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LEFT FOR DEAD

A True Story
of Resilience
and Courage



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Chapter 1

HUNTING FOR EASY PREY

It's a chill late-autumn night in Sydney's notorious Kings Cross.

Along the main red-light strip, doormen hustle passers-by for business. They stand outside the strip clubs, the pole dancing joints and the bars, imploring potential punters to 'Come and have a look,' to step in and view their wares which are, invariably, over-priced drinks and underpaid women.

In other doorways, skinny young girls sit on high stools, shivering in too few clothes, as loud music blares from shadowy corridors or down from forbidding flights of stairs behind them. There's often motley crews of kids hanging around too: the 'runners' for the drug-dealers, delivering little plastic packets of heroin, ice, coke or amphetamines – whatever's been ordered – and furtively pocketing the cash payments, ready to hand them over to their bosses later.

On a cold Tuesday like this, there's never much happening. There'll be a few stragglers wandering the street, the odd drunk, locals with heads bent against the wind rushing home after a night out, a couple of streetpeople with nowhere else to go. They're all used to the sight of emaciated hookers, faces marked with the tell-tale acne scars of a bad diet and an even worse drug habit, skulking

in the shadows, hoping to spot a lone punter ready to pay for a little company.

Kings Cross, just 2 kilometres from the city centre and named after the intersection of three main roads, William Street, Darlinghurst Road and Victoria Street, has long been the one place in Australia where society's undercurrents both collide and combine.

A bohemian heartland of artists, writers and actors in the early twentieth century, it was also the centre for the sale of sly grog, sex, cocaine and the rights to illegal casinos. The rivalry between the two infamous brothel owners Tilly Devine and Kate Leigh helped fuel the razor gang wars of the 1920s, the organised crime turf battles over the spoils.

The influx of US servicemen visiting Sydney for a little R and R during the Vietnam War imported another major element into the already potent mix of crime, vice and corruption: heroin. Rapidly developing into a centre for its supply, followed by crack and ice, Kings Cross became a honeypot for the addicted, hopeless and helpless, and drug-related crime quickly came to dominate the streets. One of the world's first medically supervised injecting centres for drug users was opened in Kings Cross in 2001.

These days, Kings Cross is still that heady combination of rich and poor, a place where criminals rub shoulders with the cream of movie, TV and radio shock-jock stars, and bohemians break bread with bikies. But even more than this, it's where the rest of Sydney comes to party on a surfeit of bars, restaurants and strip clubs providing a never-ending flow of alcohol, sex and drugs. With one of the highest rates of assaults and robberies in the country, the feeling, quite wrongly, is that this is a place without rules.

For those who live and work in The Cross, the most densely populated area of Australia with nearly 20 000 people living in an area less than 1.4 square kilometres, the rules are very clear: you don't mess with the cops, you don't mix with the crims and you certainly don't shit on your own doorstep. But for the outsiders who drift in, up to no good, it always looks like a place of boundless opportunity.

And tonight, in a nearby street, one of those deadbeats paces, looking for easy prey.

The man is just under 6 foot tall, and looks wiry and strong. His dark hair is short on top, but with a long black ponytail, plaited at the back. He's unshaven and has a general unkempt air about him. He's also covered in tattoos, hidden away for the moment under a dark hoodie, black jacket and navy-blue jeans, while the insides of both of his arms are scarred from a decade or more of heroin use and abuse.

Just now he's broke, but itching for a heroin fix. It's gnawing away at his insides.

He's only a few weeks out of jail, freed on parole after two years served for breaking into houses and stealing whatever valuables he could sneak away. He had a big row with his girlfriend in Wollongong, 80 kilometres south of Sydney, and drifted into Kings Cross, hopeful of making a little cash on \$5000 worth of camera equipment he recently thieved from a shop break-in. He's had some success too, selling it in a pawnshop no questions asked and, with the proceeds, buying some fresh heroin to feed his raging addiction.

Feeling flush, he then buddied up with two sex workers he met at The Cross, going back to the flat where one of them lived and sharing a fix in exchange for sex. He had a feed there too, tearing apart a hot chook they'd bought on the way back and heaping it between two slabs of bread. When one of the girls then split to look for more

customers on the street, he stayed back and had sex with the other. This one was better. She hadn't asked him to wear a condom and so he didn't. He didn't bother to tell her about his hep C and being HIV-positive, either. Tough shit if she caught them, but she probably had them anyway, he reasoned to himself. Then he injected himself again with the last of his stash.

