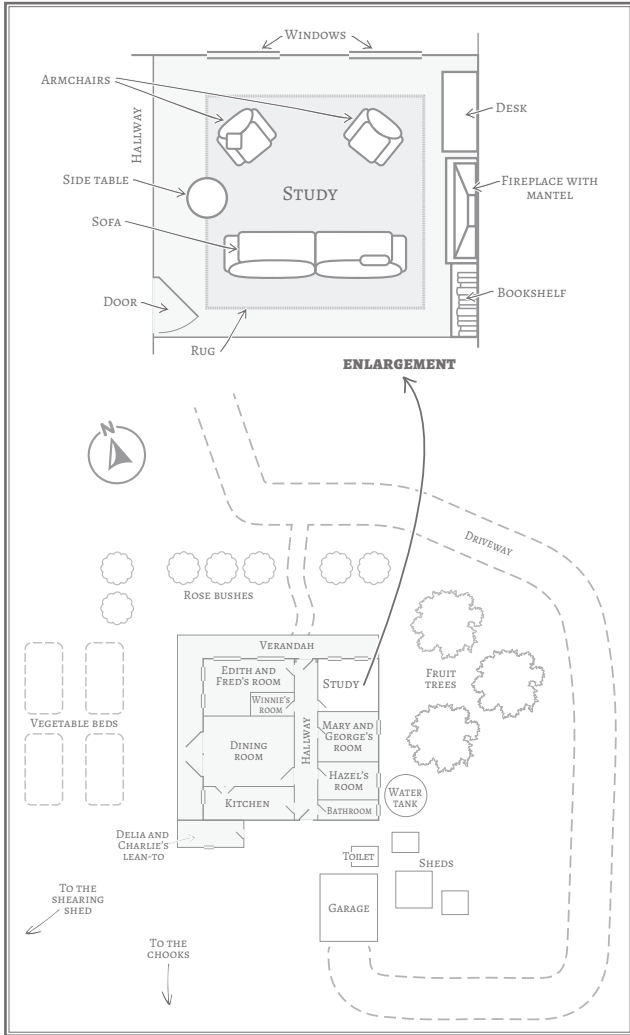
DEATH HOLDS THE KEY

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This story takes place on the lands of the Ganeang,
Wilman and Whadjuk Noongar peoples.
Sovereignty of these lands has never been ceded.



MAP OF TOLHURST

PROLOGUE

The exact nature of the north-east room at Tolhurst had always been the subject of some dispute.

Fred O'Donnell claimed it as his study, though he seldom bothered the few books kept within.

Edith called it 'the good room', though there was nothing in either function or furnishing to justify the name.

Winnie, under the influence of the *Ladies' Home Journal* and other equally indecent imported literature, referred to it as 'the living room', and was undoubtedly the furthest from the mark. Fred's uncompanionable air meant that very little living took place in the room at the best of times, but the events of the tenth of September, 1928, would forever render the epithet wholly, hideously inaccurate.

CHAPTER ONE

Detective Constable Hartley slowed his motor car to a shivering idle.

The town of Kojonup rolled down the gentle slope before him as if unfurled from inside a carpet, little buildings of stone and red brick chasing the main road through a green-gold patchwork of paddocks. The whole scene would have been altogether idyllic had his bones not been shaken numb by a full day's drive from Perth on largely unsealed roads.

Squinting through the windscreen – by this point a grimy slab of dust and dead insects hiding a pane of glass somewhere inside it – he located the squat, thick-walled cottage that served as the headquarters of the local constabulary. A figure stationed outside the building hailed his vehicle with a wave: not a police officer, Hartley noted on approach, but a well-dressed young woman wielding a parasol. He pulled into the gravel driveway, turned the engine off and sat, listening to it cool. Feigning interest in one of the instruments beside the steering wheel, he forced himself to take a few slow, deliberate breaths.

It was Hartley's first assignment since becoming a detective,

and he was determined to make a good impression. There was every chance, he well knew, that the whole business would turn out to be a hoax – his superior had made little effort to hide a sardonic smile when allocating him the case – but whatever the outcome, nothing would prevent him from acquitting himself with all the professionalism expected of an officer in the Western Australian Police Force. He caught his reflection in a dial upon the dash and found himself wishing, not for the first time, that his face would make some sort of effort to embody the gravity of his profession. The freckled cheeks and boyish brows framed eyes as widely guileless as ever, while his new hat sat upon a shock of ginger hair dishevelled beyond all attempts at re-shevelling. Hartley sighed and took a moment to fasten the top button of his coat before stepping down from the vehicle, at which point he slipped on the gravel and fell headfirst to the ground.

The woman with the parasol scrambled to help him up.

