THE SCREEN NOVEL: A CREATIVE PRACTICE APPROACH TO DEVELOPING A SCREEN IDEA FOR THE TELEVISION CRIME THRILLER

A project submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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DECLARATION

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed. I also acknowledge the support I have received for my research through the provision of an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship.

Stephen Sculley
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During my candidature I have had the opportunity to write several peer-reviewed articles and present at both the RMIT Sightlines (2014) conference and AAWP (2015) conference. Here is a list of the publications to date:


ABSTRACT

This creative practice PhD is situated in the field of screenwriting practice studies and explores the development of a screen idea using novelistic techniques. By novelistic techniques, I mean the deployment of prose and image that one would usually associate with the fiction writer. It should be noted that I refer to image as a novelistic technique in the tradition of the illustrated novel. In writing the screen idea using the novel form, I explore how I and others might develop an idea, in this case a television (TV) series, that embeds the technical directives evident in the screenplay so that character and story are brought into focus. The creative artefact in this PhD is what I call a ‘screen novel’, which aims to complement and extend traditional approaches to script development.

The intention of this research is to reframe how we discuss the development of a screen idea, in particular how we view the screenplay and summary texts as technical documents within the development and production process. As Steven Maras notes, ‘numerous writers, at different times throughout the history of film, tell us that production has little to do with writing’ (2009, p. 52). Here Maras refers to a long-standing tradition that situates the screenplay as something to be made as opposed to something to be read (2009). Maras’s comment resonates with my own experience of writing screenplays with both a technical and poetic sensibility. Discussing the screenplay as a production document has implications for the screenwriter not only in terms of the provenance and authorship of the screen idea, but also the act of screenwriting. The screenplay as a production text is prevalent in the film and TV industry and is also supported by many how-to screenwriting manuals that position the screenwriter’s role within a production system. My research thus investigates a model that situates the screen idea as a text, which is both a stand-alone object for public consumption and an industry source document.
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PART 1
BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT
INTRODUCTION

Using a creative practice methodology this PhD questions the use of documents within the script development stage of film and TV production and investigates the potential of developing a screen idea using novelistic techniques. The creative artefact for this PhD is what I call a ‘screen novel’, which in the context of this dissertation is a six-part crime TV drama titled Coyne. It should be noted that the screen idea is represented not only through the screenplay, which is a key and central development document, but also through summary texts such as the logline, synopsis, outline, treatment, character profiles and, for serial TV, ideas for further episodes (see McKee, 1999; Douglas, 2005; Grace, 2014). Therefore in this PhD I refer to the screenplay as a development document as opposed to a completed textual representation of a screen idea. My research endeavours to reframe the development of a screen idea using techniques available to the fiction writer while simultaneously integrating material for the imagined screen production.

The key point of the screen novel is that it focuses the writer’s efforts on story, plot and character, and removes technical and production information expected in existing screenplays, series bibles or pitch documents (see Grace 2014). The screen novel thus adds to the canon of script development practice by offering a new type of document that has the ability to change the way a writer approaches a screen idea. I use the term ‘screen novel’ to identify the use of novelistic techniques and to acknowledge that a screen idea can be treated differently, thus enhancing the writer’s practice. By novelistic techniques, I mean the deployment of narration, interior monologue, scenic description, dialogue, photographs and graphics in a way that alludes to the screen telling of a story that is not formatted as a screenplay. Therefore, story plot, mood and tone are written for a particular medium through a particular mode. It should be noted that the use of the word ‘prose’ in this research refers specifically to writing that is unrestricted and free flowing, as in the novel or short story, without the constraints of screenplay formatting or styling. In this PhD I use the term ‘prose style’ to include poetic prose and plain prose. For instance, ‘prose poetry is poetry that is not written in verse and contains other poetic attributes, such as rhythm and metaphors’ (Study.com 2017, Prose poems: definition & famous examples section). Prose can also be discussed in terms of what Annie Dillard notes as ‘fine writing and plain writing’. She describes fine writing as elaborate and painterly, and plain writing ‘as the prose of Hemingway,
Chekhov, and other stylists in shirts, who carefully limit their descriptions to matters at hand’ (1981, p. 208). The screen novel primarily focuses on the plain style of writing for two reasons. First, it aligns closely with the plain style evident in screenwriting, which I discuss later in this PhD, and second plain writing is also used in crime fiction, as in hardboiled writers such as Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler and James M. Cain. The creative artefact, Coyne draws on a similar style to these writers and is therefore helpful in writing a crime fiction thriller for the imagined screen work. However, I also wish to explore poetic prose in this PhD and consider metaphor, meter, syntax and rhythm as novelistic techniques that are not usually deployed when writing a screenplay.

Using a novelistic approach to developing the screen idea, I suggest that the screen novel is relevant to independent screenwriters, the general public, practitioners and scholars interested in screenwriting studies and, potentially, innovations in creative writing. The screen novel is not intended to replace current industry screenwriting practice but to serve as an addition to traditional development approaches. Although the creative artefact represented is a TV series, I maintain that this research is relevant to both film and TV, because the focus is to explore a non-conventional approach to screen industry development practice.

As highlighted this PhD uses a creative practice methodology. According to Batty and Berry, creative practice research is ‘concerned with improving and/or innovating practice, and by doing so also creating new knowledge about practice drawn from an insider’s perspective’ (2015, p. 184),¹ and so my research is informed by writing and reflecting on the creative artefact. To further define creative practice research, I frame my research as an act of discovery – a ‘make and reflect model’. This model heeds Jen Webb’s observation that ‘Reflective practice [in summary] involves concentration, a conscious act of drawing on established knowledge; time spent evaluating and testing the alternatives; and thinking consciously about your own process’ (2015, p. 120). To situate my research artefact as making a new contribution to knowledge my research draws on the ‘epistemological preliminaries’ relating to screen

¹ In discussing practice-led research, Gibson notes the need to ‘step both outside and inside the mystery’ (2010, p. 4), outside the mystery being the critical analysis and inside being the creative work. Writing on creative practice research, Gibson states that ‘the linguistic account does not “decode” the work, rather the explication opens an arena for debate around the knowledge that has been synthesised and proffered both in the work and in the linguistic account’ (2010, p. 7).
idea development (see Maras 2009; Price 2010; Packard 2011; Webb 2015). I view my creative practice research journey as a negotiation between the creative artefact and the analysis of the creative process, resulting in a contribution to knowledge, which exists in both the creative work and the critical analysis of the work. ‘The nexus of the creative and the exegetical work is not whether one speaks to an aesthetic quality, industry or artistic satisfaction or one speaks to the academy, but how they might co-exist and inform one another’ (Sculley in Lee et al. 2016, p. 93). Thus taking a hermeneutic approach to the creative artefact allows me to reflect, analyse and interpret critically the research process and the resulting creative output.

As noted my creative practice research is situated in the field of screenwriting practice studies (see Millard 2006; Price 2010; Baker 2013; Batty 2014; Nash 2014) and explores the development of a screen idea using processes and tropes typically associated with creative writing. Specifically, I use this research to investigate the potential of how a screen idea might be developed using novelistic techniques. The screen novel thus operates as a method of research inquiry and, coupled with a critical response, contributes to the study of screenwriting practice. The contribution of this research is twofold. First, I wish to contribute to the ways in which we discuss the screenplay, rather than position it as a production document the screen novel might be regarded as an autonomous text. Second, I wish to reframe how a screen idea might be written and presented moving away from traditional notions of screen industry development and towards practices used by fiction writers to develop story and plot and the subsequent work made available to a general audience.

I put forward that screenwriting studies covers a broad audience that might include the academic community, industry, how-to genre and general enthusiast. In the context of the academy, Harper notes that ‘screenwriting has not always found a home as easily in the community of creative and critical writing discussion as poetry or prose writing’; however this is changing (2014, p. ix). My research positions screenwriting practice studies as a subset of creative writing and also screenwriting studies and contributes knowledge to the act of screenwriting in relation to how a screen idea can be developed using the resources and techniques of the fiction writer.

In terms of the industry, a more complex picture arises when attempting to understand the contribution to knowledge. Who is the industry screenwriter? Ryan notes ‘the two main forms of capital-labour relation underlining the creative stage of
production in the corporations of culture are contracted artists and professional creatives’ (1991, p. 134). For Ryan, the contracted artist is an ‘intermediate goods supplier’ and retains a certain level of autonomy through their reputation and ‘artistic authority’ (1991, pp. 136–137). Conversely, professional creatives ‘exchange artistic freedom and an ethos of experimentation for financial security and bureaucratic working conditions’ (Ryan 1991, p. 138). My research aligns more closely to the contracted artist and those individual screenwriters and creative writers who fall outside the traditional film and TV business – those lesser-known freelance screenwriters, independent filmmakers and students of screenwriting, who I suggest represent a substantial number of creative agents. For example, Conor claims ‘cheap digital technologies are touted as now enabling writers and directors to bypass traditional development or organizational channels altogether’ (2014, p. 78). Depending on the type of project being created, for instance low-fi film, TV or web-based shows, cheap digital technologies do provide an alternative for writer/directors or writer/producers. It is these freelance screenwriters, independent filmmakers and students of screenwriting that operate outside of traditional industry models that the screen novel might offer an alternative approach to screen idea development, one that affords an individual approach to writing a screen idea.

The results of this research also have the potential to contribute to screenwriting education and the ‘how-to market’, and offer an alternative to the plethora of screenwriting manuals available to the individual screenwriter. As Conor notes, ‘screenwriting work is constructed, facilitated and regulated by how-to screenwriting manuals and, more broadly, the how-to genre’ (2014, p. 81). Furthermore, how-to manuals can be precarious in their prescriptive and normative approaches to structure, character and story, and through interviews with professional screenwriters, Conor comments on their reservations in churning out well-worn formulaic scripts (2014). Conor also makes an interesting point that many of the how-to manuals are actually used by ‘gate-keepers within mainstream screen production industries … looking for easily graspable tools that will orient them to industry standards and expectations’ (2014, p. 98). This all provides a context with which to suggest that the screen novel may well offer an alternative source document from which assessment of the imagined screen work might be made or at the very least offers an alternative mode of screen idea development that writers and educators might find useful.
I thus propose that the novel form has the potential to develop and present the screen idea offering story, plot, mood, theme and character in a different form to how it would be usually written and presented in screen development documents. As such, the screen novel offers a novelistic approach to developing a screen idea, specifically a long-form crime TV drama, and sidesteps the usual conventions of summary documents that are ‘easily digestible’ when presenting a screen idea (Grace 2014, p. 79). Therefore my research is focused on the screenplay as both an academic and creative output within the field of screenwriting practice studies and contributes knowledge through the unconventional way a screen idea is written and presented. Accordingly this research is relevant to screenwriters in a range of industrial and pedagogical contexts.

The structure of this PhD thesis is as follows. In Chapter 1 the screen novel is situated in relation to early attempts at writing the screenplay using the novel form, for example the film novel (Packard, 2014) and literary scenario (Belodubrovskaya, 2016), and addresses the issue of how the screen novel does not require adaptation. This is a key point in this research because I have approached the screen novel with the intention of it becoming a screen work as opposed to it being a novel that someone later might see as having the potential for adaptation. For this reason, I have focused Chapter 2 on current industry screenwriting practice and how the screen novel might exist within the production system, specifically in the concept development stage. In this chapter I discuss development documents in the film and TV industry to place in context the screen novel as a source document for an industry screen work. In addition I examine the technical and poetic aspects of the screenplay and consider how the screen novel might negotiate these elements to create what Polonsky calls a ‘unified verbal structure’ (1996, p. 187). This chapter concludes with a discussion on the reader and the screen novel and how the screen novel attempts to broaden the readership beyond the traditional industry screenplay reader. Chapter 3 moves on to outlining the fabric of the screen novel. It discusses specific fictional techniques such as prose, narration, flow and active scene description to explore story and plot in a way that the screenplay

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2 Flow might be considered as a novelistic technique. If a story is said ‘to flow’, chances are that it is easy to read; that is there are no obstacles that caused the reader to be confused or wander. I also use the word flow as it refers to the creative process as investigated by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in Flow (1990) and Creativity: Flow and the psychology of discovery and invention (1996). This psychological aspect of the creative process is beyond the scope of this research PhD, however I do see a connection with the concept of flow and how the screen novel might assist in the development of an original screen idea.
might, but extends these elements to include mood, tone and voice; elements that I suggest are more in keeping with the novelist. Chapter 3 continues by framing the use of image in the screen novel within the tradition of image in the illustrated novel, photo-novel and the graphic novel. In this section I outline how image might be used to evoke mood and tone, and assist the writer in developing the idea. Part 2 of this PhD is the screen novel, *Coyne*, and should ideally be read here. Finally, Chapter 4 then offers a critical reflection on the process of writing the screen novel with a focus on how the tools and resources available to the fiction writer might assist in the development of a screen idea. Key to this reflection is the negotiation between the technical and poetic aspects of the screen novel and as a way of testing and demonstrating this process, I use the show bible from the successful crime drama series *The Wire* (2002–2008) to compare how the screen novel might function as a source document for a similar industry-style show bible. According to Pamela Douglas a bible is ‘a guide to the series, especially for writers and directors joining a show. Includes character biographies, rules for the world of the show, summaries of past episodes, and sometimes what the producers are seeking in tone, style or stories’ (2005, p. 221). This chapter concludes by discussing how the screen novel can address the production requirements of the screen idea while simultaneously functioning as a self-contained object. The screen novel is primarily a development process with the advantage of also being a stand-alone text, which sees the screen novel as focusing on the story to be told and the transition to screenplay format as a continuum of that process.

