

DEEP WELL



JP FOX



A WORD FROM JOHN

I loved reading from an early age. Comic books. Advertisements. Signs. Numbers on buses and destinations. My teenage years were filled with Agatha Christie novels. My twenties found me soaking up true-life stories: marine and air disasters.

My favourite, and to me, the most heart-rending of human stories, was that of Chang and Eng, the original Siamese Twins. The emotional cascades stirred up by loss and pain we experience in life is often difficult to deal with.

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The night is cold and wet. The morbid pain left by the deaths of her twin baby girls finally overhauls her emotions. Mentally distraught Sally Jacobs disappears; her horse Annabelle is gone. The police are suspicious of the old well. Her husband, Rory, is the prime suspect.

PROLOGUE

Joseph moved quickly along the track towards the stables. These were noises he hadn't heard before; whimpering, stifled, and panicky. It was Rachel's voice, of that there was no doubt. That urged him to sprint. His father's gruff voice was audible but the words weren't clear. Joseph's stomach churned at the thought that Rachel might be in danger. His heart began to pound. The scene he came upon was indelibly imprinted on his brain. He would never forget it because his own father was at the centre of the atrocity upon Rachel. The oleander bush gave just enough cover. At first, he wished he was mistaken, praying that his father and Rachel were playacting, which was unusual in itself, for an unspoken decree existed between the household and staff, one that forbade over-familiarity, a boundary that maintained partitions. That rule didn't seem to affect the children, however.

Barker was employed by the Jacobs when Joseph was eight. Rachel and the boy met by design in the pine forest, where Rachel would pass on what she learned from her private tutor. Joseph's reading and writing improved significantly. It seemed that Barker would uphold the status quo when he found the children together; he was quick to separate them, giving Joseph a stern reminder that he could lose his job if the lady of the house learned of the rendezvous. To keep Joseph busy, along with his usual chores, tasks were thrust on him that suited a man, not a boy. On one occasion, Barker knocked his son to the ground in an angry display of authority. The force of an open palm across Joseph's face sent him hard against the stable door. Joseph was eleven. Barker left, spitting out further threats to the boy if he disobeyed again. It didn't matter to him that his son struck his head and bled profusely, that his upper arm and shoulder sustained bruising for weeks afterwards.

Rachel witnessed Barker's explosion on that occasion. The provocation of alcohol stained his breath. She was too late to help. Had she gone to the stables seconds earlier she would have used whatever was available to fight off the bully father. She helped Joseph to a sitting position, got him to his feet and led him into the stables, and out of sight. Her mother mustn't know of this, she told Joseph.

From the well she raised a bucket of water and to bathe his wounds she used his pen-knife to slice a piece of cloth off her blue cotton dress. Not wanting to have Barker fired by reporting him to her father, which meant Joseph would have been dismissed too, and really, not wanting to have Barker defend himself by telling the governor the reason why he chastised his son, the youngsters agreed that for safety's sake they curtail their companionship to appease the man. A pact was made to meet secretly, at signalled times, to explore the forest for wildflowers for her, or to risk venturing to the stream to catch little fish or frogs in nets made of old socks, for him. What they did not understand was, while the things they shared were enjoyable, it was the other's company they craved most. They did not understand fondness for each other had grown out of need. Nor did

they question the depth of their feelings for each other. In all their innocence they had made a promise to love.

The ensuing years seemed to pass swiftly, with Stuart Jacobs going away on business trips more frequently, staying in Sydney for longer and longer periods. A buyer and seller of cattle—often not having sighted the beasts—the man became quite successful in his late father’s enterprise, in his own right. Not a ruthless businessman, nevertheless one who was quite strict in how things were to be done; how he tolerated only the best of the herd; that a handshake meant a delivery date was a promise to be kept; that he always lived up to the agreed price and paid on time. Tall, with a strong chin, he held his posture like he owned every building he entered, having learned from a father who demanded respect. The side to him that softened the harsher parts of his persona was his love for animals, especially horses. His greatest passion was to ride his stallion at a galloping pace along the thin track that led to the precipice, look over the ocean and catch his breath in the fresh, salted air of the Pacific. To him, that was freedom par excellence, an irreplaceable pleasure.