He would have liked to stay, but this woman was eager to get back out into the afternoon too, for the chance to earn more cash. Besides, there were two other men there, the woman's flatmates, somehow also sharing the tiny one-bedroom unit. They were sitting watching TV in the cramped lounge room and ducking into the bedroom's en suite to use the only toilet in the place. They'd glowered at him when he'd walked in and swore at the girls about bringing someone new back and making too much noise. Now the two girls were gone, they didn't look any friendlier.

He left one of his bags by the bed, slung his little daypack over his shoulder and slipped out after the woman, planning to stick close to her. She might get lucky and then hopefully she might share any smack she bought. As he came out of the rundown redbrick block of flats, he looked around him. He was slap-bang on the main road running from the eastern suburbs of Sydney, with their bays and beaches, directly into the city, 3 kilometres away to his left. To his right, he could see down the road to the illuminated side of a bus shelter on the edge of a park. Straight in front, he caught sight of the woman fast disappearing along the tangle of streets into Kings Cross.

He started hurrying, and strained to see her in the distance. He thought he glimpsed her again, but then she disappeared. He stopped and felt his irritation mount. The bitch had given him the slip.

Now, ten hours on, it's late at night and he's getting agitated, craving more of the drug, his body racked with the ache of

withdrawal. He has no more money and with every passing hour, he feels his desperation grow. He needs to 'get well' and for a junkie that means only one thing: getting the money to score.

Before, he was bad. Now he's dangerous.

He's been lurking around this darkened neighbourhood for hours, on the hunt for a target to menace, to attack, to rob. Whatever it takes.

And then he sees her. A woman alone. Early twenties. Petite, slim, blonde and laden down with a bag in either hand. She seems comfortable, like she has money. The black leather bag she has over one shoulder looks expensive, and the black fabric one in the other hand is full of clothes and groceries. She doesn't look the type to be going anywhere with an empty purse. Even better, he can see headphones from an iPod over each ear.

He makes a snap decision: he's going to get her. If he's careful, she won't even notice him coming. She won't know what's hit her. He pulls his black hoodie down over as much of his face as he can and advances. Softly. Like a cat getting ready to pounce. Stealthily. His new Nike joggers, a present from his girlfriend back home in Wollongong, don't make a sound.

The woman is walking fast; she doesn't like being around these deserted streets on her own in the dark. Suddenly, she hears a soft footfall approaching from behind, pulls her left headphone off her ear and immediately quickens her pace. But she's too late.

Before she realises what's happening, two strong arms grab her from behind, a hand is clamped over her mouth and she smells the rancid breath of her attacker close to her face, hears his ragged breathing in her ear. 'Hey baby, don't you want to . . .' she hears him whisper. She twists and tries to push his arms off her face to wrest herself free but is simply not strong enough to break his grip. Instead,

she falls heavily to the ground in a desperate attempt to duck away. She cuts one knee badly but has no time to try to stem the flowing blood. 'Give me the money!' he barks at her. 'Give me the money!'

Instead, she lashes out at him, thrashing wildly with the bags she's carrying, tries to kick him, to punch him, to scratch him. She wants to hurt him before he can hurt her. And she knows, in this dark and lonely street, she may well be fighting for her life.

The ferocity of her reaction takes the man completely by surprise. He snatches his hand back from her mouth to defend himself and makes a grab for her arms. In that split second, she screams as loudly as she can, a shriek that rips, loud and hard, through the night-time hush.

It has an immediate effect. There's the sound of footsteps running up, and then she hears another woman shouting. 'Hang on!' she's yelling. 'I'm coming!' Almost simultaneously, she hears a window of an apartment somewhere above her being slammed open and a third woman yelling down asking if she's all right.

The man gives a sudden whimper of defeat, pulls himself away and runs off down the street. His prey slumps into the arms of the second woman, shaking with the fear of what she's just been through, and overcome with relief and gratitude. Even so, she has no idea just how lucky she's been.

The man vanishes into the darkness, licking his wounds, cursing his misfortune.

Next time, he tells himself, he'll do it right.