One final point to this introduction is that I wish to acknowledge that I have digressed from the standard Harvard referencing system and included footnotes in this PhD. I have done this because I wanted to include details and information that I feel enhance and add to the understanding of the dissertation, yet stand outside the main body of the work.
CHAPTER 1
SITUATING THE SCREEN NOVEL

By writing the screen idea using the novel form I wish to separate the writing process from the production process and position the act of screenwriting so character and story are brought into focus. This approach differs from traditional screenwriting paradigms and contributes to the way a screen idea is usually developed. In E. M. Forster’s seminal work *Aspects of the Novel* (1927) he outlines the key elements of the novel form in terms of *story, character, plot and point of view*, and it is my conceit that the screen novel will allow the screenwriter to focus on these aspects. Forster suggests that the ‘fundamental aspect of the novel is its story-telling aspect’ (1927, p. 25). He notes that the narrator in the novel is often the creator because the narrator can reveal the secret lives of a character; what they are thinking and feeling. However, in the industry screenplay the protocol is to only write what we see and hear. According to script guru Robert McKee, ‘Eliminate all metaphor and simile that cannot pass this test: “What do I see (or hear) onscreen?”’ (1999, p. 396). This rule of screenwriting can channel the screenwriter to only reveal the secret life of a character through performance or directorial input such as camera angle, lighting, sound, editing, etc. It is my hope that the novel form might allow the screenwriter to explore the secret life of a character before the production stage. This is particularly relevant in the conception stage of development. I suggest the novel form might bridge the industry screenplay and the production stage by imbuing the narration with an omniscient voice that speaks to the reader in the guise of storyteller and offer insights that are usually discouraged in screenplay writing.

In addition, I put forward that a novelistic approach to the screenplay might assist the screenwriter in developing an authorial voice, which is often the domain of the director for film (Winston 1973) or show-runner in the case of TV (Kallas 2014). For the screenwriter, I suggest the authorial voice can be diminished by the ongoing transformative nature of the screenplay and screenplay language as it moves towards screen production. Conor suggests that the screenwriter bridges the categories of writing and filmmaking and, in attempting to define the work of the screenwriter, makes the

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3 Douglas defines a show-runner as ‘the top EXECUTIVE PRODUCER (emphasis original) in charge of a series, the one who determines the course of a show and supervisors all aspects’ (2005, p. 231).
point that screenwriting is ‘characterized by a porosity of movements and mediums’ (2014, p. 3). There is a line of thought here that the screenplay is not written but made, and is not intended to be read. Maras notes ‘numerous writers, at different times throughout the history of film, tell us that production has little to do with writing’ (2009, p. 52). This approach to screenwriting is not only prevalent in the industry but is also supported by many how-to screenwriting manuals that position the screenwriter’s role within a production system (see Douglas 2005; Epstein 2006; Grace 2014). Thus my research investigates a model that situates the screen idea as a text to be read while simultaneously embedding technical elements for potential screen production. By positioning the screen idea as a ‘type’ of novel, I intend to explore the way a screen idea might be written and read.

As highlighted, current industry practice uses summary texts to create pitch documents for film and the show bible for TV. Central but not exclusive to these documents are the outline and treatment and, for serial TV, a complete pilot episode. The outline according to Parker (2006) may consist of a synopsis and present the main characters, their motivations and the central dramatic questions. The treatment, which I discuss in detail further in this PhD, is written in the present tense and is usually a short version of the story with minimal dialogue; its main function being to sell the story (Aronson 2000). Current industry development documents summarise the screen idea but do not fully represent the potential of the proposed screen work. To support this notion, I refer to Parker’s observation regarding the treatment: ‘many writers avoid treatments as they feel they undermine the creative energy of the potential screenplay, they find them difficult to write, or they just do not believe they work as a means of expressing the project’s potential’ (2006, p. 45). This is an interesting point because the screen novel is similar to the treatment in that it is a prose version of the story. However, my research aims to discover and put into context an approach that delivers the screen idea in a way that reveals the story, narrative structure and the potential of the work by writing it as an extended text (as opposed to a précis), and can concomitantly function as an industry-ready document. I put forward that the screenwriter might draw on fictional writing techniques not usually available to the traditional industry screenwriter. Therefore, the question posed in this creative practice research is: How might writing the screen idea using novelistic techniques assist the writer in creating an original, authorial work for the screen?
The focus of this research is to reimagine the act of screenwriting and the way a screen idea might be developed. Maras notes that ‘there are some very familiar frames through which to engage with screenwriting: among them are the practitioner frame, the story and structure frame, the business frame and the anti-screenwriting frame’ (2009, p. 10). According to Maras, the practitioner frame explores the creative process; the story and structure frame is concerned with storytelling problems; the business frame highlights the pitching process and the anti-screenwriting frame is ‘suspicious of the literary dimension of filmmaking and tends to “beat down” the writer’ (2009, p. 11). The screen novel is situated primarily in the practitioner frame and investigates the process of developing a screen idea. However, rather than isolate any one frame over another, I maintain that storytelling, business and questions of literariness are all relevant in this research.

From a practitioner point of view, I wish to explore how the screen novel might assist in developing story and how it might relate to industry conventions. Framing the research artefact as a screen novel necessarily opens the debate about the ‘literary or not’ nature of the screenplay and I emphasise that I am not focused on whether the screenplay should be a literary object but how a literary approach to developing a screen idea might be realised. Therefore, a relevant question to ask at this point is: What is wrong with traditional development documents and the industry screenplay? Foremost, I position the screen novel as a precursor to current industry approaches to developing and presenting a screen idea, and acknowledge a transition from screen novel to conventional screenplay format. However, in this thesis I do offer reasons why I believe the current industry approach to screenwriting should be challenged. It is my hope that in stepping outside of traditional methods of screenwriting practice, I extend the way a screenwriter might approach a project and offer a complementary tactic to how a screen idea might be developed. I am taking this approach because I believe the technical aspects of screenplay writing can overshadow the creative properties of the work, particularly at the stage of conception. Furthermore, by using the novel form, I wish to privilege the writer’s role in creating an original screen idea and potentially secure the provenance of the work by the materiality of the artefact as a stand-alone text.
The screen novel as a stand-alone work

This research is positioned in terms of how the tools and resources of the fiction writer might assist the development of a screen idea, and following this process, considers the resultant creative output, which is a stand-alone text with the potential to be reframed as a production document. In contrast, the traditional screenplay is not usually seen as an autonomous text. It is both creative and industrial; however, the transitional nature of the screenplay from one draft to the next can mean the original creative idea is shaped and changed by the industrial end point.

Maras notes the differences in terminology between *screenwriting* and *screen writing*. He qualifies these terms by suggesting that ‘screenwriting’ might be viewed as writing for the screen as in a page-based work, whereas ‘screen writing’ acknowledges the historical period ‘when the meaning of screenwriting was still unstable or uncertain, and the two words ‘screen’ and ‘writing’ had yet to be fully coupled, or a practice of writing that is not solely page-based (as in writing with a camera)’ (2009, p. v ii). Winston also refers to the development of film and the scripting process and notes Alexandre Astruc’s 1948 article titled ‘La Camera-Stylo (“camera-pen”)’ (Winston 1973, p. 15). My research situates the screenwriter as writing for the screen as opposed to production roles such as producer, director, cinematographer, performer or editor whose roles might be perceived as being more connected with writing on the screen.

Maras’s observations highlight the historical trajectory of writing for the screen, particularly through the Hollywood system, that resulted in the separation of screen production into conception and execution (Staiger 1979). However, Maras points out that the delineation between conception and execution is not so pronounced in contemporary screen production and notes that scripting can occur across the duration of the production. For example, new cheap digital technologies can mean greater freedom to develop an idea as it is being executed. In today’s climate, the stages of production are more flexible and I note the porous nature of screen production, where it can be difficult to pin down where conception starts and execution begins. Nevertheless

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4 Janet Staiger traces the industrialisation of filmmaking to Thomas Ince, who directed his first film in 1910 and by 1913 had a fully developed production system that incorporated the division of labour and, more importantly with regard to this research, the continuity script. As noted by Staiger, the continuity script consisted of a comprehensive history of the film’s ‘production process for efficiency and waste control’ (1979, p. 20). Ince’s continuity script contained a cover page, intertitles, interior and exterior locations, numbered scenes, cast of characters, one-page synopsis, detailed information for special effects and the cost of the film (Staiger 1979).
the conception and execution stages are still relevant in screen production because the
screen idea, which I assert is part of the conception stage, ‘is the first essential part of
working as a screenwriter’ (Parker 1999, p. 57). Having highlighted the porous nature
of screen development and screen production the separation of conception and
execution acknowledges the creative process if not always in action then as an ideology.
In the context of creative development, I position this research from the screenwriter’s
perspective and the screen idea in the conception stage.

According to Maras, the historical separation of conception and execution in
screen production ‘permeates our ideas about the script’ and the ‘script is commonly
seen as a kind of blueprint’ (2009, p. 22). The topic of the screenplay as a blueprint has
been the subject of considered discussion (see Maras 2009; Price 2010; Sternberg 2011;
Macdonald 2013). It is a complex area with multiple views on what the screenplay
should be called and its position within the production process. Is it a blueprint in the
literal sense? It would seem not to be the case because the ongoing process of drafting
and revising hardly makes the screenplay an exact document for the making of a film
(Price 2010). Macdonald suggests that ‘we have moved away from the idea of a
screenplay as a blueprint, towards a multi-layered “impression” of a screen idea’ (2013,
p. 186). In 1949, Sergei Eisenstein referred to the ‘screenplay as a hint fixed on paper’
(cited in Macdonald 2013, p. 177). Whether the screenplay should be called a blueprint
or not is important in the context of my research because I assert the technical aspects of
the screenplay underpin the reason to apply novelistic techniques in the development of
a screen idea. I suggest the term ‘blueprint’ does suggest a document from which
multiple agents might create a screen work and thus is a kind of blueprint. The
‘screenplay as a blueprint’ reflects an evolution of the screenplay as a document on its
way to becoming a screen work, which is one key element of this research inquiry.
Therefore, for the purposes of this research I refer to the screenplay as a technical
document because its form requires prescribed formatting and industry-related screen
language.

Furthermore, Price notes the inconsistencies in terminology when discussing the
screenplay, for example ‘the “scenario” and “continuity scripts” in the silent period, to
the master-scene format that was initially introduced to meet the demands of sound and
became standardised across the Hollywood studios around 1933’ (2010, p. 69). I situate
the screenplay as the master-scene script, which according to Price ‘omits shot numbers
and instead breaks the story into individual scenes, each commencing with a “slug line” giving indications of time and place’ (2010, p. 70). Using this standard industrial approach to the screenplay, I have based the screen novel on the master-scene format in as much as I have omitted scene numbers and slug lines, and broken the story into scenes, thereby initiating an approach to the screen novel, which draws not only on the techniques and resources of the fiction writer but also addresses the needs of the imagined screen work.

The screenplay is a core component of the screen idea and represents the dramatic structure for the screen work. The inherent trajectory through the stages of conception and execution requires change through revision and editing as the project moves towards a final draft. This trajectory situates the screenplay directly in relation to the final cinematic realisation and this outcome is due partly to the way the screenplay is perceived, that is as a planning document. By writing the screenplay in the novel form it becomes a stand-alone work, a concrete artefact of the original screen idea.