Martha Jacobs, on the other hand, was by nature a nervous person, right from her childhood; despite her disposition, she maintained the colonial ‘separateness’ between household and servants, an inheritance not shared wholly by her husband and certainly not at all by young Rachel. A frail woman made weaker by an undiagnosed childhood illness, Martha Jacob’s health worsened when she left on a mercy trip to the ‘old country’ to help her parents in their misery, they having been struck by the Spanish Flu’. They survived for but a few weeks; on her return to Sydney, it was clear that the avian plague which struck millions with incredible suddenness at the end of the Great War, included Martha among its victims. And while the killer virus toyed with the fragile woman’s body, the future had her earmarked for more pain, a different kind of pain.

Through the leaves of the young, white-blooming evergreen Joseph saw his father’s big left hand tighten over Rachel’s mouth. The other hand gripped her left arm at the shoulder, his forearm pressing into her chest. This was no game. Rachel was struggling to get free. The big, calloused hand pressed harder on her mouth and nose, for she was wiry strong. Only her eyes were visible. She fought for breath. Her eyes bulged in utter panic. Her heels kicked at his feet and shins with short biting stabs, finding their target repeatedly, her unyielding spirit making the man angrier, forcing him to apply still more pressure to her smaller frame. Gradually, her strength waned.

Joseph was anchored to the ground as though a stake was driven through each foot. A clamp was firmly set on his vocal chords. His eyes switched to Rachel’s feet, and while he battled with a sane reason why her underwear hung around her ankles, yet even with limited knowledge he knew an indecency had taken place or was about to. Love for Rachel said go, help her! Fear of his father said, stay put. What could he possibly do to stop him?

For as long as Joseph could remember his father had always been angry, even in happier

days when his mother was alive. Harry Barker was never happy; often, typically when he was drunk, he'd tell whoever was in earshot how much he loved his father. Other times he'd volunteer how much his father beat him as a boy, that his mother was helpless to save him. For his protection she'd told her son he should leave, and thrusting some food and a few coins into his hand she virtually ushered him into night, urging him not to look back. When he looked back he saw her tears but she quickly wiped them away and shut the door. Harry often told his wife, Katherine, that he hated his parents, one for the abuse, the other for watching in silence, in fear. Wherever he went Harry Barker took his anger with him and poured it out upon whoever was vulnerable.

Unable to move but desperately wanting to, Joseph found his voice instead. His love for Rachel was stronger than fear of his father. Triggered by the violence done to his friend and alarmed by the imminent danger she faced, he let out a yell. Harry looked towards the sound and alarmed by the remarkable power in his son's tone, he loosened his grip. Rachel dug her teeth into the heel of his palm, ripping at it like a vicious, hungry wolf, drawing blood instantly. Harry yelped and jumped back. Rachel took off but tripped over like a log. She threw off her panties and started running, calling out Joseph's name. Joseph darted into the clearing and stood between his father and Rachel. At sixteen and having worked hard all his young life he was strong, muscular, not as tall or as big as his father but a force to be reckoned with, if only in his resolve to protect Rachel. Harry swept past the boy, knocking him to the ground with one crazed punch, and went for the girl. She screamed. Her mother, besides being unable to hear the commotion, lay on a sick bed unable to help the child. The cook, part deaf and collecting vegetables and herbs from a patch near the stream, was equally of no use. Only the horses in the stable heard Rachel. They whinnied in sympathy.

Barker grabbed her by the throat and squeezed. Dazed from the punch to his chin Joseph climbed to his feet and staggered forward. Rachel kicked and kicked Barker's shins. He called her a foul name. She broke free and ran towards the house. He caught her by the well. Joseph got to them as Rachel fell backwards. And disappeared into the darkness below.

CHAPTER 1

Many years later...

Sunday, eight-oh-eight a.m., Sergeant Tim Dryden drove Rory Jacobs towards Headland Point on Murriang Estate. The storm that swept up the coast the night before made the track wet and greasy; a thin patchy fog added eeriness to the ghost gums, making the going extra hard; the vehicle moved slower than a snail in lethargy. Trees loomed in the windscreen; more than once Dryden scraped the side of the car on leafy shrubs, each time wishing he was in bed, where oblivion to crime and his job was preferable. The vehicle had a mind of its own and to avoid sliding the flabby policeman took a warning from the greasy track to treat the accelerator and the brake with additional respect. Endeavouring to master the forward movement by a steady pressure on the gas pedal, Dryden cajoled the six-cylinder up the steady, winding incline. Just keep the wheels moving, Rory had said. No words were spoken for a while; Dryden had asked all the seemingly important questions at the house, and besides, he was worn out from lack of sleep. Rory, the operator of Headland Point Track and Trail, answered as best he could. Still, Dryden quizzed the man further, as if to cement into his mind he heard it right the first time.

