

First published 2026 by
FREMANTLE PRESS

Fremantle Press Inc. trading as Fremantle Press
1/10 Parry Street, Fremantle, Western Australia 6160
fremantlepress.com.au

Copyright © Alan Carter, 2026.

The moral rights of the author have been asserted.

This book is copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study, research, criticism or review, as permitted under the *Copyright Act*, no part may be reproduced by any process without written permission. Every reasonable effort has been made to seek permission for quotations contained herein. Please address any enquiries to the publisher.

Without limiting the author's and publisher's exclusive rights, any unauthorised use of this publication to train generative artificial intelligence (AI) technologies is expressly prohibited.

Cover design by Dani Lurie, Balloon Dog Studio, balloondog.studio
Images from truestock.com.au/tasman-bridge-hobart;
elements.evanato.com

Printed by Everbest Printing Investment Limited, China.



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

ISBN 9781760997335 (paperback)

ISBN 9781760997342 (ebook)



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

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.



PRAISE FOR ALAN CARTER

‘Alan Carter’s latest crime novel, *Prize Catch*, is a page-turning thrill ride set on Australia’s Emerald Isle.’ *Books + Publishing*

‘Drawing on themes of survival and what that may cost, *Prize Catch* makes for a very tense read. Carter’s characters feel real, their choices on the spur of the moment are felt and regretted and their need to go on unstoppable.’ *Good Reading*

‘*Franz Josef* is trademark Alan Carter: appealing characters, convincing police work and bursts of action, with an overlay of international tensions ripped from the headlines.’ *Garry Disher*

‘...an unputdownable thriller from an award-winning Australian crime author.’ *Boffins Books*

‘Carter’s laconic style and small-town chills are excellently placed to ease you into a long winter in front of the fire.’ *Readings*

‘A first-rate thriller.’ *Canberra Weekly*

‘The characters work, the plot is cleverly executed and the sense of place is visceral. There’s touches of humour and self-inflicted jeopardy which are perfectly justifiable ... an absolute stand out book ...’ *Australian Crime Fiction*

‘... an extremely intelligent thriller.’ *The AU Review*

**ALAN
CARTER
LAST
BASTION**



FREMANTLE PRESS

For Liam, fearless knight-errant

PRELUDE

Maybe this year things will get better. Yes, that's what he was saying last year but now he's picked up a better-paying job. No more with the Uber Eats, which was a soul-destroying grind for terrible money and all those people complaining about their curry being fifteen minutes late. Yes, friend, you try pedalling up those steep hills in West Hobart with the wind in your face. No. No more of that nonsense. Now he's serving butter chicken to the cruise ship tourists at a restaurant on the wharf. Nodding, smiling, and wobbling his head on cue. Flirting with whoever catches his eye for a moment too long. Not stabbing them when they try to mimic his accent.

And then there's the day job in the phone shop – persuading cashed-up old folks to buy the latest iPhone and showing them how to get Siri to shut up and leave them alone. University starts in just over a month: Bachelor of Information Communication and Technology, no less. The world will be his oyster. He can set up a business and maybe get rich off some other poor suckers, wouldn't that be nice? Pay back his debts. Try to get a permanent visa and make a life for himself

here in this 'Island Playground' as the UTAS prospectus puts it. At this time of year, you can believe it too. Long summer days, not too freezing summer nights, like tonight with that full moon rippling on the surface of the river. Nice evening for a stroll. That's good, because the buses to Moonah stopped running hours ago and his bike got stolen a few weeks back. Uber or taxi? Forget it, the rent is due next week and just went up again to welcome in the New Year. He checks his watch: nearly midnight. Better get a move on if he wants some sleep before getting up for the day job.