Price discusses the ontology of the screenplay and notes Gassner’s claim that the ‘screenwriter’s relative lack of authorial status in copyright and publishing had contributed to the low regard in which it was held’ (Gassner cited in Price 2010, p. 27). It is in this context that the screen novel might offer a different publishing and reading outcome to traditional screenplays, which by and large do not receive the same publishing status as books or stage plays.5 An alternative to traditional publishing avenues might also be explored in the growing area of self-publishing. I see potential in this field because the screen novel is written as both a stand-alone work and a proposition for an imagined screen work. The screen novel is intended to step outside of traditional models of novel writing and screen development and perhaps self-publishing the screen novel as a novel and potential screen work might provide market differentiation in this expanding arena. Through self-publishing, the screen novelist

5 There are exceptions as evidenced in the following works published by Faber & Faber, however these texts are transcripts of the completed film. ‘Through the 90s, the company published an increasing number of screenplays. These charted the critical hits of the decade, from Kieslowski’s Decalogue and Scorsese’s Goodfellas to Tarantino’s Reservoir Dogs, and The Usual Suspects, Crash and Breaking the Waves. The Faber screenplay of Quentin Tarantino’s 1994 hit Pulp Fiction became a publishing phenomenon when it sold in quantities comparable to a successful novel (¼ million copies in the UK). Now, in 2004, there are Faber collected screenplays (of Cronenberg, Schrader, the Coen brothers, and others) as there have long been collected plays or poems’. The Australian publishing house Currency Press also publishes screenplays, for example Blue Murder (1996), Chopper (2000) and Dead Heart (1996).
could market their work as a screen novel and retain all rights to the work thus enhancing its marketability in a very competitive environment. Alex Daniel comments:

For some authors, expanding beyond traditional publishing formats may even lead to television. In November, Wattpad signed a deal with Universal Cable Productions to produce streaming video programs based on some of the self-publishing platform’s popular stories. This followed additional partnerships with media giants, including Turner and Paramount.

(Daniel, 2017)

Daniel notes one of the challenges of self-publishing is its success as it becomes more crowded and expands (2017). The screen novel might have agency in the arena of self-publishing because it functions as a work on the page and a potential work on the screen.

The notion of publishing a screenplay is fraught with difficulties. For example, which draft or version should be published? (Price 2010, p. 96). Many screenplays that are published, either through a publishing house or online repositories, are usually transcribed from the completed film. Furthermore, screenplays can often have multiple writers through the various stages of development. This raises the question of who is the audience for a published screenplay and also, who has authored the screenplay? The screen novel would represent the first attempt at shaping and developing a screen idea and for this reason I suggest scholars and practitioners of screenwriting may well be interested in the trajectory of the script-to-screen journey. In fact the greater the difference between the textual representation of the screen idea and the cinematic realisation of the screen idea would highlight the creative process and contribute to the broader knowledge of screen production.

Maras frames the ontology of the screenplay as being an ‘object’ problem: ‘Is the object of screenwriting on the page or on the screen?’ (Maras 2009, p. 11). By situating the screen idea as an ‘object on the page’, a prose version of the screen idea exists in its final form as opposed to the traditional screenplay, which undergoes

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multiple drafts and revisions and requires the completed film in order to realise its final form. It should be noted that numerous screenplays do not make it to market for reasons such as no script development money, lack of production and post-production finance, cast and crew availability, or finding an appropriate audience. All these variants might affect the script-to-screen journey. If the ‘object’ is on the page as it is in this PhD, then I posit several outcomes.

First, the screen novel is available for academic study, as original screenplays are often discarded during rewrites and production drafts. Price notes the ‘multiplicity of textual variants produced by a single film’ (2010, p. 94). For instance, textual editing, authorial intention, studio ownership and the script as it relates to the final film reveal the complexities of provenance of the screen idea. As a screenwriter, and especially one operating in the academy, I argue for the acknowledgement and archiving of the original idea while recognising the ongoing process and aspiration to bring that idea to the screen.

Second, the novel form allows the text to be read by the general reader, adding to the marketability of the work, and perhaps even provides an alternative avenue for the work in the event that it fails to make it to the screen. A case in point is Cormac McCarthy’s No Country for Old Men (2005), which was originally developed as a film during the 1980s and rewritten as a novel some 15 years later, then rescripted by the Coen brothers into an award-winning film (Wallach 2009). Although not a screen novel, McCarthy’s novel version of No Country for Old Men represents the original screen idea and indicates how the screen novel might function. The point I wish to make is that by valuing the screen idea as a stand-alone text, as in the screen novel, the provenance of the idea resides in the artefact.

The screen novel draws on a chequered history of using the literary form to develop and present the screenplay. I am referring here to the film novel and literary scenario. Early attempts at writing the screenplay from a literary perspective have not been particularly successful, which I discuss in the following section. It should be reiterated that I am not proposing that the screenplay be seen as literature, which is the subject of much debate (see Winston 1973; Maras 2009; Price 2010) but rather how a literary approach might assist in the development of a screen idea. In order to place the screen novel in context, I will now provide an overview of the film novel and literary scenario, which have historically represented the screenplay in a literary form.
The film novel and the literary scenario

Efforts to write the screenplay from a literary position can be traced back to the early days of film through two primary forms that emerged during the early part of the 19th century: the film novel\(^7\) and the Russian literary scenario; the iron scenario and the emotional scenario were also considered by the Russian film industry during this period, which I discuss later in this section. All of the above forms attempted to separate the creative and industrial aspects of the screenplay, with varying success. It is in this context that the screen novel complements and extends these historical antecedents by acknowledging the production elements required in the traditional script development process. According to Dennis J. Packard, Samuel Goldwyn in 1919 formed a body of writers called ‘Eminent Authors’ with the intention of hiring novelists and playwrights to write screenplays. The concept failed because ‘authors couldn’t seem to understand the needs of film’ (Packard 2011, p. 5). This is a key point in my research as I attempt to push the boundary of how to develop a screen idea and so explore the relationship between the novel and film, and in the case of my research artefact, TV.

Packard, Professor of Theatre and Film at Brigham Young University and author of *The Film Novelist: Writing a Screenplay and Short Novel in 15 Weeks* (2011), is an enthusiastic supporter of the film novel. Packard puts the key elements of the film novel as ‘novels of about 30,000 words of scene description interspersed in dialogue or interior monologue or narration’ (2011, p. 190). I follow these elements in the writing of the screen novel but where I digress is in the use of image to enhance the visual aspect of the narrative, as well as redefining the notion of scenic description and the understanding that prose can be used to influence pace, mood and tone. Here I refer to Mary Buckham’s (2015) notion of ‘active setting’, which offers a dynamic alternative to scene description in the traditional screenplay. In response, I refer to active setting as ‘active scene description’ thus bringing together novel and screenplay terms reflecting the dual nature of the screen novel. I elaborate on active scene description and its application within the screen novel in Part 3 of this dissertation.

The film novel provides a useful template in developing the screen novel because my research explores how a screen novel might assist in developing a screen idea, and is in keeping with the tradition of early film novelists. For example, according

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\(^7\) According to Packard, ‘the term “film novel” comes from Carl Dreyer, the acclaimed Danish film director, who, in 1922, urged novelists to write scripts in the form of novels’ (2011, p. xi). The film novel is also known as a scenario novel, movie novel and cinema novel.
to Packard (2011), Dashiell Hammett’s *The Maltese Falcon* (1930) was the first film novel. This claim is contentious in that any novel written before *The Maltese Falcon* which deployed a visual style might have been a potential film novel. However, the chequered history of *The Maltese Falcon*, its trajectory from novel to film, and subsequent novels to films (see *Sanctuary* by William Faulkner [1931], *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck [1937], *The Chips Are Down* by Jean Paul Sartre [1948]), suggests it was certainly an early adopter of the form. To clarify this point, *The Maltese Falcon* was first produced in 1931, again in 1936 and finally in 1941. Layman writes, ‘The first two movies take great liberties with the material from the novel’ (2005, p. 270). The second version of the film was renamed *Satan Met a Lady* (1936), directed by William Dieterle and was, according to Madsen, ‘a nonsensical spoof … and a box office bomb’ (1978, p. 47). Layman claims Hammett’s reaction to the first two versions of the *Maltese Falcon* was negative. This is not surprising because the first two film adaptations did not follow the story as written by Hammett. Madsen notes that ‘After watching the former two films, Huston decided on a radical approach – to follow the book rather than depart from it’ (emphasis original Madsen 1978, p. 47). Madsen outlines how Huston broke the story into ‘shots, scenes and dialogue’ (1978, p. 47). Huston’s version was a simple transcription of the book into screenplay format. This can arguably be evidenced by the fact that when Huston was called away he left the transcription for his secretary to complete. Unbeknown to Huston, the secretary sent the manuscript to the studio bosses who said, according to Madsen, ‘I just read it and it’s great. You’ve really captured the flavour of the book. Now go shoot it with my blessing’ (1978, p. 50). In relation to my research, I extend and advance this historical antecedent through the screen novel.

I refer to *The Maltese Falcon* for a number of reasons: the literary technique that Hammett deploys in writing this novel, the objective third-person narration, its well-drawn characters, sharp dialogue, powerful evocation of setting and moral overtone, and as the so-called first film novel it is a useful reference for my own creative artefact. Hammett’s hard-boiled style closely reflects the needs of the screenplay, and is useful in understanding how the screen novel might be approached. Consequently, I align my practice with the plain scenic descriptive style of writing evident in his writing. For example, the first paragraph of the first page of *The Maltese Falcon* demonstrates this style. It is worth noting that author Dashiell Hammett worked as a detective before
becoming a novelist and his reportage style of writing is evidenced in the following excerpt.

Samuel Spade’s jaw was long and bony, his chin a jutting v under the more flexible v of his mouth. His nostrils curved back to make another, smaller v. His yellow-grey eyes were horizontal. The motif was picked up again by thickish brows rising outward from twin creases above a hooked nose, and his pale brown hair grew down – from high flat temples – in a point on his forehead. He looked rather pleasantly like a blond satan. (Hammett 1930, p. 1)

Hammett’s description of Sam Spade is extensive and reflects how the use of prose allows the writer to elaborate and consider details that a screenplay or development document might not usually offer. The following example highlights Hammett’s use of scenic description, dialogue and narration.

The fat man raised his glass and held it against a window’s light. He nodded approvingly at the bubbles running up in it. He said: ‘Well, sir, here’s to plain speaking and clear understanding.’ They drank and lowered their glasses. The fat man looked shrewdly at Spade and asked: ‘You’re a closed-mouthed man?’ Spade shook his head. ‘I like to talk.’ (Hammett 1930, p. 102)

*The Maltese Falcon* is written with action and dialogue. It reads very much like a screenplay. In the above example the action is clear; even the shots are implied. In the first line the fat man raises the glass to the light and we see bubbles in the glass. From a directorial point of view this could be a close-up. They talk and the action continues as they drink and lower their glasses.

A similar approach might be deployed in writing the screen novel. The characters are defined by ‘what they say and what they do’, which aligns with the how-to books on screenwriting and industry screenplay requirements. It should be noted that this style of writing is well suited to the hard-boiled crime genre and does have its limitations. For example, interior monologue would draw the reader into Spade’s feelings and thoughts. However, Hammett reveals these elements through action (in much the same way as a screenplay) as evidenced in the following text from *The Maltese Falcon*. ‘He pressed the button that released the street-door lock. He muttered, ‘Damn her,’ and stood scowling at the black telephone box, breathing irregularly while
a dull flush grew in his cheeks’ (Hammett 1930, p. 14). This is Hammett’s way of revealing what Spade is thinking and feeling and, used throughout the entire novel – for every character and every situation – does create a monotone style, albeit a well-written and ground-breaking one. According to Douglas Winston, ‘The Maltese Falcon became a prototype for an entire genre of American motion pictures that came to be identified by French critics as film noirs’ (1976, p. 133). The characters in these film noirs were famous for displaying an existential type of anti-hero character and the tropes and patterns evident in these films have become somewhat overused by today’s standards but nonetheless a corner stone of the crime genre. For instance, Sam Spade is morally ambiguous and his notions of good and evil appear flexible, such as when he has an affair with his business partner’s wife. Spade understands violence and he exists within the criminal underworld. Hammett’s style of writing creates visual images and, as noted, is the reason that The Maltese Falcon draws many similarities to screenwriting.

Hammett, alongside Chandler and others from the pulp fiction magazine Black Mask (1920), established the hard-boiled style of crime fiction, which I believe is conducive to writing the screen novel. The Maltese Falcon has endured over time because according to Layman, ‘it rewards so many types of readers. It can be read and enjoyed as an entertaining story, or it can be reread to reveal its many complexities’ (2005, p. 1). The history of this ‘film novel to film’ highlights how a prose rendition of a story, when written in a specific way, that this research will elaborate, can in fact result in a successful screen work. As such the form of the screen novel differs from that of the traditional novel because it is primed for the screen, and does not require adaptation in the traditional sense of the word. By traditional adaptation I refer to the notion of giving the impression of a literal translation of a novel into a screen work as in point 1 in Michael Klein and Gillian Parker’s (1981) three types of adaptation:

1. Most films of classic novels attempt to give the impression of being faithful, that is, literal, translations.

2. Retains the core of the structure of the narrative while significantly re-interpreting, or in some cases de-constructing the source text.

3. Regards the source merely as raw material, as simply the occasion for an original work. (Klein and Parker cited in Giddings, Selby and Wensley 1990, p. 11)
As can be seen from the above categories of adaptation there are variations on how a translation might be approached. The screen novel is written with a screen work in mind and therefore does not fall into Klein or Parker’s frame of what adaptation might require.