‘Tell me again, about the shack? You don’t think Sally could’ve stayed there overnight?’

‘It’s not a shack. It’s a gazebo...more of a place for the riders to rest the ponies and eat before they started back down. It offers no real shelter from this type of weather.’

‘You mean it...it has no roof.’

‘It has no sides, Tim. No sides. No windbreak. It’s a gazebo. There are five of them scattered throughout the park. Concentrate on the road, will you?’

‘Ok. So eh, no sides. Has a roof. Not much shelter. A gazebo’, the policeman muttered, as if repeating the description would evoke a deduction. Two minutes later Dryden mentioned the bump on Jacobs’ head again. ‘That bruise does look nasty. You should’ve had it seen to. Could do with a few stitches, too.’

The reply was terse; ‘it’s fine, keep a lookout, Tim!’ Dryden pulled down on the wheel to miss a gum tree; he wished Rory hadn’t called in when he did. Sleep weighed heavily on his eyelids. Ten-thirty is not late to call the police, he told himself; there are no time restraints when members of the public have concerns, or when a crime is in progress. It was the rascal he was trying to keep up with

who gave him angst. The chase kept him up most of the night, first with apprehending the young thief and then processing the paperwork. The boy's father was drunk so he couldn't collect his son. The boy said even if his father wasn't drunk he would not have come. It was a miserable night for Dryden; having his young offsider out sick wasn't ideal either. If the larrikin offender hadn't crashed into a telegraph pole he'd have gotten away, which would have been a better proposition, Dryden regretted. That way he'd have slept and been readied for the next day's work instead of inching up a slope in a quagmire, bleary-eyed and tetchy, all in this murky winter's night.

Sleet formed an icy pattern on the windscreen faster than the wipers could clear it. Dryden upped the wiper speed to combat the carpet of white.

'What time did she—Sally—what time did she leave for the, eh...the Headland?'

'Tim, it doesn't matter right now does it? Just let's get up there and search for her!'

'Ok, Rory—hey!' The car spun sideways on an easy curve and ploughed into a copse of young pine saplings. Angered by being pushed to get there faster the policeman had revved the motor to tackle the slope, and spun out. He slammed the gear stick in reverse. Both rear wheels became bogged. Rory pulled his collar closer to his neck, muttered something about getting the four-wheel drive, pushed the door open and headed back down. It took Dryden a few minutes to catch up, he trotting and gasping, ordering the other to slow down. Rory said, 'I should've known better than to take a car up the North Track; he really hadn't considered just how heavy the rain fell the previous night. It was too awful to give up the search for Sally, he had told Dryden earlier. The weather was too bad and he had no idea where she was. She could have reached one of the other tracks, in her hysteria. Sally was a strong woman, Dryden was told, and agreed that her activity around the property and the stables proved that.

'Stay in the car until I get back. I'll winch it out.' The policeman complained it was too cold; he'd rather keep his body moving. The rain bit into their faces like flying razor blades. They were five hundred metres from the vehicles parked undercover in sheds near the courtyard. In between breaths, Dryden said as an afterthought, 'What did you mean, Rory, when you Sally was a strong woman? You said was.'

'I meant *is!* What did you think I meant?'

As they neared the stables Jack Murphy popped his head out of the Nissan. 'Sandra saw you head off in the car. You'd have never made it up that slope, not in this weather, man. Here, jump in. I was about to go after you.' Jack spoke with a hint of an Irish twang. Decidedly, his accent came into its own when he was agitated or after a few drinks, usually whisky, but anything that whet his

vocal chords did the trick; for the present it had an even blend of Aussie. 'Which track did you take', he queried, revving the engine and crunching the gearbox, and getting no applause from his boss or the policeman for the orchestra of ear-piercing proportions. 'You should've banged my door down last night, Rory! If I had known Sally was out there—'

'—never mind, Jack! Just put your boot down. Look at it! The rain's really belting down now. On second thoughts, mate, take it easy. We don't want two vehicles out of commission. Head up the North Track!' They passed the police car; it was black when Dryden started it up that morning, now all its flat surfaces had an icy greyness, the side panels and the tyres retained some of their colour. The vehicle looked abandoned; it leaned into the slope, its sleek lines twisted at an awkward angle. Rory said they'd worry about it later. Jack's driving experience showed in the rugged conditions. He knew every blade of grass on the property, every tree and every bend on all four trails. The five kilometre trip to the bluff snaked more like a river than a dirt road, water gushed down the stepped incline and left the track where the terrain naturally hollowed and came back on the track further down.

