

**CUTLER
DAVID
WHISH-
WILSON**



FREMANTLE PRESS

Prologue

The seven men removed jackets, belts and bandanas, which they used to wrap their knuckles. Framed by the headlights that enveloped them in a milky corona, their boots were at Cutler's eye level, down in the dust, and he knew the owner of every one of them.

Cutler struggled a final time with his restraints, then gave up. He swore through his gag, an oil-stained rag from the clubhouse. His cursing made no sense because the men wouldn't remove the gag. If he challenged them one on one, or all together, their sense of honour would demand that they let him fight, but they had seen him fight, and they wouldn't risk it.

He was in the forest clearing to be murdered with fists, boots, tyre iron and pickaxe handle.

Cutler would never know how they'd learned. This was not a movie, where the details of his mistake would be made clear. He had lived among the men for fifteen weeks, and he knew each of them well – their wives and girlfriends, children and grandchildren. But they were not murdering Cutler. They were killing the man they knew as Hennessy, a smurf who cleaned their cash and made it real. Soon they would learn that the encryption app they communicated on, introduced to them by Cutler, had been corrupted. Even their cleaned cash, the property owned in blind trusts, would be taken from them.

This meant nothing to Cutler, giddy with fumes and concussed to the point that if he weren't about to die, if he wasn't already in pain, might close his eyes and sleep. He felt no satisfaction at the thought that his killers would soon be arrested, and likely imprisoned. They would never be charged with Cutler's murder, because his body would never be found, four hundred kilometres west of Sydney, deep in a national park.

Dex, the sergeant-at-arms, sucked on his glass pipe before tipping spent crystals into the wild oats beneath him. He stepped toward Cutler and stretched his arms, cracked his neck. Because of the looming forest at the edge of the circle, his steps appeared large and distorted, like those of a giant.

Dex would strike the first blow, as was his right. Dex, who Cutler had seen using a needle, which was against club rules, and who added sugar to his Milo, despite his diabetes. Who liked to do a cryptic crossword every morning, in his long johns by the fire. Who was now so emaciated and strung-out that he wasn't strong enough to handle his giant Harley CVO Softail, couldn't support its weight at traffic lights.

Dex took another step and cracked his wrists, hoisted his jeans. A whoop behind made him flinch, as Midget emptied his pipe and stamped toward Cutler, skirting Dex's arm that missed its mark, failed to hold him back.

That was the problem with the club – nobody took the hierarchy seriously. Cutler had gained access to the organisation via Midget, who was a lean six foot five, for the offer of a shave on the percentage Cutler took of every transaction.

Midget was a proper sadist, and he buried his boot deep in

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Cutler's belly, began to circle, stamping on his ankles, his knees, looking for a breaking point. Cutler could move a little, just enough to take some of the blows on the meat of his legs, but then Dex joined in, began stomping his ribcage, placed a boot on his throat to hold him still.

'Do it,' Cutler said through the gag, and with his eyes – crush my throat and be done with it. The older man shifted his weight and dragged the sole of his boot over Cutler's face, slowly and with force. Another joined the circle, grunting with his exertions, the sharp spears of pain strobing from Cutler's body, barely illuminating his dulling mind, in shock now, feeling the paddling of the pickaxe handle on his spine, his forearms, longing for the bottom of the freshly dug grave behind him, the smothering of earth.

'Aw fuck,' someone yelled, from away by the cars – might as well have been from another valley, another forest, another life. Behind his eyelids Cutler watched an orange fountain spray the darkness. He opened his eyes to the grassfire, whipped by its own wind, climbing the sides of the open jerry cans placed behind the men, there to burn his body into rubble, spurting fire in gouts, yawning geysers of odd colours, the men jumping, ant-bitten, flames catching on their greasy jeans, patting themselves down, racing for the cars as the fire began to speak its guttural whispers to them, chasing them to the rim-line of forest trees. There the fire paused to dance among the smaller saplings which began to crackle, speaking in whip-cracks and vibrato drones as the cars sped across the blackening hillside and down the track, an honour guard of flaming branches lighting their way. The wind swirled in the clearing as the forest raged smoke into the spaces

between the flames. Cutler began to roll, felt the heat on his skin and clothes and hair, rolling over his mashed arms, tasting the dirt and smoke and blood in his mouth. He reached the lip of his grave and breached the edge, sliding headfirst down into the six-foot hole, birthing a cloud of dust as he watched the flames lick at the edges of his sanctuary before passing above, the sound of its eerie whispers and banshee laughter as Cutler lifted his legs and bent his body in two, passing his wrists beneath his feet and freeing his hands. The grave was deep and cool and when the fire was gone he would follow it, a ghoul of cinders and ash, until he met the angelic men and women in fluoro yellow, who would cleanse him and make the call to his handler.

