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**FREE  
WORLD  
DAVID  
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WILSON**



**FREMANTLE PRESS**

*For Georgia, my publisher and editor, with eternal thanks, and to  
all the staff, champions and readers of Fremantle Press, past and  
present, on the occasion of its fiftieth year publishing vital  
Western Australian stories.*

‘One of the many lessons that one learns in prison is that things  
are what they are and will be what they will be.’

Oscar Wilde

## Prologue

Gary Coleman followed his lights-out routine and turned onto his side. He reached for his ID card on the darkened shelf beside his razor and shaving-stick, his radio and library novels. He rolled on the rubber mattress to see if it would creak. The new mattresses were made to be folded when the cells were tossed, and they didn't rustle like the old sisal ones, but habits die hard.

Coleman put his feet on the cement floor, the ID wedged in his right hand. His eyes were open, but it was so dark in the slot they might as well be closed. He sprang the edges of the ID and felt the razor blade slip onto his waiting pinkie finger. If he pressed too hard the razor would fall onto the floor. If he didn't press hard enough the blade would remain hidden behind his photograph and prisoner number.

In the bed across from Coleman, the Premier snored. He wasn't the Premier any longer, but the name was shorthand for those who still respected him, as well as the ironic types – how the mighty have fallen.

Coleman adjusted his grip on the ID as he crossed to the door. The Premier's snoring didn't help as Coleman put his ear to the heavy steel frame. In the old days he might've placed his ear against a keyhole and listened, but those days were gone. The cell was locked and unlocked from the fortified screw-booth at

the head of the pod – just the press of a button. This practice was applied across the new remand prison so that whole pods could be locked down from the central admin building – all done by computer. Coleman wondered if the rumours about what would happen at midnight on New Year's Eve 1999 would eventuate – the worldwide collapse of the computing system which so far had made little difference to men like Coleman. Prior to this remand stint, he'd only been out for five months following a nine-stretch for armed robbery, served mostly at Casuarina Prison. He was back inside now because of a broken tail-light on his old Kingswood wagon. Pulled over six weeks ago on Roe Highway and an ID check done, the coppers found a tape-gripped .22 pistol and two rifles he intended to sell. As a result, Coleman was back on remand, looking at three years including time served, when it finally went to trial.

Coleman resisted the urge to peer through the judas hole. It was closed anyway, and he had a strange terror of meeting another eye if it peeled back.

His vision adjusted to the darkness. There was the Premier's bulky form, his belly the highest point, one arm hanging free of the blanket. The Premier took industrial quantities of the barbiturates prescribed to him and to many others, so that they could do their time quiet and numb.

Coleman didn't take the pills because it was addiction that got him into the armed-rob game. Instead, he kept himself healthy and tried to improve himself by reading, and keeping on top of the politics in the pod. It was important to know who was who, and why. Some of the younger ones were hard work but he was friendly with them, and most of the screws too.

Still, the routine. From his bed to the door in under two seconds, razor in hand and in total silence. The purpose of the electronic door was to avoid crims overpowering a screw and taking their keys, but it gave Coleman the creeps. You used to know when the door was about to open because you heard the heavy keys in the lock. The sound gave you a few seconds to prepare. It was the same with the cameras everywhere in the new prison. In the old days there were always places where mischief could be had or justice meted out, but now the enfilade of cameras made this impossible, with the exception of the cells and showers, and there was always a screw in the showers during wash-up. Every time Coleman saw one of the new cameras his anxiety sparked – they didn't even resemble cameras – more like Martian eyes, blinking red. Looking around the dark cell he wondered if there were secret cameras watching him now, crouched behind the door with razor in hand, ready to take a neck and open it. After all, he'd done more time than was necessary to rehabilitate him. It often felt like he and the other men in green tracksuits were lab rats in some perverse experiment, and that the presence of the cameras meant that the whole thing was televised.

Coleman liked a story as much as the next man. But what was his story, right at that moment, crouched in the darkness?

On the surface of it, Coleman was protecting the Premier for financial reward. This was well understood across the prison, but the finer details were known only to the Premier and him – a nest egg for when Coleman emerged back into the free world. He could do the years easily knowing that he was coming out to a savings account containing money. It meant that he wouldn't have to go back to the old ways. It meant that this was his last stretch.

Nobody except Coleman knew that he was actually there to protect himself. Along with the serial killer whose name Coleman refused to speak, the Premier was the prison's highest profile inmate. He didn't get any special privileges, but he was closely watched. If something happened to the Premier it'd look bad for the screws but also the brass, and the people who intended to lock him away for several years. Coleman liked reading ancient history, especially ancient Chinese history, and in his role for the Premier he sometimes felt like a palace eunuch, guarding a prized concubine. He was defined and emasculated by his job, but he was safer in the emperor's palace than in the army outside.

The heavy door dampened sound, but not every sound. Out in the pod it was quiet. Coleman rolled his neck, arched the ID card and slipped the razor behind his photograph. It'd been a long day and now it was time to sleep. It was only when he moved that he realised something wasn't right. He couldn't feel his foot on the floor when he stepped, and so toppled, his arms numb as the ground jumped toward him. He crawled to his bed and climbed onto it, his breathing slowing until he couldn't feel a thing, not even the cold rubber on his face.