As will be explored later, theme, narrative voice, temporal dimension, voiceover, thoughts and feelings, syntax, pace, mood and tone can also contribute to the form (Jauss 2011). My own screen novel *Coyne* will deploy these elements in concert with image and screenplay format to investigate an alternative approach to screen industry development practice that also renders the ‘development document’ as a creative work in its own right. The screen novel is an attempt to negotiate the needs of the novel and the screenplay, and I draw from these earlier works to assist my thinking.

A similar approach to the film novel was considered in the Soviet film industry. In the mid-1930s, the literary scenario, according to Belodubrovskaya, ‘was inaugurated as an independent work of literature and became the focus of the Soviet screenwriting effort’ (2016, p. 252). Like the film novel, the literary scenario is a useful iteration of the screenplay in the context of my own research to develop a screen idea using the novel form. It would appear that the literary scenario and the film novel share a historical time reference, however, the literary scenario evolved from a very different cultural climate. The Soviet film industry ‘suffered from a constant shortage of good screenplays’ and, under the Stalinist regime, existing literary writers were called upon to write for the screen (Belodubrovskaya 2016, p. 257). In discussing the introduction of the literary screenplay into the Czechoslovakian film industry, Petr Szczepanik argues that the hiring of literary writers was part of an initiative to install ‘pro-regime writers in order to implement socialist-realist dogma’ (2013, p. 74). The scope of my research is not broad enough to investigate the production deliberations of the Soviet film industry, however I will outline the key points in order to contextualise the literary scenario and the cultural and creative forces that rendered it unworkable.

Screenplay development during the Stalinist reign was informed by the need to regulate the system of production through controlling directorial interpretation and authorship (Belodubrovskaya 2016). It was thought that directors had too much power and during the 1920s and 1930s, ‘three leading formats emerged … the iron scenario, the emotional scenario and eventually the literary scenario’ (Belodubrovskaya 2016, p. 252). The iron scenario was a numbered screenplay essentially mimicking the
Hollywood continuity script. According to Staiger, ‘The use of the continuity script resulted in a two-stage labor process – the work’s preparation on paper by management followed by its execution by the workers’ (1979, p. 21). The iron scenario was an attempt to standardise the production flow and ensure the director remained true to the script. However, the Soviet film industry was not oriented towards commercial success, and the budgeting and cost outcomes of the iron scenario were prohibitive.

What the iron scenario offered was the ability to lock down the script and therefore control the directorial interpretation. The screen novel is situated at the front end of the production process and acknowledges the role of the director in the creative process, however of interest in this historical reference is the similarities in managing the script-to-screen journey and the role of the writer in the making of a screen work. Belodubrovskaya (2016) notes that, at its heart, the iron scenario was about controlling content while allowing the director creative freedom in the making of a film. This structure undermined the function of the iron scenario and, based on an essay by Eisenstein (1929) ‘O forme stsenariia’ [On Screenplay Form], the emotional scenario evolved. The emotional scenario was an attempt to speak to the poetic elements of a screenplay in the hope that directors would respect the work as a literary form and minimise directorial interpretation and authorship. This is useful to the screen novel because poetic elements, such as metaphor, lineage, syntax, and image, are elements that are not usually applied to the traditional screenplay. I should point out that the screen novel, unlike the iron and emotional scenarios, is not an attempt to minimise or control directorial input but rather to enhance the director’s realisation of the screen idea. However, both the emotional and iron scenarios were unsuccessful because they did not address the necessary controls that prompted their introduction in the first place and as a response, ‘Literature was elevated to enjoy a special status’ (Clark 2011, p. 82). This led to film scripts being written only by leading writers, and it is interesting that this literary privilege echoed Samuel Goldwyn’s (1919) attempt at creating the literary group, ‘Eminent Authors’, to write films. The screen novel revisits this idea of novelists writing for film but as noted, the ‘Eminent Authors’ enterprise failed due to a lack of understanding the needs of the screenplay. The screen novel seeks to redress this failure by using the resources and techniques available to the fiction writer, screenwriter and novelist, and understanding and applying the needs of the imagined screen work when developing a screen idea.
It is important to understand why the literary scenario was not successful, particularly in light of the potential success or failure of the screen novel. According to Belodubrovskaya, ‘the literary scenario was not standardised’ (2016, p. 262). This meant that, as a document, it was not useful in the production process because Belodubrovskaya notes, it was ‘too literary’ (2016, p. 263). The ability to transfer the literary text into a production text appears to be the key reason for the failure of the literary scenario. This is crucial to my research because the screen novel acknowledges its shift as a self-contained creative writing text to a screen production document. In addition, Turkin (1938) cited in Belodubrovskaya comments that literary writers ‘lost their sense of what kind of stories and the volume of material were appropriate for a film’ (2016, p. 263). This is interesting because the screen novel has yet to define a screenplay metric, such as one minute of text being equivalent to one minute of screen time. The scope of this research does not allow for a full exploration of this type of metric and could be resolved through the transference of the screen novel into a script format. It would seem that the failure of the literary screenplay was not its inability to standardise the format but, as Szczepanik argues, the literary screenplay was ‘established for external political reasons, and which was not linked directly to either the practical needs of the development process or of production personnel’ (2013, p. 96). He notes that the literary screenplay remained in the conception stage of film production and the technical screenplay in the execution stage (see Maras, 2009). According to Szczepanik, the reason why the literary scenario was not utilised is complex and is compounded by political and cultural forces and the ‘institutionalized practices of development’ (2013, p. 97).

Both the film novel and literary scenario did not address the production needs in developing a screen idea and for this reason I position the screen novel in the conception or early development stage and acknowledge that it would require a transformation to be translated into a production format (as in Huston’s version of The Maltese Falcon) for the purposes of making the screen work. As highlighted, the screen novel does not require adaptation.

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8 In The Hollywood Standard the Complete and Authoritative Guide to Script Format and Style, Riley writes: ‘Over the years, a rule of thumb developed among filmmakers that one script page translated, on average, into one minute of finished film. Production estimates also came to be based in part on the number of pages in a script or scene’ (2009, p. 24).
The screen novel as un-adaptation

This research is not about adaptation but about the intersection of screen and literature captured in one work. In this section, I continue with the idea that a literary object does not necessarily require an act of adaptation. If Dashiell Hammett wrote the first film novel as Packard (2011) claims, then I suggest that demonstrates the potential of a prose composition that can be a kind of blueprint for a screen work. Bluestone (1961) notes that the novel and film are two distinct mediums, and adaptation requires a discriminatory change from one medium to the other. Although Bluestone has been challenged on his views of the film novel – see Packard (2011) – I agree with his observation of the film and novel as two distinct mediums. Thus, in the context of the screen novel, a transfer from prose to screenplay format is required and the idea of adaptation is not relevant because the structure, story, characters and dialogue exist within the screen novel. The screen novel is written as a stand-alone text and a text for the imagined screen work so the author already performs the task of adaptation because screen elements are embedded within the text.

The screenplay as literature is problematic if not contentious (Winston 1973; Giddings, Selby, Wensley 1990; Maras 2009; Price 2010). According to Price, ‘attempts to situate the screenplay within the field of literary criticism, since it tends to fall victim to the twin problems of defining “literature” and constructing evaluative criteria that determine whether a given text, or even a whole genre, merits entry to the canon’ (2010, p. 27). Why, then, is the screenplay as literature so contentious? Perhaps it is this notion of the screenplay being tethered to the film production process that undermines attempts to view the script as anything but a planning document. Although the screenplay reflects linguistic and thematic elements its role in becoming something else excludes it as literature. In this regard, the screen novel might be viewed as having a closer relationship to the stage play than the screenplay because there is a tradition of the stage play being an artefact that can be read and performed. Conversely, the screenplay is seen as an intermediate work; it is not an end product in itself. By writing the screen idea using novelistic techniques and naming the physical artefact as a hybrid of the screenplay and the novel I situate the screen novel, like the stage play, as a work that can be read and performed. To position the screen novel as a literary object is not a gambit for high art, rather an acknowledgement that the screen novel has the potential to secure the authorial status of the screenwriter and original screen idea.
The argument that the screenplay is an imperfect work only made perfect through the production process continues the screenplay’s intermediary relationship to the screen realisation in terms of conception and execution (Maras 2009, p. 48). Is this of concern? Not necessarily because the screenplay as the creative document within the production process has a long tradition; however, I posit that the screen idea is undervalued in the development process and this research endeavours to privilege the author’s original contribution to the screen work as it moves through the various stages of production. It should be noted that the model I propose is specifically related to the individual screenwriter as auteur. This is particularly relevant in light of current trends in high-end TV drama, with single-authored screenplays challenging the traditional writers’ room model of TV writing. As discussed, my research focuses on the intersection between novelist and screenwriter – Dashiell Hammett being one such writer. To continue this line of thought, I now examine the role of novelists Cormac McCarthy and David Simon who have written both novels and screen works and also filmmakers Quentin Tarantino and Abraham Polonsky who deploy a novelistic style in their screenplays. All these writers blur the line between novel and screen and are thus relevant and useful in my investigation into exploring the novel form to develop a screen idea.

Cormac McCarthy

The work of Cormac McCarthy is relevant to my own creative writing practice in that he is a novelist that has written works that transition from an object on the page to an object on the screen. In his novel No Country for Old Men (2005) the confluence of novel and screenplay is evident and demonstrates, like Hammett’s Maltese Falcon (1930), how a novel rendition of a screen idea might work. For Esposito (2008), ‘McCarthy’s novel is so bare bones that in many ways it is closer to a movie treatment than a novel’. Given this novel was originally conceived of as a screenplay, it is not surprising that it reads like a treatment. However, it is more than a treatment in that it includes dialogue and detail not usually found in traditional screenplay treatments. The following text is an example from the novel, No Country for Old Men. In this scene Carla Jean is watching TV when her boyfriend Llewelyn enters.

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9 See The HBO Effect (Dean De Fino 2014), Difficult Men (Brett Martin 2013), The DVD Novel (Greg Metcalf 2012).
She was sprawled across the sofa watching TV and drinking a Coke. She didn’t even look up. Three o'clock, she said. I can come back later. She looked at him over the back of the sofa and looked at the television again. What have you got in that satchel? It’s full of money. Yeah. That’ll be the day. He went into the kitchen and got a beer out of the refrigerator.

(McCarthy 2005, p. 21)

This descriptive style of prose is action-based, and the dialogue is loaded with subtext. In McCarthy’s prose, Carla Jean is sprawled on the sofa drinking a coke. She says, ‘three o’clock’, to which Llewelyn responds, ‘I can come back later’. There is a familiarity between them, a weariness that is not so well defined in the screenplay, which I will discuss shortly. I suggest the dramatic richness of the scene is embedded in the prose version. McCarthy’s novel feeds the screenplay with performative possibilities in the way the scene is blocked and the subtext evident in the dialogue. It is this close relationship between the novel and the screen work, where the novelistic treatment embeds directions within the text that I explore in the screen novel. Wallach discusses this relationship in terms of fictional and cinematic text and notes ‘the novel version [No Country for Old Men] is more cinematic than literary’ (2009, p. xv). McCarthy’s style echoes the industry tenet of what we see and what we hear yet he infuses the text with a poetic sensibility that makes him a useful reference for the screen novel. The following scene is an excerpt from the Coen brothers’ screenplay and follows industry format using technical information such as location, time of day and the description of the character of Carla Jean. The screenplay written by the Coen brothers (2007) stays true to the novel; however, the Coen brothers’ version of the same scene highlights the tonal difference between screenplay format and novel style.

INT. TRAILER - NIGHT.
Moss enters carrying the document case. A twentysomething woman in cutoff jeans and a halter top watches TV. This is Carla Jean.

Further examples of McCarthy’s work highlighting the intersection between screenplay and novel can be seen in his original screenplays for The Counselor (2013) and The Gardener’s Son (1977). These screenplays read more like stage plays, with a heavy focus on the use of dialogue, and were written and published in the novel form and marketed as original screenplays.
CARLA JEAN
What's in the satchel?

MOSS
It's full a money.

CARLA JEAN
That'll be the day.

( Joel and Ethan Coen 2007)

I suggest that what is lost in the screenplay format is the nuance of Llewelyn and Carla Jean’s relationship. In the screenplay, Carla Jean is described as a 20-something with cut-off jeans and a halter top. The tone in writing her description feels like it is directed towards the wardrobe department, which is appropriate for the production needs of the film but I wonder if the Coen brothers’ direction was influenced by McCarthy’s novel as the novel provides information that is not evident in the screenplay. Continuing with the investigation of authors who traverse novel and screenplay we can turn to the work of David Simon.