I.

The room Whelan organised for Cutler was on the second floor of a besser-brick apartment block overlooking the Suva docks. The apartment was rented by the American company whose vessel Cutler would be riding to the fishing grounds, until they located the *Shuen Ching 666*, and Cutler was transferred. The apartment was empty most of the year and smelled of ashtrays, damp curtains and the black mould that covered the bathroom ceiling. It had a kitchenette, and a hot shower and toilet. The main room contained a bed and a couch with a view over the port, where two American purse seiners were undergoing repairs. Cutler didn't know where the captain and mates of those vessels were billeted, but he assumed in a hotel downtown, past the municipal market where he'd bought himself some supplies, including three jars of peanut butter, two bags of brown sugar, three boxes of muesli bars and a coconut that he drank on the sweaty walk back to his apartment. The trade winds were blowing from the east and the temperature was mild, but humidity was high, and he'd arrived at his door lathered in sweat.

He didn't bother unpacking. His passport and cash were laid across his bed in the money belt he'd bought at Perth Airport. The bag contained the clothing he'd thought necessary for the six-week job, with a few last-minute purchases, including wet-weather gear

and a waterproof puffer jacket, a heavy woollen beanie and a pair of polarised sunglasses. The idea was to look like an inexperienced but enthusiastic fisheries nerd, embarking on his first employment aboard a commercial vessel as a licensed PNA observer.

Whelan had told him to buy large at the Australian duty-free, and so Cutler had bought his allowance of litre bottles of Johnny Walker Red Label, and six cartons of cigarettes, to ingratiate himself with the captain and crew. Whelan would supply everything else.

Cutler checked his watch and pulled the sliding doors that led to the balcony. He lit a cigarette and watched the creamy-blue waters swirl behind an antique lugger approaching the wharf, kestrels riding the winds above in wafting circles, diving into the ocean to spear baitfish. The lugger turned into the docks, nudging plastic rubbish and parting petrochemical rainbows that glazed the surface waters. The men aboard the lugger wore shorts and tee-shirts draped around their heads. Their skin was purple-black and their bodies lean with hard work. A boy among them leapt to the dock with a rope between his teeth that he hitched to the nearest mooring. Two others slipped tyre-fenders down the side of the clinkered hull, the boat shuddering on impact before jerking at its leash, and settling.

The satellite phone behind Cutler trilled. He re-entered the room and saw a large shadow cross the front window. Instinct caught him hard, and he felt dizzy, staggered as he leaned to the phone. The man at the door knocked, and the trilling died.

Whelan was dressed for the tropics, in board shorts and a beige shirt from a camping store. If the shirt was designed to wick moisture away from the skin, it wasn't working. As Cutler waved

the older man into the room, he could smell the sourness on him, could see the beads of sweat on the back of his neck. His boaters creaked in the silence of the room, and his shirt stuck to his body as he collapsed onto the couch.

Whelan looked at Cutler and frowned. 'You're a smoker?'

'You want one?'

Whelan sniffed, shook his head. 'My wife, Deb, died of lung cancer five years ago. Not a nice way to go.'

Cutler paid it no mind. 'You come straight from the airport?'

'Yeah, the driver's waiting outside, with the ... materials.'

'I'd offer you a beer, but I've only got water.'

'Had a few ... too many on the plane. Free bar, of course.'

Whelan had flown from Perth to Suva direct, bypassing the international airport at Nadi, in the private jet of a mate – one of the world's biggest retailers of luxury pearls. Back in Australia, he'd talked about their weekend trips from Perth to Greece just to dine at a particular Cretan restaurant. Whelan was filthy rich, too, although he didn't talk or dress like a man worth sixty million dollars. He was the CEO and main shareholder of one of Australia's largest commercial fishing operations, with licences to take toothfish in the Antarctic, and tuna just about everywhere else.

Cutler had done his due diligence on Whelan, who'd started out the old way, working as a deckhand on his father's southern-bluefin fleet, before the vast migratory shoals were thinned out. He then managed tuna ranches off Lincoln, where juveniles were dragged from the open ocean in giant enclosures to fatten them up, before that too became unviable. Whelan was his father's son, had

manifested the business into a behemoth, following what he called the Australian principles of efficiency, investment, technology and constant adaptation. They were pretty words, and Cutler had little idea of their veracity, and cared even less, because the nature of Whelan's business wasn't the reason the two men were there, in a badly painted hotbox overlooking a sleepy port.