## I.

Lee Southern sat across from Catherine Farrell, the polished surface of the marri tabletop catching the morning light, revealing figured accents in the red grain. The woodwork throughout the Federation-era home was impressive, from the wide jarrah floorboards to the joinery of the skirts, architraves and doorframes down the corridor to the sitting room at the back. A hand-turned jarrah staircase, all tongue-and-groove and wooden dowels holding it together, with not a nail in sight, rose through the house beside them. The staircase's graceful lines and French polish caught the sunlight reflected off the swimming pool outside. Catherine, as she insisted Lee call her, pressed a tissue to the corner of her eye, which was slick with eye ointment, the eye itself as red as the marri table. She was a tall thin woman in her late sixties, her cropped silver hair and thin lips in keeping with her straight back and calm blue eyes, watching Lee as he glanced around the sitting room. Outside, sprinklers ticked across a green lawn, the river visible through jagged limestone crags, vast and blue where it curled past Point Walter.

Catherine Farrell sighed, putting her hands on the table. Chitchat over, it was time for business. Behind her head were a dozen or so framed photographs of her husband, the former premier, shaking hands with Ronald Reagan, another with Maggie

Thatcher, the Pope, various other dignitaries. In every photograph there was Catherine, in the background, smiling politely but taller than everyone else, her hands pressed together as they were now, her gold wedding band glinting as she turned it with her thumb.

‘Mr Southern, I’m not normally lost for words, but ...’

‘Please call me Lee.’

‘Of course. You already said that. Forgive an old lady the formalities of her generation. I find myself unusually nervous.’

Catherine Farrell stared at her hands. She dabbed her eye, then sighed again.

‘Because of the attempt on your husband’s life?’

‘Yes, that, of course. But also because of what you’ve offered to do. It seems ... unfair. I would do it myself if I could.’

Lee believed her. There was anxiety but also conviction in her voice. It carried the authority of someone used to speaking quietly to be heard above the noise. Despite the humiliations her husband had endured – his bail revoked due to an attempt to flee overseas – here she was, trying to help him. Lee’s investigative partner, Frank Swann, had described the former premier as a sociopathic charmer who’d set himself up as a consultant, which was where the charges stemmed from – offering inducements to a public servant on behalf of a real estate developer that were recorded and submitted as evidence.

‘Of course, you’re under no obligation to continue,’ she continued.

‘Am I the only person you’ve spoken to about this?’

The question seemed to surprise her. She arched her eyebrows and ironed out the swell of her lips, pressed together in a perfect line.

‘Of course, yes. Why do you ask?’

‘Because this isn’t something you want floating around town. Not for your husband’s sake, or mine for that matter.’

‘I agree. I’ve set aside the money, as mentioned. Our legal fees are eating us alive, but I have my personal savings. As you’re no doubt aware, my husband was born to nothing, while I was more fortunate. My family come from old pastoralist stock, and I was an only child. I have no children myself, and I can’t take it with me. I saw you admiring the staircase earlier. One of my grandfather’s businesses was timber milling – he knew the best carpenters in the colony.’

Lee put his elbows on the table, looked her in the eye. ‘The money is fine. Generous even.’

‘Good. You don’t strike me as the naïve type. Have you been imprisoned before?’

‘Me? Not exactly, although my father and his father both did time, and my great-grandfather was a convict. I’m the first generation in my family to avoid going to jail, so far. I always expected to when I was a kid.’

‘With a family history like that, I can imagine thinking of incarceration as some kind of initiation. Some kind of challenge to meet.’

‘Not exactly.’

Lee sat back into the plush chair lined with green velvet. He watched Catherine Farrell take out a chequebook from her handbag, open it to a new cheque.

‘You’re sure you want a paper trail on this?’

Catherine smiled, nodded. ‘For your sake, as much as mine. I would have thought you’d insist upon one.’

Lee Southern reached behind him and drew out a manila envelope from his jacket. He slid out the typed sheets and opened the pages, dictated by Frank Swann and typed by Lee – a standard contract. Swann wasn't happy to do it, mainly because he was reluctant for Lee to take on the work, but they were partners now, and Lee had insisted. Swann had thought long and hard about the words as he dictated, applying responsibility for negative outcomes to the employer, Catherine Farrell, as much as was possible.

Lee passed the papers to Catherine Farrell, who exchanged them for the signed cheque. She scrutinised Swann's words with a lawyer's eye and when she finished pushed the papers back across the table.

'I can't sign this.'

'We aren't doing anything illegal, as you've said many times. That is just a story – part of a paper trail in case I become ...'

'It's not illegal, but it won't be looked upon kindly. It manipulates the system and uses the valuable time of the court for personal ends.'

Using the levers of government for personal ends was the reason Catherine's husband was in prison, and with as much politeness as he could, Lee pushed the pages back toward Catherine. 'That's all true. However, if anything goes wrong in there, it'll be on my record. I'll lose my citizen investigator's licence, at best.'

They both knew that Catherine was going to sign the papers. The chances of finding someone else to undertake the job were zero. She drew the papers toward her and signed her name.

'What's next?' she asked.

'First, a question. For my own curiosity. Was your husband really planning to flee the country and break bail?'

Catherine looked at him and her eyes were pained. 'He panicked. Being arrested at the airport with hand luggage and two bottles of Glenmorangie was the peak of his embarrassment, especially once the press was called. Those photographs plastered across the national papers, clutching his duty free while the officers tried to handcuff him – you can imagine. So yes, he did try to break bail and flee, although it wasn't part of any grand plan to avoid justice. But to *my* question.'

'What's next?' Lee said. 'Once your cheque clears, I have to commit a major crime.'