Jack's thoughts went to the previous night. His living quarters were twenty metres from the main house; he'd heard a commotion in the Jacobs' kitchen but acted as though he hadn't. Sally was shouting, her voice sounded hysterical at times, Jack would later tell Dryden, but he reminded the policeman what the woman had gone through and he wouldn't blame any woman for feeling that way at what had happened. Well, angry hysteria didn't quite describe it, he later explained to the policeman; it was more like a mournful declaration that life was unfair, yes; it was a cry about the unfairness of it all. Dryden sympathized but he was forced to admit he had no children of his own, that it was hard to feel the pain in that way. Not that he and his wife didn't want kids; they did. Beatrice just wasn't as blessed as other women, he confessed with a hint of regret.

With a kilometre to go to the summit, the Nissan struggled in the mud; Jack nursed it along. Half a kilometre further the mud changed to a loose and shifting surface, shale. A real treat for the red in hikers' blood since the terrain forced one to lean forward on a steeper grade. Jack edged his way steadily until he lightly touched the brakes near the gazebo. Ten metres past the structure a small shed stood desolate; a sign on the door read "dunny" in dripping black letters; the structure accommodated a toilet bowl and sink, the water being supplied by a small rainwater tank which was filled from an artificial reservoir twenty metres down the slope. It was a clever suggestion prompted by Jack when Rory's father was alive. If the rain didn't oblige, the retention pit did. The dunny stood like a sentinel surveying the vast ocean. The water tank appeared as an appendage on the side of the dunny. The strong smell from the chemical toilet toyed with

his nostrils, taunting him with its ubiquitous pungency. A company had offered him a natural alternative via the Internet. He opted for it, without hesitation, but he would use up what was left of the old stock.

Had a lamp been installed on the slight-angled roof it would have offered passing craft safe passage. Shipping lanes, however, were nowhere near the headland. Small boats were a different matter. Many of the locals fished around the base of the bluff at ebb tide and nobody went home without a good feed, at least not on record. The rocks were mostly below the surf during full tide, with the tallest ones remaining above water as if to mark the danger zone. The thought that Sally fell or was thrown over the cliff darted frantically along his brain waves; it was too painful to contemplate for more than a millisecond. The leggy, eighty-foot precipice wall and the rock floor at its feet were not in the business of compassion.

Before the vehicle had stopped Rory was out and moving. He began calling out Sally's name, loud but in an appealing manner at first and not at all panicked as if she was asleep under a tree in a green leafy forest and the Prince had come to rescue her. Just one kiss on her sweet lips and she'd awaken from a nightmare, safe from predator animals. If only it were that simple, like a fairy tale with a happy ever after. What happiness could ever come from the loss of two beautiful baby girls in such a flagrant, insensitive way, and too, at the earliest phase of life?

Dryden and Jack followed, tentatively pronouncing Sally's name like it was a password to unlock a tragedy. Jack secretly thought no one could survive a night in this weather, and certainly not Sally, for when he saw her through the kitchen window racing into the darkness she had on a light top with short sleeves, a long skirt and an open pair of shoes. The only advantage about her clothing was the skirt was woollen and reached her ankles. He was fond of Sally. She treated him well, like an uncle even. She made him feel part of the family, inviting him often to eat with them and watch TV in the evening. He never felt he was a just a worker. That meant a lot to him because his own parents died when he was young and life with his aunt didn't pan out to his liking so he moved out and on. In time he travelled to enough places in the world, both as a seaman and as a nomad, to give him universal status. There wasn't a place he didn't have a story about and there wasn't a story he couldn't tell without his own blend of humour.

Normally, Tim Dryden was a community man at heart, and although he was too tired to think he had to give the appearance of concern. The post he had received was only a recent one; five months on his new beat hadn't allowed Beatrice and him to get to know the people that well, but he was attempting to widen the circle when he wasn't fighting crime, which included petty theft, traffic violations (mostly reduced to a warning) and the regular skirmishes outside the pub on Friday and Saturday night, usually after closing, and usually by the same

offenders.