‘Are you all right?’ she asked. The genuine concern in her eyes was enough to weaken the detective’s already unstable composure, and he began to laugh as he climbed to his feet.

‘I think I shall survive, thank you.’ From somewhere beneath the dust, his mind drew forth the particulars of the case. ‘Ah – Mrs O’Donnell, is it?’

‘Hazel,’ she nodded. ‘And you must be Detective Hartley.’

‘Call me Jamie,’ he said, taking again the hand that had helped him up. ‘I hope you haven’t been waiting too long.’ He glanced around. The front door of the police station was closed, no signs of life visible through the barred windows.

‘Oh, only half an hour or so. The local lawmen had some pressing business to attend to, it seems, but kindly allowed me to loiter out here.’

Hartley followed the young woman's pointed gaze across the street to a building that quite plainly housed a pub, feeling himself inflate slightly with indignation. Not content with having him dragged out to the middle of nowhere for what would almost certainly prove to be a dull jape or simple misunderstanding, the Kojonup police now appeared determined to tarnish with their provincial work ethic the reputation of all those who wore the uniform.

'Now, really!' he spluttered. Then, finding further words and the desire to take any tangible action equally elusive, he added: 'Really, now!'

This might have gone on for some time had Hazel not taken it upon herself to interject.

'Shall I show you out to Tolhurst?' she offered, to the detective's great relief. 'Only if you have room in your auto, of course. I imagine you'll be wanting to take a look around before it gets dark.'

'Not a bad idea,' said Hartley. He turned back towards the car, shifting his weight so as to discreetly stretch still-aching calves. 'How far is it, would you say?'

'Just a few miles. Not much more than twenty minutes, certainly.'

Though he didn't know it, 'not much more than twenty minutes' was also the amount of time that remained to Hartley before his nascent career would sustain its first fatality.

* * *

A white milk-can letterbox marked the beginning of the driveway, which curved through wheatfields and past windmills for more

than half a mile before reaching the house and its attendant buildings. From behind the rusting gate, only one corner of the main dwelling could be seen, peeking out around a row of pines. Leaving the engine running, Hartley went to help his guide with the gate.

‘This is usually locked in the evenings, is it?’ he asked, eyeing the sturdy padlock and chain.

‘Every night,’ said Hazel, ‘and the one on the side road, too.’

‘I see.’ The detective struggled to keep his voice steady against the weight of the iron frame as he pulled it wide. ‘And were both gates closed on each occasion that ... well, each time ...’

‘The spectre paid us a visit?’ There was a hint of challenge in the young woman’s voice, as though she were daring the newcomer to doubt her.

‘I suppose so, yes. The encounters, as it were.’

Hartley let the gate fall wide of the driveway, tossing his head a little in what might have been a bid to shake off scepticism or an attempt to suppress a shudder – the detective himself would have been hard-pressed to say which. He was sure of one thing, though: the bucolic scene before him was almost impossible to reconcile with the dark business that had called him so far from the city. The wheat was nearly ready for harvest, green and shifting slightly in the breeze. Rows of towering lemon-scented gums bordered the road while smaller conifers helped to demarcate the paddocks, several of which played host to grazing flocks of sheep. The very image of antipodean Arcadia, especially with the golden light of the spring afternoon ripening towards evening. The idea of cloaked figures creeping through the darkness in a place like this seemed absurd.

‘You were the first to see it, weren’t you?’

‘The first, but not the last,’ said Hazel. She spoke in an automatic, offhand way, gazing out towards the house. A distant form in the garden raised a tiny hand in acknowledgement, and Hazel responded in kind, though her face remained hard. ‘It was three weeks ago,’ she went on. ‘Plenty of others have seen it since then. The local police laughed it off at first, but after the third or fourth testimonial, they were forced to take note.’

Hartley had read the statements. Though they came from various members of the O’Donnell family and sundry associates, they never differed in the key details. The figure came at night, swathed in a black cloak and hidden beneath a heavy hat. The witnesses described it as more of an impression than a person – a mere shape, a suggestion of something dark and unwholesome.

‘I’m not a child,’ Hazel said. ‘I don’t believe in fairy stories or haunted houses. No, he’s a man – he must be – but he’s a man who knows how not to be seen. No-one has ever gotten close to him.’

‘No-one other than Fred,’ the detective pointed out.

Fred O’Donnell, the family patriarch, overlord of Tolhurst’s two-thousand-odd acres, was undeniably the one in whom the phantom was interested. If the witness statements were to be trusted, the visitor never appeared save when Fred was present, and it usually contrived to have him alone, fleeing into the darkness the instant an onlooker made themselves known.

Hazel huffed at the mention of her father-in-law’s name.

