MORTAL CHAOS

DEEP OBLIVION



Also by Matt Dickinson

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide in

Oxford New York

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New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in

Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece
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First published 2012

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Data available

ISBN: 978-0-19-275715-9

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Printed in Great Britain
Paper used in the production of this book is a natural,
recyclable product made from wood grown in sustainable forests.
The manufacturing process conforms to the environmental
regulations of the country of origin.

For my son,
Greg



1

TWENTY-FIRST FLOOR, UNFINISHED OFFICE BLOCK, SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA

The butterfly was an Australian Painted Lady, a lost survivor of a migrating tribe. She was exhausted and beaten up, living out the last chapter of an eventful and frighteningly short life. Her wings spoke of a thousand miles of hard travel, their edges frayed and ragged.

Her youthful brilliance was long gone, the bright oranges of her wing markings bleached by sunlight to a dusty brown. Even the spectacular aquamarine eyespots of her hindwings had been scored out to an ordinary shade of grey.

Some months earlier, in the first ecstatic flights of her young life, this creature had danced among the Foxtail palms and thousand-year-old Kauri trees of the forests of Queensland, tasted the nectar of Illawarra Flame flowers and feasted on candy coloured orchids as big as your fist.

Now she was stressed and alone, trapped on the twenty-first floor of an unfinished office block high above Sydney, a dusty deathtrap devoid of liquid or plants.

It was just past seven a.m. on the 31st of December. The last day of the year. The Australian Painted Lady shrugged mortar dust from her tattered wings and beat herself against the glass in her quest for freedom and light.

2

CENTRAL BUSINESS DISTRICT, SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA

Twenty-one floors below, on the pavement outside that same office building, a seventeen-year-old Australian girl called Hannah was setting up for the day.

All she had with her was a small tin marked with the words *'Hungry. Please help'*, a filthy nylon sleeping bag . . .

And a feisty fur-ball of a mongrel tied to a grubby bit of string.

Fleabilly was the mutt's name, a cross-eyed warrior to his scruffy core. He was a pocket-sized dog, part terrier most people thought, but he punched way above his weight when it came to a fight. Hannah had seen him take on the odd Rottweiler when he was in the mood. She loved Fleabilly's pugnacious attitude and his oddball squinty look, knew he would defend her to the bitter end if necessary and that she would do the same for him.

A social worker had once asked Hannah to write a single sentence which would sum up her view of the world. Hannah chewed on a pencil for a bit then wrote:

'The more I learn about people, the more I love my dog.'

Hannah and Fleabilly had been living rough in Sydney's parks for a good few weeks, long enough for her to have learned that it was a dangerous place for a seventeen-year-old girl to be. She couldn't go home; the very thought of returning to her drunken bully of a father was too much to contemplate. Her mother was long gone and had cut all contact; even her beloved brother Todd had gone travelling to escape.

Now, Hannah put the tin on the pavement in front of her. Fleabilly was badly in need of some breakfast.

3

CENTRAL BUSINESS DISTRICT, SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA

The security guard was Markos Dean. 'Marko' to his friends. He was twenty-two years old, filling in time with this temporary job while he waited for something better to turn up.

Marko had been waiting for something better to turn up since he flunked out of school aged fifteen.

Marko weighed in at just over ninety-five kilos and he kept himself in good shape. He did a bit of door work at some of Sydney's rougher nightclubs and he put in a few hours a week as a lifeguard when the beaches were busy.

Today he had the morning shift. From six a.m. until two p.m. this part-constructed shell of a building was Marko's domain, a towering prefabricated monolith of steel girders and polished aluminium panels.

The building should have been completed months before but the global credit crisis had spun out of nowhere and construction had ground to a halt. Money which had once flowed like water was now mysteriously unavailable. The pipes were jammed. The system froze. A new financial ice age had begun, and now no one was thinking of moving into glossy new palaces in Sydney no matter how heavenly the view of the harbour bridge.

The construction workers laid down their tools.

And Marko began his shifts.

Now, Marko took the lift up to the top floor, the twenty-fifth, from where he would start his hourly inspection tour.

4

CENTRAL BUSINESS DISTRICT, SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA

Hannah had a lucky start to the day. Almost as soon as she put out her begging bowl a good Samaritan threw a couple of coins into the pot. 'Thanks, mate,' she called after him. 'And happy New Year.'

She scanned the street. Looking for any sign of cops. Or even her father.

Was he out looking for her? That was her biggest nightmare.

Christmas night had been the toughest of all. Curled up with Fleabilly in the back seat of a burned-out car down by the port. Faded memories of the days when her family had—after a fashion—still functioned. The days before her mother had the breakdown. The days before her father became a monster with the booze, spiralling out of a job into the blackest of depressions, then on to a three month stretch in the Long Bay Correctional Centre for the fight that gave Hannah a black eye and a chipped tooth.

Hannah had tried to defend her mother. Her father swore he would never forgive her for that.

Social services had been on her case, put her in a hostel for a few nights. But many of the other residents had drug problems and when Hannah's room mate offered her heroin she ran back to the streets.

Anything was better than *that.*

Another couple of coins hit the tin. 'Two more dollars,' she told Fleabilly, 'and we'll split a bacon sandwich.'

5

CENTRAL BUSINESS DISTRICT, SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA

Marko took out his mobile and buzzed a call to his girlfriend Denise to relieve some of the boredom of the security patrol.

'Hey, Den. G'morning. How you doing?'