Whelan stared at the balcony, his expression forlorn, helpless as only the parent of a missing child can be. He seemed unable to speak, and Cutler didn't fill the silence. If Whelan's fishing operation wasn't the reason they were there, his attitude toward the industry certainly was. Cutler had asked around. Whelan's outfit was distinctive because of its obedience to the laws, and his determination to be a good actor in an industry plagued with organised crime, ruthless multinational cartels, cowboy operators and the soft-power projections of the rival Chinese and Taiwanese fleets. Being a good actor meant sticking to quotas, carrying shipboard observers, having his ships flagged to Australia, maintaining MSC certifications, reporting data accurately for the purposes of stock conservation, allowing his ships to be electronically monitored and, increasingly and controversially, giving money and resources to conservation entities and fisheries agencies aimed at bringing the rest of the world's major operators into line. The pun had been intended when it was described to Cutler as Whelan's turning the massive ship of his business away from fisheries science – whose entities he saw as suspect and industry-captured – toward fisheries conservation, when the two approaches had existed at loggerheads for decades. The move had won Whelan many friends in the conservation movement

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but many enemies among his fellow fishermen, and among the bureaucrats and merchants whose livelihoods depended on a growing supply of fish, whatever its provenance.

‘Do you want to go for a walk?’ Cutler asked, when it looked like Whelan was on the verge of collapse. He was a big man, toned for his age, with boyish looks and a natural head of sandy hair. Whelan’s socials were full of him mountain biking and road racing, scuba diving and spearfishing. Astride a large-frame racing bike, Whelan looked like he was mounted on a tricycle, so large were his limbs.

‘No thanks. Too hot. I don’t feel right.’

The man before Cutler hadn’t shrunk, exactly – he still commanded the room with his bulk – but his once-tanned skin was now pale, and his eyes were sunken, and his cheeks sagged on his otherwise youthful face.

‘If you don’t mind me saying, you look like you need to eat. Or sleep. Something.’

Whelan sighed, put his face into his hands. His shoulders trembled. He wept. Cutler left him alone, went to the balcony and smoked a cigarette, watching the shift-change on the docks, men in orange jumpsuits and high-vis greeting one another as they departed and arrived through the main gates – no security that Cutler could see.

Cutler heard the front door open, and when Whelan returned, he had an impact-proof plastic suitcase, heavy in one hand. He placed it on the bed and fingered the combination locks, cracked the spine. He began to lay out the maps, the cone-shaped EPIRB, laptop and boxes of batteries and even more of medicine – antibiotics,

disinfectants, painkillers, bandages – that Cutler had requested. When the suitcase was empty, Whelan sighed. He tensed as he firmed his resolve, peeled back the suitcase liner, removed the Glock pistol that he held like a piece of evidence – with a pinkie finger – and quickly dropped it onto the bed.

‘First time I’ve handled a pistol. It’s lighter than I expected.’

‘Made of polymer, mostly. You don’t carry weapons on your ships?’

Whelan took a deep breath, but it didn’t refresh him, instead made him sag to one side, reaching for the wall to brace himself.

‘Fucking vertigo. Yeah, sure, we always carry weapons. Every fishing boat does. Shotties, mostly, but that’s always the first mate’s job. I never went near ’em.’

‘Not many pirates down there in the Southern Ocean.’

Whelan tried to laugh, but it didn’t sound right. ‘Not for *pirates*, mate. For fucking mutinous cretins, on the meth, or coming off the meth. Lots of sharp objects on a fishing boat. Once you’ve had a gaff swung at your head, or a filleting knife digging at you, a shotty in the wheelhouse seems a good idea.’

Some colour had returned to Whelan’s face as the memories of conflict worked through his heart, his blood – the old male restorative.

While there was adrenalin in his system Cutler broached the question. ‘What about Bevan? He ever dabble?’

The question made Whelan reel for the wall again. ‘Seriously? Alright. I promised full disclosure. Bev wasn’t into fast; he was more into slow. The odd party drug, plenty of ketamine, when he was younger – we did that together once at a festival. Turned me

into a jellyfish, a blob on the grass. But Bev, he liked dancing, the floatiness, the out-of-body. We could always talk about that stuff. He tried heroin once, but it made him violently ill.

‘What about you?’

‘Is that pertinent?’

‘Full disclosure, right.’

Whelan gathered himself into a ball, leaned against the bed, his legs steady. ‘I like a bit of coke, but who doesn’t? Special occasions only. I get a bit greedy. My dad was a drinker. Addiction’s in the family. What about you?’

The question was gently put, Whelan’s pale eyes tentative, not expecting an answer.