University. What a luxury. Just study and do the one gig at the restaurant. Phone shop at the weekend and during study breaks. Sweet. The intercity cycleway is probably the easiest path at this time of night. No cyclists to speak of, and less chance of meeting up with a *lund khajoor*, or dickhead, as they say here. Follow the water past the Regatta Grounds then cut up through New Town and join the old railway line. Yes, a good year, with a job, a place at university, a roof over his head, and no dickheads. Trouble is, there's been an upsurge in the latter in recent months. They're trending and the billionaire tech bros are giving them free rein. Financially he can see that it makes sense: social media fact-checkers cost money; lies and hate make money. No brainer, as they say here. But there's that thing that his father calls 'the moral imperative' – in short, right is right and wrong is wrong and money be damned. For him, the bottom line of this money-making hate trend is that dickheads regularly accost him and his friends with abuse and violence. To hell with that.

Heading up towards the war memorial now, a massive

LAST BASTION

cruise ship parked at the wharf with its funnel fuming and lights blazing. Over to the left, a helicopter landing on the roof of Royal Hobart Hospital. Ahead to the right, the Tasman Bridge lit up in colours for whatever reason. Silhouettes heading his way. Dickheads? He hopes not. After all, his mind is made up. This is going to be a good year.

1

THURSDAY. ‘How many does that make it now?’

Jill Wilkie shivers in the early morning breeze. ‘Four, in as many weeks.’ She took the call about an hour ago, sun not quite up at that point. A man found beaten to a pulp under the Bridge of Remembrance, a footbridge across the busy Tasman Highway leading to the war memorial. Young. Male. South Asian, Indian to be exact in this case. The poor bloke now in intensive care at Royal Hobart. Chances somewhat less than fifty-fifty.

‘Linked, you think?’ Her boss, Hughesy, yawns at his end of the phone. Is that a slurp of coffee she hears? ‘Apart from by the seemingly obvious racial motive?’

‘Too early to say. See if Forensics come up with anything from the scene. There aren’t too many nearby doors to knock on but we can do a media call-out for dashcam footage, witnesses, et cetera. Plus, we’ll sweep up any CCTV in the vicinity.’

‘Family, friends?’

‘Following up now, boss.’

‘Told you not to call me that, Jill. Makes me nervy.’

‘Burden of leadership. Boss.’ They take their leave of each other and Jill pockets her phone. ‘Anything of interest yet?’ she asks the nearest Forensics tech.

‘Nah, Sarge. You’ll be the first to know. Or one of the first anyway.’

Jill strolls down the hill a little and examines the surroundings. Startled momentarily by the long blast of a ship’s horn as the cruise liner pulls away from the wharf. A ten-storey city of five thousand souls, probably New Zealand bound. Bon voyage, she thinks. Maybe I should stop them leaving in case one of the passengers saw something from their balcony while they sipped a moonlit G&T. Or maybe one of those passengers did it. Slipped down the gangway in the dead of night to beat the living daylights out of some poor bastard before retiring to their cabin for sweet dreams.

Traffic building for rush hour into the city. Some rubberneckers slowing to look at the police activity and the unfolding crime scene. Impatient toots from other cars. She looks up at the footbridge again. The cameras there, trained mainly on the traffic. Did they catch anything? She shakes her head. Four in as many weeks. Linked simply by the emboldened virus of xenophobia or by a handful of the same vicious individuals each time? Whatever it is, it needs to be stopped, thinks Jill. I really don’t like this shit happening on my watch.

—

Sam Willard thought things had died down and had started to relax his guard. He really should have known better. Nearly

six months incident-free – coinciding with the announcement of war-crimes charges being dropped against the principal accused and a winding-up of the task force – would give you reason to be optimistic. The only person still facing criminal proceedings was Sam himself, the whistleblower. But he knows from experience that this is the best time to strike. Like the tumour that blossoms just when you believe you're in remission. Breakfast over, lots of movement as people ready for a new day: workshops, education, chores, lolling about and shooting the breeze. The new Southern Remand Centre already seems to be losing its polish. Maybe the sparkle just fades from the light in these places, and what looked great on the website turns to shit when brushed with reality. True, they're separated from the hardcore bad bastards in main pop but there's no shortage of vicious chancers here too. But the months flow by and Sam still yet to get his day in court. That's the point though. Nobody wants to hear what he's got to say in his defence.