‘That’s him over there, in the garden.’ She indicated the faraway figure, which was now heading back towards the house. She glared after it for a moment or two, waiting until the man had disappeared from view before continuing. ‘The problem is that he

won't admit to anything. Fred O'Donnell is far and away the most stubborn old man I've ever encountered. He claims that there's nothing to be seen, and never has been. Imagine it!' She laid a hand on the letterbox as if for balance, grasping it with enough force to whiten her knuckles. 'Imagine having the unrestrained gall to tell grown men and women – your own family, no less – that what they've just witnessed with their very own eyes never took place.'

'The dossier did leave me with the distinct impression that Fred O'Donnell can be a difficult man,' said Hartley, choosing his words with care.

'Difficult? I'll tell you what's difficult! It's difficult to understate just how much of a bloody tyrant—' The young woman pulled herself up short, looking back at her interlocutor with a tight smile. 'You must forgive me, Detective. The last few weeks have not been easy. The cloaked man has come to us time and again, and we've all been worried senseless. He seems to appear and disappear at will. We've never heard a horse or a car. He doesn't even leave footprints. If he wanted to do anything to us, or to the children, I doubt we'd be able to stop him.' She sighed. 'He does want *something*, though, I'm sure of it. And whatever it is, Fred knows.'

Hartley studied the woman. Her honey-coloured hair was pulled back into a loose bun from which a few ringlets bobbed loose, brushing against cheeks reddened from sun, or pique, or both. Her face was long and pleasant, despite the strain it wore, and she spoke with a slight cockney accent, dampened by the long years which must have separated her from London. Hartley found himself sympathising with her.

'If his statement is anything to go by,' he said softly, 'it would

seem that Fred doesn't believe the cloaked man exists at all.'

'I'm well aware of Fred's beliefs,' Hazel sniffed. 'He never shies away from inflicting them on us. He accuses us of imagining things, or daydreaming, or inventing outright nonsense. Last week, Edith pulled him aside – Edith, that's his wife – and told him she'd seen the cloaked man creeping past the window. She was afraid, quite naturally. Terrified! And do you know what he did? He told her to "stop bloody wool-gathering" and get back to the dishes.'

'I'd have thought wool-gathering was in demand around here, especially during the shearing season.'

Hartley froze as the words left his mouth. The quip had sprung unbidden to his mind, and he hadn't been fast enough (travel-addled as he was) to prevent its escape. He cursed himself. Less than an hour into his first case and he was already belittling the witnesses.

'I'm terribly sorry,' he stammered. 'I didn't mean to make light of—'

He broke off. Hazel was laughing.

'Quite the wit, Detective. I only hope it functions as well in the investigative sphere as in the comedic.'

Hartley felt himself redden. 'I'll certainly give it my all. I can't make promises, of course, but I am convinced that there must be a rational explanation for all of this. And if an explanation exists, it can be found.'

To the detective's surprise, Hazel responded by turning away. 'To be honest,' she said, 'I can't say I hold much hope of that.' Then, seeming to catch hold of herself, she faced him once more. 'Really, I'm just glad that you're here. The local police did nothing

but shrug at us for weeks. It was only when we heard the shots—'

So thoroughly unlikely was the prospect of a gunshot ringing out at that precise moment that Detective Hartley found himself doubting the evidence of his own ears. If it hadn't been for the flock of sulphur-crested cockatoos which took flight from the direction of the homestead, jabbering indignantly, he would have dismissed the sound as the work of his imagination. In fact, he was still half inclined to do so. As if sensing his uncertainty, a second shot rang out, followed by a third.

'Come along!' he called, rushing back towards the vehicle. Hazel stood as if frozen. Every trace of colour had fled her face. It was only when the engine clunked into gear that she seemed to regain the power of movement and ran to join the detective.

The car tore along the driveway, an incongruous beast of noise and dust amidst the peace of the paddocks. As they rounded the final stand of pines, the house came into full view, a large single-storey brick-and-limestone construction with an iron roof, bounded on two sides by a wide verandah. Hazel gestured for the detective to stop the vehicle beside a small gap in the front hedge. She leapt out and ran down the path to the front door, Hartley in tow. Flying up the stone steps, she crossed the verandah and was reaching for the handle when the detective caught her arm. He drew her aside to the nearest of the two large windows which looked into the room on the left.

It was not a particularly sizeable room, boasting little of note besides a desk, a couple of overturned chairs, a long chesterfield sofa, and a fireplace. It did, however, contain the body of a man lying face-up on the floor, his head and torso just visible over the back of the sofa. A couple of holes in the far wall, ringed with

cracked plaster, spoke to the fate of the first two gunshots, while the third appeared to have found its mark in the man's chest. The room was dimly lit, the curtains having been drawn across the far window, but Hartley could see well enough to know that no breath passed those half-parted lips.

Stepping around the ashen-faced Hazel, he tore through the front door and into the hallway.