Rory went straight towards the latrine and pulled the door open, calling his wife's name hoping against hope she was in there, albeit tightly curled up in the corner, but alive and safe. Jack came up on his shoulder and scrutinized the empty shed. Dryden had gone to the cliff's edge and leaned his neck over the steel safety rail. The wind had abated and fog had given way to the heavy rain that had recently swapped for fine drizzle. Peering downwards he squinted through the spray but he saw no further than a few metres. The tide was out, he reckoned, but he didn't know why. It just felt quieter.

The two others just gazed into the small structure; one hoping Sally wasn't far away, the other hoping she wasn't lying on a bloodied slab eighty feet below. The story Rory heard of the gardener who fell to his death surfaced. He wasn't sure if it was true or not. Nor how or why he fell over the precipice. So hazy. It happened so long ago. Even his father hadn't been sure of the details. Rory looked towards the cliff's edge where the world stopped sharply. Jack shook his head at the man's back. What, he worried, got into the woman's mind to take off into the night in such awful conditions? He knew her heart was wrenched apart by the calamity that struck her family and that Rory did all he could to alleviate her misery while trying to tend to his own. And there was young Cassie to consider. The child was smitten by the arrival of her two sisters, Emma and Tasha, Emma being older than her twin by a few minutes and a little heavier at birth. Cassie also had serious concerns and hurt, and questions. And doubts that centralized around one question: Why? Her father couldn't give her any answers, at least not any which would console. Instead, he tried to tell her the whole family had a sadness that could only be beaten if they all worked together to drive it away and that it would mean a lot of hard work and that it would take time. Cassie asked how long before the sadness goes away. Rory said the harder they work together the sooner it would leave. The answer didn't satisfy the seven-year-old. Sally cried every time Cassie asked her why.

Had Sally finally gone off her head, unable to deal with the loss? Jack juggled his private thoughts back and forth. Is that why she raced into the blackness, to leave the pain behind and not have to wake up to a new day of pounding, implacable anguish? Wouldn't blame her if she did, he commiserated just as he had felt after he twins died. He went through the whole joyous occasion of seeing the girls arrive home in matching baskets, brightly covered in pinks and whites. And welcomed the twins like they were his own offspring, watched them progress to healthy, smiling, warbling four-month-olds, and then they were gone. The whole agonizing ordeal of the bitter misery on all their faces paid his mind another visit. Sally's pain-streaked face appeared before him exactly as she looked the fatal day Emma was found, the first time and only time he offered verbal con-

dolences. He remembered feeling totally inadequate back then and was unable to look into her face for more than a few seconds at a time. He wished he could have given his old life for their young lives.

Rory stood near the edge now, afraid to look over in case he saw what his brain refused to accept. He remembered he cried on Jack's shoulder in desperation one night, protesting that he could do nothing for his wife, all his energy had drained from his bones and no amount of pleading would relieve her heartache. So depressed was she in the first few months he thought she would end her life. Somehow he managed to talk to her sanity and when that failed he spoke delicately to her love: her love for Cassie, her love for him, and for their future as a family. Like soothing oil poured on a wound, Sally responded. It gave Rory a huge surge of hope. He recalled that moment even as he stood on the precipice, as the fine rain bathed his face. But the joy was short-lived. In less than a week Sally had gone into a deep depression and came out of it two weeks later with fresh vitriol; this time she walked a blame trail for the babies' deaths, starting with herself then her husband and onto members of the medical profession, and finally with scurrilous remark for the doctor who delivered the twins. God was especially earmarked for his part in their deaths. The accusations came in a controlled volley, like a line of placards marched by carried by dissident workers against unsafe working conditions. Each time Rory tried to defend the 'offenders' Sally marched another of the accused onto the scene. The change was too much for Rory. The light at the end of the tunnel was madness, he was sure of that; she would do herself harm. And possibly Cassie, too, for Sally had warned the child's distress was as bad as or worse than hers, because Cassie had confided in her, over and over and over again. Rory didn't want to think of those days. He forced himself to recall the happier times before the twins were born; before the pregnancy, the ultrasounds, the first kicks, the two heartbeats, the pride in being parents again, and the sheer joy Sally had in having twins growing in her belly.

The misty atmosphere that hid the ocean acted like a huge screen hanging from the sky. The pictures formed in his head, which he transferred to the screen, taking him back to happier days when Cassie was four and additions to their family were in the negotiation stage. When a test proved positive, Sally's mood became joyous. Contentment with life shone in her eyes.