Two then. Or is that a third looking down from the upper walkway? The screws seem to have magically evaporated. Sam is unarmed; no breakfast tray or even plastic mug, no book from the library, not even a gnarly chess piece to slip into his knuckles. Just him, his wits, his background.

The crowd ebbing and flowing like a chill morning at the beach, seconds before the shark barrels in from the depths. Sam parries the lunge, twisting, wrenching, breaking the guy's arm. Somebody has him from behind, pinning him, while another approaches front on, home-made blade in the right hand. Sam thinks briefly of Kaz and of little Ollie,

starting kindly soon. Is this goodbye? A stamp on the ankle and a jerking back of the head. Crunch of a broken nose. The grip is released and Sam sidesteps the front approach, elbows him in the throat, and drives the bloke's head into the steel balustrade leading to the upper level. Suddenly the screws are on them, alarms are sounding; they aren't able to leave it too long with the CCTV ticking over.

Cable restraints, a knee in the back, few punches to the head and face, a stamp on his leg. In no time at all, he's in one of the punishment cells with just a bare mattress and his thoughts for company. He didn't recognise his attackers, new arrivals maybe. Why them, why now?

Why not, he supposes.

He really should know better than to let his guard down. Ever.

—

'Pankaj Kumar. Age twenty-two. Originally from India, Delhi to be exact, been here two years on a student visa doing a bridging course before starting at UTAS this coming March. Works by day at the Optus shop and by night at the Rajah down at the wharf.'

His passport photo is up there on the board. Handsome guy, film-star looks. A charmer and maybe a heartbreaker, thinks Jill. Until now. Now he's hooked up to a machine and his own mother wouldn't recognise him.

'We've set the wheels in motion to have his family in India notified. There are housemates, workmates and such to be interviewed to build more of a picture of him. And speaking

of pictures, we've got a shipload of CCTV to trawl through. Right, Sophie?'

A nod from the back of the room. Meanwhile Hughesy's come out of his office to watch Jill in action. He seems happy enough so far. The rest of the team have locked in behind Jill and him. Any loyalists from the old regime have long since fucked off. Out the window it's sunny and building to a high-twenties day. Third time this week. A southern Tasmanian heatwave.

'Forensics?' asks Hughesy, to show he's paying attention.

'Nothing of consequence so far. The only blood there seems to belong to Pankaj. Footwear scuff marks and various fibres suggest more than one assailant. They should have transferred traces of themselves onto him. We might have more details by end of day.'

'Usual suspects?'

'About to pay them a visit after this.'

Hughesy's fiddling with a paper clip. Must be stressed about something. 'And no witnesses come forward yet?'

'Not yet. We've put the call out on social media for witnesses, dashcam, et cetera. I'll be doing the news this arvo, if that's okay by you.'

'Fine, no probs.'

Tasks are assigned and the meeting breaks up. Hughesy invites Jill into his lair before she heads out to chat to the local neo-nazis.

'Rumblings, Jill.'

'Yeah?'

'All the way from Canberra.'

‘Canberra. Wow.’

‘The Indian ambassador wants us to do something about our racism problem down here in Hobart. Not impressed that his citizens keep getting attacked by ours.’

‘Fair enough.’

‘Got me worried, Jill.’

‘I can see that. This wouldn’t have anything to do with an upcoming federal election and the fact that our local federal member is the new Leader of the Opposition who’s building his votes on dog-whistling about the foreigners, would it?’

‘Succinctly put; you might be onto something there.’

‘So, what did Canberra say to the ambassador?’

‘They assured him that Hobart is no more racist than the rest of Australia and that we’re on the case.’

‘We?’

‘You.’

—

The view flap opens and the door is unlocked.

‘On your feet, Willard.’

Is he due for a beating? Maybe the screws are here to finish off what just failed in the main hall. Sam stays where he is, in the corner, nobody at his back.