'Police!' he called. 'Is there anyone here?'

No reply.

The door to the front room was the first on the left. Hartley rattled the brass handle and stooped to peer through the keyhole. It was locked from the inside.

'Mrs O'Donnell,' he said, 'I need you to find me another key to this room, please, as quick as can be.'

The young woman shook herself out of her stupor. She was on the verge of vanishing into the dark heart of the house when a sudden thought seemed to strike her. Turning back, she dropped to her knees before the door.

'The children like to make a game of locking themselves in the woodshed,' she muttered, reaching up to retrieve a hairpin from beneath her hat. 'As a result, I've had to become something of a housebreaker.' She prodded around in the keyhole, then gave voice to a string of syllables that would not make it into the detective's official report as the hairpin snapped. The key could be heard clattering to the floor on the other side of the still-locked door.

'Never mind!' said Hartley, already starting back towards the front of the house. 'You keep looking for a spare while I try the windows. And be careful!'

The window through which he had first glimpsed the dead man was bolted from the inside, affording a maddeningly inaccessible view of the scene within. Hartley considered breaking the glass but was loath to risk disturbing anything inside the room. There could be fingerprints on the casements, he reasoned, or boot marks in the dust on the sill. The second window, about four feet further along the northern wall, proved to be locked just as securely, but Hartley felt something move as he tried to lift the sash. He ran his fingers around the edge of the frame and came away with a tightly folded piece of notepaper about half the size of his palm, darkened at the corner with what could only have been blood. Something slipped from within as he opened it. Animated by instinct, he was quick enough to catch the first object as it fell, but several others dropped to the floor, clinking and ringing. He knelt to scoop them up, casting cautious glances about the verandah, then spread his collection upon the windowsill. The item Hartley had managed to catch proved to be the brass casing of a shotgun cartridge, flattened into a crude circle by the application of some significant force. Beside it lay a ridged steel ring about an inch in diameter, a small coin of tarnished copper and the notepaper itself, across which had been scrawled, in an ostentatious hand: *With this, a little of what was wrong is now put right.*

All items being, at present, equally unilluminating, he pocketed the lot and returned his attention to the far more pressing matter of the dead man on the other side of the window. As far as he could discern, the still-locked door was the only other way in or out of the room. How, then, could the shooter have escaped? Notwithstanding the disarray of the chamber itself – and, notably,

the bullet holes – nothing in the immediate vicinity indicated the recent presence of another person. The detective stood still, watching the body and thinking, until his attention was arrested by a series of muted sounds from within the house: the sort of dull creaks and thuds which could be caused by anything from possums in the ceiling to settling walls or bare feet on floorboards.

‘Mrs O’Donnell!’ he called, taking a cautious step into the dim hallway. ‘Hazel?’

There didn’t seem to be a light on anywhere in the building. The obscurity ahead was broken only by the vague outline of the distant back door, which looked as though it was standing slightly ajar. He was just about to go and verify this when Hazel materialised from the darkness, key in shaking hand. The detective breathed a sigh of relief. Taking the key, he turned back to the door of the frontmost room. The lock opened without a sound, and he was able to kneel beside the victim at last.

The unfortunate man was on the older side of middle age, rather tall and strongly built. He was clean-shaven, clad in solid boots and a cotton shirt tucked into heavy trousers. It was the work of a few seconds to confirm that he was no longer living, though the warmth had yet to leave his cheeks. A cigar, near whole, smouldered on the floor beside him, while another glowed in an upturned ashtray nearby.

‘Is it him?’ asked Hartley, knowing full well that the lifeless hand he now held had waved at him from the garden only minutes ago.

Hazel nodded. She still stood in the hallway, apparently unwilling to cross the threshold into death’s dominion. Her fingers were clasped tight, blanched and bloodless.

‘That’s Fred,’ she said, quietly. ‘That’s my father-in-law.’
The detective’s shoulders fell.

‘I must confess to having doubted the danger facing you and your family,’ he said. ‘I see now that I was wrong. I’m sorry.’

Hazel shook her head but said nothing.

‘You should summon the rest of the O’Donnells, I’ll take care of things here and send for the local police. They’ll need to make a record of everything while I look for whoever did this.’

‘It’s the cloaked man,’ Hazel said, in a curiously dull voice. ‘It has to be.’

The young woman disappeared back into the darkness of the hallway, leaving Detective Constable Hartley alone with the body of the person he had been called down from Perth to protect. Maybe there was something to this phantom after all. What about the rest of the statements supplied by the family, then? Did the man he was looking for really appear and disappear at will? Did he really leave no footprints? He looked again around the room. He couldn’t doubt the evidence of his own eyes: each door and window was locked from the inside. What kind of killer could walk through walls?