David Simon
David Simon is a novelist and screenwriter who created the critically acclaimed TV drama The Wire and as such, I use the show bible for The Wire in Part 3 of this PhD to compare the screen novel with this industry document, to reveal how the screen novel might function as a source text for industry requirements. I maintain that the show bible for The Wire (2002–2008) is a relevant comparison to the screen novel because it is a crime genre work; it employed novelists such as George Pelecanos, Dennis Lehane and Richard Price to write individual episodes; and, like Coyne, it is structured as an episodic TV drama. David Simon is a writer of non-fiction and his writing style is relevant to my research as Coyne uses the real life event of the East West Link to develop a crime fiction. Simon is a former journalist from the Baltimore Sun and to write his groundbreaking novel Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets (1991) spent a year with the Baltimore Police Department’s Homicide Unit. This novel was subsequently optioned by the broadcaster NBC and was aired under the title of Homicide: Life on the Street (1993–1999). To write this novel, Simon draws on the life of contemporary police detectives, and draws heavily on the ‘plain’ style of writing. It is this style that makes the transition from novel to screen worth investigating. Kevin
Boon discusses the literary qualities of the screenplay by linking the ‘plain writing style of the modernist prose writers … and the ‘hardboiled’ writers of crime fiction such as James M. Cain, Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler’ (Boon cited in Price 2010, p. 35). It should also be noted that there is a strong correlation between these hardboiled crime writers and film noir. Mark T. Conard frames hardboiled literature and film noir by noting that both share a similar ‘existential outlook on life’ (2007, p. 17). David Simon also draws on this existential style in Homicide: Life on the Street (1993–1999) and also the TV series The Wire. The mood and tone of both noir literature and film are useful in writing the screen novel as the two mediums deliver similar sensibilities and demonstrate how writing in a particular mode can be conducive to a cinematic outcome.

It is important to understand the tonal and rhythmic qualities of the prose writers of the ‘plain style’ because they demonstrate the craft of scenic description. Writing scenes through the description of everyday observation and everyday language brings into focus a key stylistic element that is deployed in the writing of the screen novel.

It should be noted that Simon wrote Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets (1991) in the present tense. The tone of this novel uses verisimilitude and actuality, and the choice to apply present tense provides an intrinsic element of style to the work and aligns with industry screenwriting practice of writing a screenplay in the present tense. Simon uses the immediacy of the present tense to create the killing streets of Baltimore. David Jauss notes an advantage of present tense is its sense of ‘immediacy’ because the present tense speaks in real time (2011, p. 96). This idea of ‘immediacy’ is supported by William Gass, who notes the effect of present tense as ‘that amount of time and life felt to be immediately given in experience’ (2001, p. 3). In the following text, Simon’s use of the word says instead of said highlights this tonal quality.
Tuesday, January 19
“Just like with tires,” Landsman says. “Comes with a patch and everything else you need. Now a bigger wound, like from a thirty-eight, you’re gonna have to get a new head. This one you could fix.”
Landsman looks up, his face the very picture of earnest concern.

(Simon 1991, p. 1)

The narrative takes place over a 12-month period (the chapters are punctuated by month and date, reinforcing real-time present tense), giving the reader the sense that they are experiencing the events. Simon’s *Homicide* reflects a sense of urgency and at times I argue the unrelenting pace dissipates the energy and urgency. Because the present tense focuses on the events as they happen, notwithstanding temporal diversions, I posit that there is a tendency for the writer to focus on action and dialogue, and minimise the descriptive passages echoing the screenplay format. Simon’s *Homicide* reflects this style.

Heavy pounding on the door is answered at last by a light from upstairs, where a frame window is suddenly and violently wrenched upward. A heavyset, middle-aged woman – fully dressed, the detective notes – pushes head and shoulders across the sill and stares down at Pellegrini.

“Who the hell is knocking on my door this late?”
“Mrs. Thompson?”
“Yeah.”
“Police.”
“Poh-leece?”

(Simon 1991, p. 5)

The above scene draws on action and dialogue: the heavy pounding on the door, the window wrenched suddenly and violently, the woman pushing head and shoulders through the sill and staring. The description of the woman is stark: heavyset, middle-aged and fully dressed. The scene reads like a screenplay with a short description of the action followed by dialogue. As noted, this novel was adapted for a TV series and the above scene demonstrates a ‘screen-like writing style’, much of which might be attributed to the use of the present tense and the plain style. In the author’s notes, Simon writes, ‘This book is a work of journalism’ (1991, p. 619). Simon was embedded with a Baltimore police unit and states that ‘Most of the dialogue in this narrative – perhaps 90 per cent – comes from scenes and conversations that I personally witnessed’ (1991, p. 620), thus reinforcing Simon’s narrative voice.
The following text from the original novel highlights Simon’s hardboiled writing style coupled with an acute eye for detail.

Thursday, February 4
It is the illusion of tears and nothing more, the rainwater that collects in small beads and runs to the hollows of her face…

She is resting on her left hip, her head cocked to one side, her back arched, with one leg bent over the other. Her right arm rests above her head, her left arm is fully extended, with small, thin fingers reaching out across the asphalt for something, or someone, no longer there.

Among the detectives and patrol officers crowded over the body of Laytona Kim Wallace there is no easy banter, no coarse exchange of cop humor or time-worn indifference…

From the moment of discovery, Laytona Wallace is never regarded as anything less than a true victim, innocent as few of those murdered in this city ever are. A child, fifth-grader, has been used and discarded, a monstrous sacrifice to an unmistakable evil.

(Simon 1991, p. 59–60)

Here, Simon writes a powerful and evocative account of the murder of Laytona Kim Wallace, which is strongly editorial in the sense that Simon’s own voice is extremely present. The tone is stoic and moralistic, and resonates with early film noir existential elements such as pessimism and bleak worldview (Conard 2007). Simon begins with a poetic description of the child’s body when he writes that ‘the rainwater is nothing but an illusion of tears’. Simon recounts the scene in detail and what is interesting is that he imbues it with a sense of an authorial voice by adding an emotional layer when he writes ‘thin fingers reaching out across the asphalt for something, or someone, no longer there’. Although Simon is factual and uses a plain reportage style he also builds pathos and meaning. In the above extract the imagery is clear and the style engaging by giving the reader a sense of the tragedy and brutality of the murdered child.

The scene in Episode One of the television series is pivotal as Detective Bayliss (Pellegrini in the novel version) is shocked and confronted by the dead child. The camera lingers on Bayliss’s face as the screen fades to black. The opening scene of Episode Two continues with Bayliss at the crime scene. Although the novel and television series are two distinct works Simon’s account of the murder of Laytona Kim Wallace (Odena Watson in the television series) guides and shapes the emotional and narrative arc of the TV series. Like Hammett and early plain prose writers, David
Simon uses visual writing to convey the *mise en scène*. Although very different in style to David Simon film auteur Quentin Tarantino approaches his work from a literary point of view and is thus useful in discussing the interaction between the novelist and screenwriter. In this instance Tarantino represents the screenwriter as novelist as I will demonstrate in the following section.

**Quentin Tarantino**

In a Bret Easton Ellis interview with Quentin Tarantino (2015), Tarantino goes as far as saying that the script for *The Hateful Eight* (2015) was one that could not be filmed. To quote: ‘I was on set adapting my novel’ (2015). This type of ironic comment throws the idea of adaptation into question by acknowledging the literary approach that Tarantino has taken to his screenplay. For the purposes of situating the screen novel as ‘not’ requiring adaptation and not conforming strictly to the notion of transference from one medium to another, specifically novel to screen, the screen novel should be viewed in the context of the multiple drafts of a screenplay and screenplay development normally required in a project. Does writing a screenplay require an act of adaptation? Tarantino dismisses the notion of adapting his screenplay, yet he acknowledges the process of transference from one medium to another. I do not suggest that *The Hateful Eight* is a screen novel as such but it does highlight how a novelistic approach to a screenplay can assist the writer in developing the idea. For example, in *The Hateful Eight*, we can look to the following scene that raises questions about the length and detail that a screenwriter, particularly a writer/director such as Tarantino can deploy in order to explore a scene as fully as possible.

**EXT - MINNIE’S HABERDASHERY - DAY**

The six horse team stagecoach pulls up to the front of the log built building that’s known as “MINNIE’S HABERDASHERY”. On the outside, Minnie’s just looked like a slightly bigger then normal stagecoach stop over, parked halfway up a mountain. That’s because, despite local reputation, that’s what it is. If serving two bottles of tequila, one bottle of Mezcal, and one bottle of brandy qualifies you as a bar, it’s a bar. If serving stew qualifies you as a restaurant, it’s a restaurant.
EXT - MINNIE’S HABERDASHERY - DAY (CONT’D)

It sells a few hats, and gloves, and snow shoes for the stagecoach passengers. And supplies for the mountain folk. And it received special packages for people in Red Rock. Like say when Carlos Robante (Pedro Gonzalez-Gonzalez) in “Rio Bravo” buys those red bloomers for his wife Consuelo (Estelita Rodriguez), but doesn’t want everybody in town to know about it. If he lived in Red Rock, he’d buy them through the mail, have them sent to Minnie’s, and when they arrived, Minnie would get word to him, and he’d ride out there and pick them up. Minnie’s was also a good place to hold up during a storm. This wasn’t the first time a group of passengers from the stage had to sit out the snow. Minnie and her partner Sweet Dave also traded goods. In fact the only stuff in their store of any interest is the stuff they acquired in trade. If that makes them a trading good store, then their [sic] a trading goods store.

(Tarantino 2015, p. 23)

Here, the scene description goes beyond the industrial format of only writing what ‘we see and what we hear’ and digresses from the notion of economy and speed. As highlighted, Tarantino discusses *The Hateful Eight* in terms of its novelistic qualities. He delivers narration, backstory and mood in this scene and it should be noted that parts of the scene description are not present in the film version. His scenic description is detailed, giving us a strong sense of the story world, and is a good example of active scene description from a filmmaker who is prepared to explore prose to enhance the reading experience. In an interview with Erik Bauer, Tarantino discusses his writing:

> I’d like to see more art put into screenwriting. One of the things about writing a novel is you can do it any way you want. It’s your voice that’s important and I see absolutely no reason why a screenplay can’t be the same... my scripts are getting published now, this is gonna be the fucking document. I’m not writing novels, these screenplays are my novels, so I’m gonna write it the best that I can. If the movie never gets made, it’d almost be okay because I did it. It’s there on the page.

(Tarantino cited in Bauer 2013)
Tarantino says he is a method writer; that he inhabits the characters and ignores structure. He parallels his screenplay writing with the novel form and this is interesting not only for his novelistic approach to writing (unstructured compared to structured screenplay writing), but also because it appears that he has an awareness of the screenplay as a literary object and as highlighted above references the authorial voice and the flexibility of the novel form to discover and communicate his ideas. It should be noted that not all novelists take an unstructured approach to writing and Tarantino is one example of a writer/filmmaker who uses the novel form as part of his particular creative process.

The screen novel has similarities to Tarantino’s method of screenwriting in that it uses the tools and resources that a fiction writer might use to write a screenplay. As evidenced in the extract from *The Hateful Eight*, the scene description reflects a visual style of writing and it flows in a way that the traditional screenplay might not. This descriptive style raises the question of how does a creative writing text differ or not from a screenplay text? This idea is expressed in the critical edition of Abraham Polonsky’s script *Force of Evil* (1948).

**Abraham Polonsky**

In his essay ‘A Utopian Experiment’ (original written in 1962), Polonsky highlights the schism between writing the screenplay as a technical document and one that evokes a poetic sensibility Polonsky writes.

> I am using the terms poetry and poem to characterize a screenplay which instead of conventional camera angles would guide the attention through concrete images (as in metaphor); which instead of stage directing the action would express it; which instead of summarizing character and motive would actually present them as data; which instead of dialogue that carries meaning where film image fails, would be the meaning that completes the film image.

Polonsky’s approach to the way a screenplay could be written indicates how I might develop the screen novel – by bridging poetic elements such as metaphor, syntax, 

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12 Based on the novel *Tucker’s People* (1943) by Ira Wolfert.
lineage with the technical aspects of the screenplay (see Corley and Megel ‘White space: an approach to the practice of screenwriting as poetry’ 2014, pp. 11–29).

In Force of Evil, the character of Joe tries to inveigle his brother Leo into merging with Tucker’s organisation, but Leo refuses. The dialogue highlights the rhythmic, poetic qualities that exist throughout the script (note the text from Force of Evil (1996) is not in standard screenplay Courier font). The introduction of this edition outlines the context: ‘The following is a synthesis of Abraham Polonsky’s authorship of Force of Evil. It is a blending of his shooting script (written before the film was shot) and the continuity script (a transcription of the dialogue and visual/aural elements of the film itself)’ (underline original 1996, p. 17). In the scene below Joe arrives at Leo’s workplace to offer the deal.

