

The Bait Trap

Prologue

Cooinda, New South Wales, Australia, Friday 26 November 2021, 5:45 pm

The murderer watched as John Judd stood at the cabin door surveying the ink-black sky, as impervious as a tulip to his fate. Judd patted his trouser pocket to check for his keys and snuffed out the light in the cabin. A languorous smoke trail crept into his nostrils. Judd's footsteps were getting louder and louder, rising in symphony with the footsteps was his humming. As he trudged over the scar on the landscape, Judd's steps skimmed the top of the leaf litter. There was another set of steps, lighter, like hesitant taps on the forearm of a stranger.

He was so taut, so focused on Judd, in the half beat before his arrival he thought he'd combust. Judd's profile was level with the trunk that was his cover. This secret turtleneck-jumper-and-geeky-spec-wearing phony needed to be taken out, once and for all.

Thwack! His baton came down heavily at the base of Judd's neck. He heard the throaty bark of a dog.

'What the—' Judd said. His hands were black spidery cut outs as he reached blindly into the night. *Oomph!* It was like pounding meat with a mallet. Judd's legs bowed gracefully like he did at mass. His face planted in the leaves. The murderer swung again. Another dull thud on Judd. His mobile went skidding across the parched earth. He sunk his boot into the dog's bird-like ribs.

When he'd entered the forest only an hour earlier, ancient ironbark trees had sagged and groaned. Ribbed trunks had stood proud, cloaked in a sinister shawl of mist. Now the woof-woof call of a barking owl echoed through the night air like a warning siren, and a cacophony of birdlife shot up as if someone had fired a gun.

He waited until he heard the feral pigs squealing then moved aside. Their rotund bodies panic-rammed each other for the prize of fresh meat. The fading light was no impediment; their quivering snouts guided them to their second dinner. The larger ones greedily barred the weaker ones from partaking in their fair share. Virtually, all that was left were the bones.

Liquid pooled on scorched ochre like a rich claret on a raw linen carpet. Tails twitching, the pigs bore witness as the remains were doused with petrol. The lighter clicked, and flames danced in the night air. Would the heat be fierce enough to erase *all* traces of him?

Chapter One

Sydney, New South Wales, Australia, Friday 26 November 2021, 10:51 am

‘Look Zac, I can’t stay long. Skye needs me to take her to school and drop off her artwork,’ Jenny said. ‘There’s an exhibition on Wednesday night.’

‘That sounds nice,’ Byrne said absently, eyes locked on *The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous* on his bedside table.

Jenny lowered herself uncomfortably into the seafoam armchair, her eyes two small reservoirs brimming with an ominous combination of fear and anger. She gazed at the etchings of shells on the wall meant to make you feel tranquil. She looked far from it.

‘Anyway, I didn’t come here to talk about Skye’s exhibition. I’ll be along to support her.’ Jenny picked at the tassel on her bag and scrunched a tissue in the other hand. A public address announcement blurted out that sessions were about to begin. Every atom in the room was suddenly charged.

Byrne had checked into Shangri-La Private Hospital—or ‘La-La Land’ as those in the revolving door of rehab called it—to placate Jenny. He’d tried everything: wine with water chasers, beer with water chasers, beer with wine chasers.... Even rebirthing his inner child only led to one place—the bottom of a bottle.

Jenny looked somehow different. Gone was the guileless round face. Her features were hard right angles, with an eleven etched between her brows. Her only make-up was a slick of lip gloss. Wet hair completed the look, scraped back from her face and looped in a band. Silver threads raked through the temple and her parting.

Jenny’s breath stalled. ‘There’s no easy way to say this, so I’ll just get to the

point. I just can't do this anymore' she said, for the first time meeting his gaze instead of looking at her hands.

His pulse skidded. He tamped down the bile burning the back of his throat.

'What are you talking about, Jen?' Byrne said. *Shit. What's next?*

'I...I mean, we... can't stand your drinking any more. You have no time for us. We lost track of the number of times we've waited for you at home—birthdays, Mother's Day, Christmas Day...when Skye was made a prefect,' she said, her eyebrows yoyoing up and down. Her voice bounced off the walls and circled back to him. Guilt clawed up his neck.

Why was he suddenly in the couples' panic room? 'Jen, I told you I'd change. That's why I'm in here! Come on, Jen...give me a chance. Only been here a week,' he said. She was wearing a sweatshirt emblazoned with *The Upside*. If he wasn't so terrified, he would have laughed.

'The booze'll always come first. It trumps everything. Once you pick up the first drink...all bets are off.' Her ready smile with the quirky, crossed front teeth which he loved was now a determined pout. Ice shrouded her voice.

A nurse popped her head in and said: 'Ah, group sessions are about to start now Zac. Please make your way to the blue room.'

'Yeah, sure,' he intoned, with a palm-up gesture.

'That was it,' she said, her hand sweeping the air, 'you picking up Skye from Bella's house, drunk. Then making a scene in front of all her friends. Putting your arm around her,' Jenny said with a chihuahua-like shudder. An angry blush was slinking up her throat and ears. 'Either way, you've got a long road to hoe with her.'

'You're only worried about keeping up appearances with Bella's mum,' he said. Hardness tainted his voice.

'Look, Maureen's the least of my problems. Zac, she never wants you to drive

the girls to parties again, because you're too, too... unreliable,' her voice held a barely audible edge of hysteria.

'I always said that woman was a helicopter parent,' he muttered before he could stop himself.

'Look, I really hope that it works for you in here,' Jenny said, looking around the room as if for some reassurance.

They both blinked out of sequence.

'When you've finished, I don't want you back home. I've spoken to Faye and Keith. They said that you could stay at their place,' she said, rearing up like an untrained horse and jerking her bag over her shoulder.

His stomach gave a sickening lurch, like you get when you slam on the brakes, and the shopping in the back of the car comes hurtling forward. 'You've spoken to Mum and Dad? Don't drag them into it!'

'You have to stay somewhere. And Skye ... she'll be eighteen soon. It's entirely a matter for her whether she wants you in her life or not.' This was a monologue she'd clearly rehearsed. 'Anyway, you'd better go to your meeting. The nurse is waiting.' She gave him a weak smile, but her eyes were shuttered.

Byrne knew every one of Jenny's smiles. That smile said, 'I've had enough. There will be no more apologies. I'm moving on.'

'Are you fucking kidding me?'

And just like that, the continuum between past and future, the surety of passing into old age with the same person, the predictability of night following day, was erased. This wasn't how his rehab was supposed to play out. He was going to learn how to drink 'properly'. It was meant to be a full stop to his drinking career. Not the start of a whole new existential crisis.

He'd never had a relationship for more than a few weeks until he met Jenny. She'd been his first and only serious girlfriend. They'd soaked up and grown into the world together. It had been like dating a perpetual prefect. She liked nothing better than sudoku, speed limits and fun runs. He, on the other hand, liked to count the items in other people's trolley in front of him, stabbing at each one as he counted and argue the toss with them if they'd exceeded the limit. He'd take two tablets at once and wash them down with a beer. He'd never read an instruction manual; he'd just press random buttons until something worked. He was no stranger to road rage, especially if the other car was sticking to the speed limit. But he could do all of those things that made him mad because he was always had a valid reason.

He'd been faithful to Jenny—sort of. But since the day he'd been tapped on the shoulder by the Homicide Squad Inspector and asked if he'd like to do his A List, he'd barely been home. He'd thought about this a lot. That's when it started. That's when his drinking career really took off.

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