The chat continued, just mundane early morning catch up until Marko reached the twenty-first floor and took a cursory look around the empty room. Suddenly, a fluttering movement caught his eye. Something was caught in the room. Marko walked over to take a look. For a moment he thought it was a small bird, but as he got closer he realized it was a ragged looking butterfly, beating itself crazy against a window.

'Bug invasion,' he told Denise. 'That's about as exciting as it gets here, babe.'

It wasn't a phobia exactly, but if there was one thing that Marko hated more than anything else it was butterflies and moths. Something about their fat, hairy bodies just made him squirm.

'I'll call you back.' Marko cut the call.

He put on one of his leather gloves. He stepped up to the window and slammed his palm hard against the glass in an attempt to kill the butterfly. But the creature was fast, and he missed it by a couple of inches.

Instead, the impact had the most surprising effect; the glass panel popped right out of its frame and fell away from the building. Marko leaned forward in shock, watching in horror as the huge pane of glass fell towards the street below.

6

OPEN OCEAN, NEAR SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA

The cruise ship was the MS *Cayman Glory*, weighing in at 85,000 tonnes and cruising now towards Sydney harbour at eighteen knots. She was one of a new generation of super-de luxe vessels, fitted out to the exacting standards of a five star hotel and catering for an international clientele who like their luxury and are not afraid to pay for it.

The captain was Stian Olberg, a stout, fifty-six-year-old Norwegian who was celebrating his twenty-fifth year at sea. Olberg had brought many vessels into Sydney harbour and even though he'd never show it to his crew, he always relished the natural drama of this most spectacular of ports.

'Reduce speed. Eight knots,' Olberg told his first officer. He nodded to the radio officer, 'Raise Harbour Control.'

The radio officer switched his VHF transmitter to Channel 13: 'Harbour control. This is MS *Cayman Glory* reporting five miles south-east of pilot boarding ground. ETA twenty minutes.'

'Harbour control,' confirmed the reply. 'G'day, *Cayman Glory*. Your pilot will shortly be on board cutter and heading out, over.'

Captain Olberg felt the deck beneath his feet tremble slightly as the MS *Cayman Glory* reduced speed. He took a sip of black coffee and put on his sunglasses.

It was a fine day for cruising.

7

CENTRAL BUSINESS DISTRICT, SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA

Another coin clinked into Hannah's begging tin. People were being extra generous today, she thought; must be the holiday mood.

Hannah could see her reflection in the window of the office building but the vision was so upsetting she had to look away. She looked a mess: the dreadlocks she had once been so proud of were matted and filthy.

'Is it just me,' she asked Fleabilly, 'or does one of us need a bath?'

He nuzzled her hand as a reply.

Hannah knew she couldn't run for ever. Living rough was awful. At night she got hassled by drunks. During the day she dodged the police who were constantly on her case.

There was an aunt up in Brisbane that she was fond of, one of the few relatives who had always given her love and support. Hannah had a feeling she might offer her a new home but how would she get there with no cash? She didn't even know how far away Brisbane was; a few hundred miles? A thousand?

It was hopeless.

'Time for breakfast,' she told Fleabilly.

An instant later she saw something flash through the air.

8

CENTRAL BUSINESS DISTRICT, SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA

The pane of glass hit the roof of a passing truck in the street below. The impact speed was about one hundred and forty kilometres an hour. Twisting as it fell, it was precisely flat relative to the ground as it cannoned into one of the re-inforced steel frame supports that held the canvas truck-roof in shape.

The effect was a veritable explosion of glass as the huge laminated pane ripped itself into thousands of razor sharp shards. Each spun off on its own random trajectory, blitzing the road—and those using it—with a shower of potentially deadly fragments, and sending pedestrians scurrying for cover.

The noise was shocking. Hannah's little dog nearly jumped out of his skin. He shot to his feet in panic and ran blindly into the road:

'Fleabilly! Come back here!'

One blade-shaped shard embedded itself in the tyre of a speeding taxi. The driver, shocked by the sudden blowout, felt his vehicle lurch to one side.

Fleabilly was struck a glancing blow.

The impact sent him flying. He somersaulted twice, crashed hard onto the road and lay still.

Hannah was covered in cuts from the flying glass but she rushed forward and gathered Fleabilly up in her arms.

A thin trickle of blood was running from his ear.

9

CENTRAL BUSINESS DISTRICT, SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA

Marko took the stairs at a run, four, five steps at a time, his torch and keys flying unheeded from his kit belt as he spiralled crazily fast down through the building. He was praying, praying harder than he'd done in a long time, that that lethal pane of glass hadn't already killed someone . . .

Eighth floor, sixth, second . . . What the hell had happened there? Marko's frantic mind was trying to figure out how that pane of glass had popped out of the frame. Sure, he'd hit it pretty hard, and he was a strong guy. But how come it wasn't fixed in place?

If his brain hadn't been otherwise engaged he might have worked it out: the construction team responsible for fitting the windows on the twenty-first floor had downed their tools mid-task when they'd heard they were being made redundant. They'd retired to a local bar to drown their sorrows, leaving one of the windows fixed loosely with its rubber seal but missing the grouting that would fix it securely to the frame.

A simple case of human error.

Marko hit the ground floor. He raced through the half finished corridor into the atrium and pushed his way through the revolving door into the glaring sunlight.

The traffic was at a standstill. A handful of wounded pedestrians were clutching handkerchiefs and tissues to their cuts.

Nearby he could see a scruffy looking girl with dreadlocks. She was cradling a dog in her arms. A dog that was curiously still.

'You OK?' Marko asked her.

She stared at him blankly, evidently in shock.