LEO
Two thirds for Tucker, brother Joe, and one third for me, for my own business?
(he looks squarely at Joe)
You know what that is, Joe?
(he shouts)
Blackmail! That’s what it is, blackmail!
(to Doris, a witness)
My own brother, blackmailing me!

JOE
(shouting back)
You’re crazy! You’re absolutely crazy! Mad! You’re not listening to me.

LEO
I don’t want it.

JOE
You know why you don’t want it? I’ll tell you why. Because you’re a small man, because if it’s a small thing you’re a tiger, you’re a tiger. But if it’s a big thing, you shake and yell and call me names.
(he minces, pouting, imitating Leo)
Oh no. A million dollars for Leo! Oh no! It must be the wrong address, it must be somebody next door.

LEO
(going to the door)
The answer is no.

The repetition of the words in the above scene demonstrates the rhythmic cadence and poetic mood in this film noir screenplay. For example, Leo shouts the word ‘blackmail’ three times: twice at Joe and a third time to Doris, who is witnessing the exchange. The repetition of the word ‘blackmail’ solidifies the dramatic exchange and charges the scene by giving Leo an emotional response to Joe’s offer. Leo retreats but Joe comes on the attack and cuts deep by calling Leo ‘a small man, with a small outlook’. The scene concludes with Joe mincing and pouting and mimicking ‘Oh no … Oh no! It must be the man next door’ to which Leo, going to the door, replies, ‘The answer is no.’

I refer to Force of Evil because it demonstrates how a poetic style might be deployed in the writing of the screen novel. The language is rhythmic and poetic and offers an insight as to how a screenplay can be imbued with an authorial voice as Jack Shadoian states: ‘The dialogue is full of verbal echoes; people speak in a strange, incantatory language, with phrases repeated like musical notes. It works not as poeticized speech but as the poetry of speech’ (cited in Force of Evil: The Critical Edition 1996, p. 181). Polonksy’s approach to Force of Evil raises questions of style and authorial voice within the screenplay and how these elements might inform the writing of the screen novel. This script highlights how a screenplay can exist on the page as a self-contained work (as evidenced by the 1996 reprint of the screenplay by The Center for Telecommunications Studies, California State University) while simultaneously functioning as a production document for the intended film.

Hammett, McCarthy, Simon, Tarantino and Polonsky have all influenced my approach to the screen novel because their works highlight how plain prose and visual language can transfer from the page to the screen. Drawing on the style of these writers I have situated the Coyne series in the city of Melbourne and used realism to convey the theme of political and business corruption. I have also deployed a plain style and concrete images to give the reader a sense of the text as a screen work and a foundation for a fully scripted screenplay. In order to place in context the role of the screen novel as a concept development tool, I will now outline the current traditional industry documents used for screen development.
CHAPTER 2
THE SCREEN NOVEL AND INDUSTRY

This chapter focuses on the screen novel and its relationship with the film and TV industry, and considers its potential to function within the current environment as both a development and pitch document. I discuss specific documents such as the ‘scriptment’\(^{13}\) and ‘treatment’ because they bear similarities with the screen novel and, in Part 3, I demonstrate how specific development texts such as the overview, character profiles, setting and episode outlines can be extracted from the screen novel for current industry requirements.

I put forward that the screen novel, unlike the screenplay and ancillary industry documents, can function as both a stand-alone work and also a development document for a potential screen work. So how might the screen novel exist within the current industry climate? As a pitch document, the screen novel is timely because there appears to be a shift away from the traditional modes of working in the industry, particularly in broadcast TV that has traditionally centred on the writers’ room as a place for story development (see Kallas 2014). The screen novel represents a single-authored approach to screen idea development and should be considered in light of traditional modes of working such as the collaborative nature of the writers’ room.

The writers’ room is a broad concept, and according to Kallas, ‘almost each room seems to work a bit differently from any other’ (2014, p. 158). To clarify the notion of a writers’ room, I am referring to a place where the physical presence of a team of writers gathers to brainstorm a story idea. The shift away from the traditional writers’ room model can be evidenced in the American system, and TV writer Noah Hawley’s personal experience demonstrates the changing attitude to broadcast TV production. In a 2016 podcast screenwriter Noah Hawley provided a personal account of his time as a writer in broadcast TV. Hawley is interesting as he is a novelist, screenwriter and producer, and has experience across a broad field of media formats. He states, ‘I can’t really imagine working in broadcast again, mostly just because experimentation is so important to me and there is a kind of irreverence that I feel, for the rules of how you tell a story’ (Hawley 2016, KCRW Spin-off podcast).

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Hawley’s reluctance to return to broadcast TV highlights the changing model of the writers’ room and particularly the development of the single-authored writer as evidenced in shows such as *The Honourable Woman* (2014) by Hugo Blick or *Fargo* (2014–) by Hawley himself.

A similar situation exists in Australia where there is a growing trend towards authored TV dramas developed by single artists and small teams. Shows such as *Secret City* (2016), *Jack Irish* (February 2016–March 2016) and *The Code* (2014) highlight a shift away from the traditional writers’ room model of screen development and an investment in authored long-form drama series. I therefore situate the screen novel in this context of authored works and non-traditional approaches to writing long-form TV drama.

For example, according to Greg Metcalf, the long-form format offers a new way of telling stories where ‘characters can be developed and transformed in the way we expect characters to change in traditional literature and drama’ (Metcalf 2012, p. ix). Metcalf identifies the impact of other art forms such as literature and theatre as factors in the development of long-form quality TV, and the screen novel is a contemporary platform intended to express the ideas that Metcalf has raised. He points out in his book, *The DVD Novel*, that ‘writers can treat a season of television as a single story’ noting that the scale of quality TV programs goes beyond traditional TV writing (2012, p. ix). To highlight this shift, Metcalf comments that ‘American primetime television through the 1970s meant freestanding episodes with characters that never changed’ (2012, p. ix). Metcalfe makes an interesting point because contemporary TV drama has become more cinematic, theatrical and literary. The modes of writing in this medium are changing14 and the screen novel reflects this creative environment. It is my intention that the screen novel be viewed as a vehicle to explore a single idea for the screen using novelistic techniques while simultaneously embedding information for industry requirements.

**Development documents in the film and TV industry**

Current industry development documents, both nationally and globally, can be difficult to categorise because they are dependent on the variant requirements of house style, stage of development and purpose, as well as the specific needs of funding organisations either public or private. The types of development approaches are also

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14 Kallas discusses the ‘Three acts of TV history’ in *Inside the Writers’ Room* (2014, p. 3).
subject to business, cultural, technological and political influences. For instance, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation previously displayed a strong culture of in house productions\(^{15}\) but now after funding cuts and shows for the iView platform, project development documents may vary greatly. Commercial networks also source their projects from independent producers such as December Films, Matchbox Pictures, Playmaker Media, et al. Different platforms might also change the type of development documents required; for example, if a project were a web series or an app, these would require a different set of development documents than a six-part drama series. The scope of this research does not warrant a full historical account of global film and TV development processes; therefore, I will discuss development documents in terms of their function as both a creative and business tool with the objective of bringing a screen idea to the screen.

So what is the purpose of development documents? ‘Clearly, script development means many things to many people, from the passion and vision of the writer to the commercial eye of the developer’ (Batty and Taylor 2015, p. 6). Here we can see the dual function of the screenplay and subsidiary documents to assess both the creative and business potential of a screen idea. In researching the screen novel, I acknowledge this dual function and aim to understand the potential of the screen novel as a hybrid of creative and business so that it is relevant as an alternative approach to industry screen development.

Another way to view this duality is summarised by Bridget Conor: ‘Screenwriting is a form of work routinely characterised as riven by the unassailable dichotomy between craft and creativity’ (2014, p. 1). The use of the word ‘craft’ is interesting in the context of this research because of the dual nature of the screen novel. I put forward that the notion of ‘craft’ draws similarities with trade, and the common reference to the screenplay as a ‘blueprint’ or technical document sits within this context. The screen novel aims to bridge the creative and business requirements of screen development through a single text and, as I demonstrate later in this PhD, the screen novel is written as both a stand-alone work and a foundational text for business and further development.

\(^{15}\) The ABC website states ‘ABC TV Fiction does not make programs in-house. Instead we work directly with independent production companies’ (ABC 2017).
Framing the ‘act of screenwriting’ in terms of craft can be found in numerous screenwriting manuals that aim to assist the screenwriter in developing a screen idea (see Aronson 2000; Douglas 2005; Epstein 2006; Parker 2006; Grace 2014). These manuals provide a useful resource for the screenwriter and, for the most part, reflect industry standards. However, as noted, the idea of the craft of screenwriting can be construed to mean the business of screenwriting and development documents have an underlying agenda to sell the idea. Many how-to manuals suggest a display of the craft/format of screenwriting will assist in entry to the industry. For example, in the introduction of David Trottier’s *Dr. Format Answers Your Questions* (2002).

The purpose of this book is to provide you with guidance on very specific formatting and spec screenplay topics. Understanding formatting and spec writing is a necessary key to crafting a readable and saleable script. This book shows you how to turn the key.

(Trottier 2002, p. 1)

Further titles of screenwriting manuals that reflect Trottier’s premise of ‘craft equals business’ are: *Writing for television series serial and soaps* (Grace 2014); *The Hollywood standard: the complete and authoritative guide to script format and style* (Riley 2009), *Crafty TV writing: thinking inside the box* (Epstein 2006); *The art and science of screenwriting* (Parker 2006); and *Writing the TV drama series: how to succeed as a professional writer in TV* (Douglas 2005) to name a few. There is an irony in that the screen novel is yet another how-to approach to screen idea development. The key difference is that the screen novel encourages a treatment style of writing as a method to develop an idea and positions the development of the idea as a precursor to more stringent formatting requirements. As stated earlier, two development documents that are worth discussing are the scriptment and the treatment because of their similarities to the screen novel. Writing about the treatment, Aronson notes its function as a selling document and acknowledges its industry requirements:

[Treatments are notoriously difficult to write because] at the same time as being meticulously precise and economical, they must be a good read – a piece of prose that jumps off the page. Treatments must depict, simply, vividly, and without ambiguity not only what the camera is seeing but also the order in which it sees it, so that no mental replays have to be done.

(Aronson 2001, p. 279)
Aronson’s assessment of the treatment is a reflection of the current accepted industry and pedagogical approaches as seen in screenwriting manuals and most screenwriting education. With the screen novel, I am interested in challenging the orthodoxy in screen development and posit a more novelistic and flexible style in writing the screen idea with a focus on the creative development and claiming the authorial voice, as opposed to the marketing of an idea. Price’s observations regarding this point are salient in terms of the screen novel. ‘The novel, for instance, which is almost invariably single-authored, ordinarily introduces no comparable industrial processes that would routinely demand the submission of working copy for corporate consultation and revision’ (2010, p. 12).

The film and TV industry clearly has financial interests and requires development documents that frame the creative process in terms of business. For example, Batty writes ‘a screenplay is a product – and as such, should be marketed and sold like all other products’ (2012, p. 178). Acknowledging the business requirements in making a screen work, Margot Nash comments on the industry’s ‘quest for certainty’ and notes the positive role that failure can offer when developing a screen idea: ‘[I]t is through taking risks, and at times failing, that we learn what we do not know’ (2014, p. 99). Nash is interesting as she is both an academic and filmmaker and, like myself, is attempting to bridge the divide between the academy and the industry. In following the industry screen-development process, there is a belief that the idea must be anchored and locked down within the frame of approved conventions. Using industry conventions can be a signpost for the industry reader to assess the veracity of the idea. Continuing from Nash’s comments, I suggest there is a danger the story is merely packaged within the cosmetics of format and presentation.

Millard states how funding bodies adhere to screenplay convention and how industry requirements deflate the creative momentum, ‘to the point that the screen idea lacks what “Maslow called in his diaries a quality of “aliveness”” (2010, p. 13). I maintain that the dual functions of development documents are creative and business, and do not necessarily provide the optimum environment for the act of creative development. The screen novel as an artefact presents itself as an autonomous text, with a focus on creative development, and the potential to be reimagined as a screenplay. To contextualise the screen novel and its role as both an autonomous text and specifically a
text for the proposed screen work, we need to consider the various summary documents required when developing and presenting a screen idea for finance and production.

Film and TV require similar development documents. In film they might be referred to as pitch documents and in TV, show bibles or concept documents. The limitations of these documents are summary in form and do not necessarily reflect the actual work but a glimpse of how the work might be realised. The purpose of these documents is really to secure funding to convince government or industry that the idea is worth pursuing for further development or commission. The screen novel requires a type of reverse engineering where the creative work is explored first and then mined for the specific needs of marketing the idea (hence its dual function as a screen development document and an artefact in its own right). As a practitioner/researcher, I posit that the creative process, particularly the early stages of development, evolves from a creative confusion and dynamic struggle with the material at hand. Thus writing the ‘idea’ using novelistic techniques distances itself from the traditional industry approaches to screen idea development and enables the writer to explore without trying to second-guess or thumbnail the idea before it has time to form (as in Nash’s observation of the ‘quest for certainty’).