Cutler shrugged. ‘I take dexedrine to stay sharp. Valium to counter that, when I need to.’

‘Nothing else? You must have been around a lot of drugs. Your line of work—’

Cutler held up his hand. ‘You don’t get to ask about that. What about the Taiwanese fleets – there a specific culture of using?’

Whelan thought about it. ‘We’re talking about fishermen. Long hours. Brutal hours. Robotic killing. Loneliness. Months at sea, sometimes years for the crew, the slaves I mean. *Yaba, kyethi, shabu*, horse pill, call it what you will. Some captains give the crew meth to keep them working. Saves feeding them too. They have their own ways to deal with the behaviour problems that result. You can imagine.’

‘That’d be across all the fleets. What, specifically about the Taiwanese?’

‘Nothing specific. *Worse things happen at sea*, you know the

saying. We drug test, so do the Yanks, but not reliably. Fishing fleets, they're all ... hierarchical, the command structure. The captain and mates have total power. Outside of a few countries, the crew have no rights either, no union, no ...'

Whelan was flagging again. He slumped on the couch, put his head in his hands as the dizziness passed. Cutler spoke to the top of Whelan's head.

'Everything's on the laptop, as agreed? Bevan's logs, his blog, the GPS data, all that?'

Whelan nodded but didn't risk opening his eyes.

'Then I don't need you anymore,' Cutler said. 'I'll call when necessary. You've paid me for six weeks. This goes over, you make the same payment, the same way. Otherwise, I'll see you back in the Lucky Country.'

Whelan stood too quickly, groaned and covered his mouth. He panicked, looking for the bathroom. Cutler stood aside as the old man went and emptied himself, his retching noisy in the stifling little room.

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During the night Cutler awoke to the sound of clanking from the port and the wind humming forlornly in masts and rigging, the curtains on his open window slapping the walls. He'd tried to drink himself to sleep on the duty-free, and had taken two valium to see him over, passing out on the old couch, the laptop splayed on his chest.

Cutler's eyes opened to the digital image of young Bevan Whelan, smiling beneath a purple bucket hat, his lips chapped, and his nose burned by a tropical sun. The photograph was

a selfie, standing on the bow of a ship with a pod of dolphins riding the bow wave beneath him. His eyes were slitted due to the midday glare, but even so the warm blue of his father's eyes was unmistakable, as was the dimpled chin, the strong jaw and sandy-blond hair, shoulder-length on his reddened shoulders. The photograph headed a blogpost about a report he'd heard, aboard the American purse seiner, of fishing captains still setting their nets on migratory whale sharks, despite the practice being banned in the vast PNA fishery. The fishermen were doing this because juvenile tuna shoaled beneath the hulking whales, and below them, larger tuna congregated, much like how a FAD, a fish aggregating device, operated to attract fish in the middle of the big blue ocean. It was, Bevan said, almost as if the fish tried to form their own island, their own community, in the face of a volume of water that to a small fish must resemble the voids of interstellar space. His American captain, Rick O'Reardon, an old salt who'd fished the Pacific for decades, had admitted that setting a net on whale sharks was common practice when he was younger, as was the setting of nets on pods of dolphins, whose feeding attracted seabirds, visible for miles, for much the same reason. The whales and the dolphins inevitably drowned in the nets, part of the cost of doing business, but the blogpost was hopeful, Bevan said, because they were currently in a closed-to-fishing region of Palauan waters some 475,000 square kilometres in size. Despite the hundreds of thousands of dolphins that continued to perish in purse-seine nets, and the thousands of whales, that very day he'd seen the results of this conservation measure – dozens of whale sharks and pods of dolphins several thousand in number, free from the hand

of a rapacious industry. He believed in the PNA mission, had seen with his own eyes how it was working.

The post was uploaded on 1 May 2024. Cutler slapped the laptop shut. Four weeks after that date, Bevan Whelan disappeared from the face of the earth.

First published 2024 by
FREMANTLE PRESS

Fremantle Press Inc. trading as Fremantle Press
PO Box 158, North Fremantle, Western Australia, 6159
fremantlepress.com.au

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Cover image: Fishboat vessel fishing in a rough sea, istockphoto.com
Designed by Nada Backovic, nadabackovic.com
Printed by Everbest Printing Investment Limited, China



A catalogue record for this
book is available from the
National Library of Australia

ISBN 9781760993252 (paperback)

ISBN 9781760993269 (ebook)



Department of
Local Government, Sport
and Cultural Industries

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Fremantle Press is supported by the State Government through the Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries.

Fremantle Press respectfully acknowledges the Whadjuk people of the Noongar nation as the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the land where we work in Walyalup.