‘I said, on your feet.’

Sam tenses, assesses. One screw in the cell, two others at the door. They’re not in riot gear, they wouldn’t bother talking to him if they meant business. It would be swarm and smother. Game over.

‘What’s this about?’

‘You’ve got a visitor.’

It’s not visiting time. They mean to get him somewhere else to finish the job. ‘No.’

‘Relax, dickhead.’ Passes him a box of baby wipes. ‘Clean yourself up, you look like shit.’

Sam wipes the blood from his face and knuckles. ‘Who is it?’

‘You’ll see. Yeah, that’s better. You gonna behave yourself, tough guy?’

Sam gives his word and they cuff him as they head for the visitor reception area. On the way, winks from some, appraisals from others. He’s led to one of the interview rooms rather than general visiting. The door opens. An older woman checking her file notes through half-moon glasses perched on her nose and held in place by a thin gold chain. The look of Sandy Bay about her and the smell of Marlboro Lights. She glances up at him, pauses for a moment before deciding to smile.

‘You’ve been fighting,’ she says. ‘Did you win?’

‘I’m here.’

‘Indeed, you are. That’ll be your training. SAS it says in the file. You look like it too.’ Without standing she drapes a hand in Sam’s direction. He’s not sure whether he’s meant to shake it or kneel and kiss it. He opts for option one. ‘Pauline,’ she says.

‘Pauline what?’

‘All in good time.’ She squints at the guard, still standing behind Sam, waiting to be noticed. ‘Can we have the handcuffs removed, please?’

‘You sure, madam?’

‘Yes.’ The cuffs come off. ‘And close the door behind you.’

‘But ...’

‘Good man.’ Turns back to Sam. ‘Take a pew.’

‘What’s all this about? Who are you?’

‘Somebody who can help.’

‘Who says I need any help?’

‘You’re bleeding.’ She pushes a packet of tissues his way.
‘Just above the left eye.’

—

Jill reads the sign again. It warns of trespass violation and that entry is by invitation only. A whole bunch of hocus-pocus legalese ending with the threat of a fine of ten thousand dollars or its equivalent in gold or silver bullion or bitcoin. The sign is A4 printed, laminated, and taped to the front door of this otherwise nondescript brick suburban house in Cadbury Road, Claremont—spitting distance from the chocolate factory.

‘Fucking sovereign citizens.’ She slaps the door a few times and presses the chime bell a few more. A dog barks inside, a big bark from a big dog. Jill knows because she’s been here several times before. Early afternoon and the UV in double figures. She can almost feel the melanomas forming as she stands firm.

‘Who goes there?’

‘Police. Open the door, please.’

‘No.’

‘Open up, Mr Reynolds.’

‘I do not respond to the labels attributed to a straw man.’

My name is Kevin Freeman.'

'That's not what it says on the warrant. Do as you're told, Kevin, or we'll come back with the riot squad and a battering ram.'

'You do not have my consent.'

Sophie Bosnich has taken a break from the CCTV trawling, delegating the task to civilian support staff. She's got her hand on her Glock and looks pissed off and hot.

'Easy, Sophie. You know how he is. Give us a sec.' Jill slaps the door a few times more. 'Kev, mate, I'd appreciate a word, otherwise I'll have to do that call to Centrelink again and you'll get your benefits suspended while they investigate the complaint.'

'What complaint?'

'The usual, Kevin. Open the door, talk to me, and then we'll go away. Simple, mate.'

It's a respectable house in a respectable area and curtains are twitching in the neighbourhood. Kevin inherited the place when his mum died of the Covid he didn't believe in. The door opens enough for an XL bully to poke its muzzle through and bare some yellow teeth at Jill. The dog is trying to growl and snarl but has its airway constricted by Kevin's attempts to control it. Instead, a hissy squeak floats out, like that from a slowly deflating balloon. 'What do you want?' Kevin's head appears in the gap: chestnut, mulleted hair and a poorly sketched goatee. Cigarette breath, Bintang vest and a shoulder tatt of the Aussie flag. Inside, the sound of thwacking balls and oohs and aaahs.