The central and only national funding body in Australia, Screen Australia, itemises and reflects the current documentation required for development funding. According to Screen Australia, development documents include: a one-sentence synopsis; one-paragraph synopsis; pitch version of the one-paragraph synopsis; one page synopsis; outline; scene breakdown; treatment; and scriptment. In the context of screen production these summary documents make sense, not only for the industry reader to quickly appraise the idea but also for the screenwriter to fish for potential interest. However, by writing the screen idea as a stand-alone work, that is the screen novel, the writer is encouraged to maintain interest and motivation in fully exploring the possibilities of the idea through keeping authorial control. The screen novel can supply the necessary creative and marketing documents as noted, by creating an inclusive and comprehensive text that embeds the information in the novel form. However, unlike the development document, with its attention to the business aspects of the process, the focus of the screen novel is the creative development of a screen idea. To this end the treatment and scriptment, as noted, are two documents that are worth exploring, as I view their function as being more to do with creative development than marketing. By
examining these two forms, I intend to position the screen novel as both a creative and business document.

The scriptment is a relatively recent addition to the list of development documents required by Screen Australia. It also occurs in other contexts, such as Kriv Stenders and Richard Green’s independent film *Boxing Day* (2007), and in particular the works of James Cameron. According to the James Cameron Online fansite (2017), the origins of the term scriptment can be found in reference to his 1987 film *Strange Days*: ‘Writing the script went through stages. I went off to my cave and came up with the initial document. It was supposed to be a treatment, but it was almost as long as a script, so we called it a “script-ment”’. Consequently the scriptment has been adopted by Cameron for other projects and several filmmakers have also deployed the scriptment as an alternative approach to screen idea development.

Screen Australia (2016) gives a detailed description of the scriptment, which can be found under the heading of ‘story documents’ on their website.

A scriptment, as used by Screen Australia in the context of our guidelines, refers to a document that is part script, part treatment, and may include visual materials. It is likely to be a more expanded and detailed document than a treatment or scene breakdown, and incorporate some scene writing and possibly images as well as prose.

(www.screenaustralia.gov.au)

This is a clear indication of how the screen novel might function within an industry context albeit a government-funded organisation. The similarities between the screen novel and the scriptment are close, for example the use of prose and image to develop and present the story. However, the screen novel expands on the scriptment by presenting itself as a complete work while simultaneously functioning as a source text for the imagined screen work.

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16 See James Cameron Online fansite <http://www.jamescamerononline.com/StrangeDays.htm>

17 ‘Scriptments on the studio level are often employed by bigger A-List writers who propose huge budget projects and need to give execs more than just a 2-line pitch in order for them to write a check. Examples of name talent that have employed scriptments include Quentin Tarantino, who prefers to write a great deal of prose to set up the world of his story before finalizing and editing his scripts, James Cameron, whose 114 page scriptment for “Avatar,” is longer than most screenplays’ (Sarantinos, J G 2011, Scriptfirm, Gideon’s screenwriting tips: now you’re a screenwriter).
By writing the screen idea as a complete work, it is my hope that the creative writing process is supported and encouraged through the act of writing. The screen novel is not based on summary or distillation of the idea nor is it designed to dismiss existing industry and pedagogical development models but rather to act as a precursor to such models. The focus of this research is to explore the screen idea fully and provide an alternative resource from which the various industry requirements can be accommodated. I assert that developing a screen idea to its fullest potential can only enhance its appeal. By its fullest potential I mean that the screenplay should come alive through descriptive writing and a focus on the story being told to communicate to other creative agents the realisation of the author’s original idea. Elisabeth Lewis Corley and Joseph Megel posit that ‘a less mechanical use of format in screenwriting, is a benefit to the end product of the screenplay: the film itself’ (2014, p. 13). This point is arguable because a screenplay could be flawed and tedious to read yet the film could also be a spectacular success. So I position the screen novel as a self-contained work that provides a platform for the writer to explore story and character and hopefully offer a positive reading experience, which in my experience is often not the case for screenplays. The screen novel is situated as a creative writing tool and acknowledges the ongoing stages of production to bring the idea to the screen.

Furthermore, by developing the screen idea in the form of a screen novel the screenwriter is empowered by retaining their original vision in a self-contained complete work. In the context of the screenplay as being a technical document there is an inference that the work is not complete. Development documents are the first stage of the production process and perhaps this position undermines the role of the screenwriter. The screen novel gives the (silent) screenwriter agency and control. To support this line of thought, the novel is acknowledged as complete with a potentially proven audience.

As stated, the screen novel does not require a process of adaptation; however, it should be written in a way that indicates its potential as a screen work, while maintaining its novel form. Winston notes ‘that the best selling novel, has always had one very attractive inducement for being made into a motion picture: the characters and story have already been tested on the public’ (1973, p. 53). The Australian drama Secret City (2016), for example, was based on the novels: The Mandarin Code (2014) and The Marmalade Files (2012), which were co-authored by Chris Uhlmann and Steve Lewis.
The Jack Irish TV movies Dead Point (2014), Bad Debts (2012) and Black Tide (2012) are based on the novels of Peter Temple and provide further examples of works that have existed in the public domain before being adapted for the screen. The published novel authenticates the story whereas the screenplay is a working hypothesis. Screenplays do have the potential to be published, however they are usually published after the film has been made. The screen novel also has the potential of being published, the difference being that it signposts itself as a complete work. In screen terms, we might understand this as a type of reverse novelisation.

I put forward that writing the screen idea in a novelistic style may enhance the practice of writing for the author and may result in a richer text. If for Burgess ‘so many things are generated by the sheer act of writing’ (Burgess cited in Millard 2010, p. 18) then the conventions of formatting and packaging of a screen idea into a series of development documents is pre-emptive, and more focus on the writing stage should be supported. This research also expands the way a screen idea might be written and draws on the illustrated novel and graphic novel to assist in visualising the text. The screen novel is a kind of prototype, which uses materials such as photographs and graphics as part of the design and creative process. As a ‘prototype’, the screen novel then has the potential to communicate the imagined screen work. Image is discussed in detail in Chapter 3 of this dissertation but for now I will continue with the technical and poetic aspects of the screenplay as they relate to the screen novel.

**Aspects of the screenplay: technical and poetic**

Ingelstrom discusses the variant forms of narrative voice within the screenplay and argues ‘references to the potential film can appear in the screenplay through different narrating voices, and [how] the screenwriter can use these voices to direct the reader’s visualisation of the potential film’ (2014, p. 31). Continuing with Ingelstrom’s observations of the narrating voices in the screenplay text, she states that the extrafictional voice offers information about the production elements of the intended film and the fictional voice offers information about the story. She notes that the layout of the industry screenplay can reflect these variant voices, for example the slugline, which provides location and time of day and scene description use the extrafictional voice. Ingelstrom notes ‘the screenplay … will always first and foremost exist in order to communicate the potential of the film’ (2014, p. 31). Conversely, the screen novel
draws on the novel form to explore the story rather than the visualisation of the story. This is a relevant difference in that the screen novel’s purpose is to tell the story first and foremost and while aspects of the visualisation (i.e., production) are written into the text, they are more inferences to the final screen work than actual directives for them. The research artefact Coyne (see Part 2) will explore how I might write these filmic directives into the text and Chapter 4 ‘Writing the Screen Novel’, will explicate and interpret this process.

According to Parker, a scene’s description gives a ‘description of the location… who is in the scene and when they are revealed to an audience… how the character/s look… the action of the scene… the basic visual framing… and Special effects’ (2006, pp. 174–175). Dialogue is formatted in the centre of the page with character names in capital letters and screenplay language is deployed to provide technical information, such as FADE IN, FADE OUT, C/U, FLASHBACK, DISSOLVE, V/O and other directives that inform and remind the reader that the text they are reading is intended to be a screen work (see Final Draft, Celtx software). Polonsky’s position on the screenplay’s voice is relevant here. He suggests a move ‘away from technology, away from exhaustive analysis and description of the shots […] towards compression, density, structure, elegance, metaphor, synthesis, magnitude and variety, all held within a unified verbal structure’, which he aligns with poetry (1996, p. 187). My argument here is that the varying voices within the screenplay can distract the reader from the story being told. The intention of the screen novel is to integrate the mix of technical and poetic information and move towards a ‘unified verbal structure’. The screen novel thus explores narrative voice from a novelistic point of view.

In regard to the fictional voice, Ingelstrom claims it can be divided into two distinct voices: the scene text and the narrator. She positions the narrator as the extrafictional voice and parallels the screenplay with the novel, citing the extrafictional voice in the screenplay as comparable to the ‘implied author, extrafictional narrator or extrafictional voice’ in the novel (2014, p. 37). She posits that the extrafictional voice assists the reader in visualising the story. Taking these observations, I explore the narrative voice in the screen novel in the context of the extrafictional voice in the screenplay. Specifically, if the extrafictional voice ‘is the voice that most directly conveys the thoughts and directions of the screenwriter’ (2014, p. 35), then it makes
sense that the fictional voice exists within the realms of the story. The screen novel combines both, creating a ‘unified verbal structure’.

Furthermore, Ingelstrom claims the fictional voice can be broken into the personal and impersonal voices. She states that the personal voice is evident in dialogue and the impersonal voice is a specific descriptive voice. The following example is an excerpt from the Coen brothers’ film, No Country for Old Men (2007) and demonstrates the use of screen language as encapsulating both personal and impersonal voices.

FADE IN:
EXT. MOUNTAINS - NIGHT
Snow is falling in a gusting wind. The voice of an old man:

VOICEOVER
I was sheriff of this county when I was twenty-five...

EXT. WEST TEXAS LANDSCAPE - DAWN/DAY
We dissolve to another West Texas landscape. Sun is rising.

( Joel and Ethan Coen, 2007)

In the above example, the extrafictional material FADE IN, EXT, MOUNTAINS, NIGHT, VOICEOVER, EXT, WEST TEXAS LANDSCAPE, DAWN/DAY, DISSOLVE provide the logistical information that could be embedded into the fiction as proposed in the screen novel. The personal voice resides in the voiceover of the sheriff; in the novel version of the film this first-person voice is represented in italics and occurs before the third-person narrator tells the story. The screen novel aims to diminish the extrafictional voice and embed the writer’s thoughts and directions through prose and image. According to Ingelstrom, the extrafictional voice does not reside in the fictional world of the story but is ‘directed to the production team of the real world’ (2014, p. 38). This means that the screenwriter of the traditional screenplay must write for a specific audience of industry professionals to a set formula that addresses the production requirements and ultimately the budget.

A development on the extrafictional voice is also made known through what Ingelstrom names as the ‘we formulation’ (2014, p. 40). According to Ingelstrom in this formulation the word ‘we’ is substituted for the word ‘camera’ (2014, p. 41). In other words the use of we see – we hear is simply the voice that speaks to the production and
the intended audience as in the above example, ‘We dissolve to another West Texas landscape’. This formulation positions the reader as camera and, although this is interesting, Ingelstrom notes this directive language is not necessarily followed by the director, as noted by Michael Arndt’s observations in the afterword of *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006) ‘the production team followed none of the point-of-view shots he had indicated in the text’ (Ingelstrom 2014, p. 42). The screen novel aims to represent the author’s intentions but rather than write using multiple voices that Ingelstrom has identified, it is my intention that the narrative voice of the novel form is flexible and unified and has the potential to speak to the reader in an intimate and nuanced manner from differing points of view that do not refer to production *per se*. Whether we see from the narrator’s or a character’s point of view, from an inner reality or an external one, shots can be implied through the point of view. Lubbock (1921) notes the novelist’s choices as being synonymous with the authorial voice, that is, the decisions made in terms of point of view and, the distance created when writing pictorially and then coming closer into the scene with dramatic writing – these decisions identify the unique style of the author. E. M. Forster refers to shifting perception in terms of expansion and contraction, which could be interpreted as a close up or wide shot in screen terms. This observation bears similarities to Ingelstrom’s idea of the extrafictional and fictional voice within the screenplay, which for me depersonalises the text through the use of slug lines, abbreviations and formatting. Using a ‘unified verbal structure’ and the fluidity of the novel form, I hope to expand the screenwriter’s toolkit to write a text that is less technical and more poetic in the sense that story, character and the authorial voice are brought into focus.