'Watching the Open? Who's on?'

‘Sabalenka. Killin’ it. What’s this about?’

‘Can you tell us your whereabouts for last night, Kevin?’

‘None of your business. I’m a free man. I go where I please, when I please.’

Can dogs go blue? The bully doesn’t look well. ‘What’s the dog’s name again?’

‘Eureka.’

‘I think Eureka’s choking, mate. Anywhere you can chain him up?’

‘It’s a she, and no, there isn’t. None of us should be chained. Look, I was home all night watching the tennis.’

‘Anyone to vouch for that, Mr Reynolds?’ asks Sophie.

‘Me girlfriend.’

‘Is she home?’

‘Out at work at the casino. What you got your hand on your gun for? Eureka ain’t gonna bite ya.’

‘Promise?’

‘Take it to the bank. Anything else I can do for you?’

‘Your crew, any idea where they were last night?’

‘You’ll have to ask them.’ A roar from inside. ‘Can I get back to the game now?’

—

‘I see your court case has been postponed yet again. And you’ve been locked up, what, two years now?’

Sam’s still trying to get a handle on this woman who has the game-playing air of a spook and the hauteur of a dreaded vice-principal at an expensive girls school. ‘Give or take. I’d really like to get to the point here, if that’s okay.’

‘Somewhere you need to be? Got a lot on? Look, this trial of yours is going to be delayed and strung out for as long as it takes – maybe until one of those attackers finally gets lucky – meanwhile the charges are being dropped on those people you’re accusing and they’ll be walking free soon. That’s the unfortunate reality for whistleblowers in this country. War criminals sipping lattes in the sun while you languish in this shithole. You’re Tasmania’s own Count of Monte Cristo, mate. It sucks.’

‘Could be worse. Could be the man in the iron mask.’

‘No, we keep them on Nauru. Sam, I believe you can help me with a little problem and, in return, I can get you out of here and back in the bosom of your family. How are they, by the way?’

‘What’s the job?’

‘Down to business. I like that. Know anything about politics, Sam?’

‘You’ll need to narrow it down.’

‘Your local member down here who recently rose to the dizzying heights of Leader of the Opposition and is poised to be the next PM after the election. If you believe the polls, everybody’s lapping up his Trump-lite schtick.’

‘Malcolm Ross. What about him?’

‘He’s got a wayward son who’s gone and got himself embroiled with this bunch of fascist nutters. They market themselves as a masculine wellness energy centre but I’m more inclined to view them as a survivalist incel nazi cult. Call it what you will, but we also have it on good intelligence that sprinkled among them are a handful of hardcore extremists

hell-bent on committing acts of terror. Soon, so we hear.’

‘And?’

‘And we’d like you to extract young Conor from their evil clutches before we raid them and the media gets wind of it.’

‘Why me?’

‘You come highly recommended.’

‘Who by?’

‘Malcolm Ross’s chief of staff.’ Pauline squints at her notes.

‘Kristin Baker?’

Alan Carter was born in Sunderland, UK. He immigrated to Australia in 1991 and now lives in splendid semi-rural semi-isolation south of Hobart, Tasmania. In his spare time he follows the black line up and down the local swimming pool or drags on his wetsuit and braves the icy waters of the D'Entrecasteaux Channel. *Last Bastion* is the sequel to the Tasmania-set *Prize Catch*. He is also the author of the NZ-set Sergeant Nick Chester series – *Marlborough Man* (which won the Ngaio Marsh Award for Best Crime Novel), *Doom Creek* and *Franz Josef* – as well as the Fremantle-set DS Cato Kwong series, which include *Prime Cut* (winner of the Ned Kelly Award for Best First Fiction), *Getting Warmer*, *Bad Seed*, *Heaven Sent* and *Crocodile Tears*.