**The reader and the screen novel**

Although the focus of this research is the application of novelistic techniques in writing a screen idea the screen novel also offers a shift in current perceptions of the way a screen idea might be read. By writing the screen idea using novelistic techniques and removing technical information, the screen novel asks both the writer and reader to consider the story and characters foremost while imagining the text as a potential screen work. For example Corley and Megel note, removing the screenplay of any language that takes the reader out of the story ‘can only make the screenplay more vivid’ (2014, p. 27). In this way the screen novel attempts to broaden the audience beyond the film
and television industry and make the screen idea accessible to the general reader. Current industry practice assumes a level of technical knowledge and an understanding of screen language in assessing a screenplay and this is useful when planning a production schedule. By framing the artefact as a novel and embedding technical and production information expected in existing screenplays, series bibles or pitch documents the screen novel invites the reader to consider the screen idea not only as a text for a screen work but also as a stand-alone work – an ‘object on the page’. Therefore, the screen novel speaks to a range of readers interested in the development of a screen idea and is relevant to screenwriters, scholars interested in screenwriting practice studies, the industry and in the case of *Coyne*, crime fiction readers.

As highlighted, the screen novel is intended to appeal to a broad readership through a unified novelistic text. Writing on the screenplay, Claudia Sternberg claims, ‘Different types of readers are associated with the three functional text stages: property, blueprint and reading material’ (2011, p. 1). She notes the property stage is where the script is assessed for its marketability; the blueprint stage is specifically intended for production; and the reading material stage is, by Sternberg’s own admission, difficult to pin down because the screenplay is often a transcript of the completed film and does not necessarily reflect the author’s original intention before it moves through the various stages of production. I position the screen novel at the beginning of the development process and not the transcript end-stage of the completed film.

Finally, Maras states that ‘screenplays not only require an act of filming but also an “act of reading”’ (2009, p. 69). This observation is crucial to my project because it raises the question of whether industry would be interested in reading a screen idea in the novel form. For this reason, the screen novel is situated as a foundation text so that technical information and screenplay format can be created if and when required. The screen novel thus aims to fill the gap between visualising for the screen and providing the reader with a self-contained text in the novel form. A key point to make regarding the readership of the screen novel is that as an artefact the screen novel allows for a direct relationship between the screenwriter and the reader, whether it is industry or the general public. It is here that I wonder if and how prose might connect both the writer and the reader to the story world through the application of craft components such as syntax, active scene description, point of view and flow – discussions of which usually
feature in the discipline of creative writing but rarely in screenwriting. It is these aspects that comprise the following chapter.
CHAPTER 3
THE SCREEN NOVEL AND NOVELISTIC TECHNIQUES

In this chapter I discuss novelistic techniques available to the fiction writer in writing the screen novel and in doing so highlight how the screen novel differs from conventional script development processes. As noted, the screen novel deploys aspects of prose to develop a screen idea in a non-conventional manner, namely the use of: active scene description, syntax, rhythm, flow, tense, narration dialogue and interior monologue. These techniques are key elements of prose and although there are crossovers between the screen novel and the screenplay such as scene description and dialogue, all of the above elements will be deployed in the context of a prose-based approach to writing the screen idea. In addition to discussing prose techniques in the screen novel, I also discuss the screen novel as an inter-medial text that uses prototype materials such as photographs and graphics to communicate the author’s individual style and flesh out visual and thematic aspects of the story. Consequently, this research explores the potential of the novel form to present the screen idea purely in terms of the story to be told as opposed to the traditional show bible or pitch documents, which are summary in form and arguably pre-emptive when creating an original work. The screen novel is but one of several alternative screen development approaches (see Millard 2006; Packard 2011; Sawtell 2017) and contributes to the emerging field of screenwriting practice studies and the way we discuss the screenplay and screen idea development.

The screen novel uses novelistic techniques to develop a screen idea but to make this approach practical and relevant it should be viewed in relation to the traditional industry development process. For instance, Charlie Moritz follows the industry mantra that a ‘screenplay describes no more nor no less than what we can see (and hear) happening in the moment’ (original emphasis 2001, p. 41). Moritz is careful to note the limitations for the screenwriter; of particular interest is his warning against a novelistic approach to the screenplay suggesting prose/drama can make the screenplay ‘partially unrealisable’ (2001, p. 43). However, in discussing the craft of screenwriting, Moritz does acknowledge the need to balance levels of detail when writing action and setting and recognises the necessity to evoke mood and tone when writing scene descriptions; nonetheless he notes ‘a lot of the time you do only need the bare bones’ (Moritz 2001,
p. 43). The screen novel differs from the conventional novel in that it is written with a screen work in mind. Therefore, I suggest Moritz’s warning against a novelistic approach to screenwriting is not directly relevant to the screen novel. The screen novel proposes a detailed and comprehensive approach to writing the screen idea, which I outline in the section discussing active scene description. In proposing the screen novel as a development text, I situate the screen novel at the stage of conception and, in doing so explore story and character before it moves into the screenplay stage. Thus, the screen novel uses the tools and techniques available to the fiction writer in developing a screen idea and situates itself as a form of prototype for the imagined screen work.

In this regard, I refer to Millard who discusses her 1996 short feature thriller Parklands as a case study in the limitations of the traditional screenplay and ‘reconceived the project as essayistic fiction’ (2006, p. 3). She elucidates her process stating that she wrote the treatment using collaged image, a policeman’s diaries and notes. This approach is relevant to the screen novel because it offers a new perspective in screen development and demonstrates the potential to move beyond traditional screenwriting practice and the how-to genre. Millard wrote her ideas as an essay and moved between essay and script to develop the film. She notes the conventions of traditional industry formatting as being directed ‘towards a production and budgeting document rather than a creative record of a screen idea’ (2010, p. 17). This observation speaks to the intention of the screen novel as a document that retains the original screen idea and focuses on the creative [writing] aspect of the work. In terms of my own creative practice, writing the screen novel as an ‘object on the page’ shifts my approach in developing a screen idea in a similar way to Millard, in that the screen novel represents a creative record of my development process.

I put forward that approaching the screen idea using novelistic techniques might broaden the possibilities of exploring a screen idea. For example, in a traditional industry model a screen idea would be developed by mapping it out using a logline, synopsis, step outline, treatment, character profiles and, in TV, a pilot screenplay with ideas for further episodes (Moritz 2001; Douglas 2005; Grace 2014). As highlighted in Chapter 2, these summary documents can be more concerned with marketing and pitching rather than developing a complete and comprehensive screen idea. By ‘writing out’ the story in a novelistic form the focus is on the development of story and character; in addition, the resultant artefact is an autonomous work that counters the
industry model of the screenplay as a transient document. For example, Maras cites Jean-Claude Carrière in reference to the screenplay: ‘Once the film exists, the screenplay is no more … It is the first incarnation of a film and appears to be a self-contained whole. But it is fated to undergo metamorphosis, to disappear, to melt into another form, the final form’ (2009, p. 48). As a practitioner/researcher I want to change the discussion about what a screenplay is and suggest it might be seen as a stand-alone object ‘in and of itself’ while also functioning as a source document for the intended screen work. Through the act of writing the screen novel, the screen idea is made visible as an object on the page and it is here that authorial voice and expression of the idea resides until further development occurs. In the following section I discuss ‘active setting’ as a specific way of writing the screen novel, as it relates to scene description within the screenplay.

**Active scene description**

As highlighted, I consider ‘active setting’ in terms of ‘active scene description’ but I will defer to the term active setting in the context of Buckham’s observations. But first I wish to discuss scene description in the screenplay and the balance between insufficient detail and too much detail. According to Moritz ‘It should not be over descriptive but then again, it needs to evoke enough atmosphere to keep the reader hooked’ (2001, p. 44). Considering these broad observations, Moritz poses the problem not only for the screenwriter but also the screen novelist in that keeping the reader hooked is a challenge for any writer. The use of the word ‘hooked’ is interesting here as it aligns with screen terminology such as the logline or in business language the ‘elevator pitch’\(^{18}\), both which are about selling the idea in a quick, easily graspable form. The cover art of the screen novel seeks to sell the idea in this way, which I discuss in Chapter 4; however, the screen novel offers a different approach to industry development documents because it seeks to engage the reader through prose with an awareness of pace, mood and tone and also image. So how might active scene description hook/engage the reader?

In the context of screenwriting, I have found limitations in writing scene descriptions such as the need to write a ‘bare bones’ description *no more nor no less than what we can see (and hear) happening in the moment* (Moritz, 2001). Granted,

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screenwriting is a discipline that requires adhering to the form because of the collaborative nature of the screenplay as a production document where the screenwriter is encouraged to be economical and precise in their writing. Yet I find the idea of active scene description a useful tool that occupies the space between both the novel form and the screenplay.

By approaching the screen novel as a self-contained work, it is important to acknowledge the screen idea as an ‘object on the page’, therefore the screen novel is written in terms of what Buckham calls ‘active setting’. Buckham asserts ‘Active Setting means using your Setting descriptions to add more to your story than a passive visual reference’ (2015, p. 2). Accordingly, ‘active setting’ can establish location, time of day, reveal character, show emotion, create complication, show backstory and anchor the reader (Buckham 2015). Considering Buckham’s list of what active setting might bring to a text, I am interested in exploring the specific benefits that active setting might offer the screenwriter beyond the usual realm of scene description in a screenplay.

To highlight how active setting might inform a scene description, we can look to Janet Evanovich who is a New York Times bestselling author. Her Stephanie Plum series of mystery novels has 18 to date and her 1994 comedy crime novel, One for the Money was made into a feature film in 2012. Evanovich offers a contemporary pulp fiction style of writing and highlights how the screen novelist might approach a scene for the imagined screen work using plain or unadorned prose. The following text from Buckham’s book A Writer’s Guide to Active Setting uses an extract from Janet Evanovich’s novel Seven Up (2001) to demonstrate how active setting can be used to create a detailed scene description.

It was a sunny April day. But Stark Street looked dreary…
Pages from a newspaper cartwheeled down the street and banked against curbs and the cement stoops of cheerless row houses. Gang slogans were spray-painted on brick fronts. An occasional building had been burned and gutted, the windows blackened and boarded. Small businesses squatted between the row houses. Andy’s Bar & Grill, Stark Street Garage, Stan’s Appliances, Omar’s Meat Market.

(Evanovich cited in Buckham 2015, pp. 16–17)

The following example is my interpretation of Evanovich’s text in traditional screenplay format.
EXT. STARK STREET – DAY.
Pages of a newspaper tumble down a bleak-looking street.

Graffiti is painted on brick walls. We see some small businesses between run-down houses.

I posit that the above slugline and scene description lacks the tone, emotion and mood of the original prose description. However, it is representative of a traditional screenplay approach to setting where there is a ‘preference for economy and speed’ (Corley and Megel 2014, p. 24). The following example uses some of Evanovich’s detail to enhance the setting:

EXT. STARK STREET – DAY.
The street looks dreary. Pages of a newspaper cartwheel down the street and bank against curbs and the cement stoops of cheerless row houses.

Gang slogans are spray-painted on the brick walls.

We see the occasional building burned and gutted, the windows blackened and boarded.

Small businesses squat between the houses – Andy’s Bar & Grill, Stark Street Garage, Stan’s Appliances and Omar’s Meat Market.

By using Evanovich’s description of the setting to enhance the screenplay sample the scene is dynamic and creates a clear visual scenario for the reader to imagine. This example is an indication of how a prose rendition of a scene description (using active setting) might guide the reader towards imagining the story world and, for industry, how the scene might be realised for the screen. Buckham claims, ‘Setting that is active never intrudes on the reader’s experience of the story’ (2015, p. 238). Referring again to Ingelstrom’s notion of the varying voices within the screenplay, particularly the extrafictional voice that speaks to production elements of the work, I suggest screenplay format tends to take the reader out of the story. This observation is relevant because the screen novel is intended for the ‘story being told’ as discussed and aims to speak to the reader on both a technical and, more importantly, poetic level.
The screen novel: syntax, flow and style

David Jauss questions the meaning of flow as it is often used to explain ‘what’s good or bad about a story’ (2011, p. 59). Jauss suggests syntax is a key element in defining flow, particularly as it relates to the rhythm of the text. Virginia Tufte (2006) refers to rhythm in the form of parallelism, which is revealed through repetition and syntactic structures, which she outlines eloquently in the following passage:

Repetition and variation constitute that dual essence of prose rhythm, as they do of form in music or in painting. Many types of parallel arrangement, of balance and calculated imbalance in phrase and clause, of repetitions and ellipses, pairings, catalogings, contrasts and other groupings, assembled together into distinct prose textures, can contribute to the unique rhythms of almost any kind of prose. When the diverse shapes of parallelism are called into play, when careful structuring and more relaxed rhythms interchange and merge, writing can profit from a vast and fluid variety of patterns.

(Tufte 2006, p. 234)

It is interesting how Tufte’s observations also relate to the thoughts of Polonsky in his efforts to reframe the screenplay with a poetic sensibility and his use of syntactical arrangement and repetition to create a rhythmic effect as highlighted in Chapter 1 under the subheading Abraham Polonsky. I have found the application of syntactical structures and arrangement to be particularly relevant in writing the screen novel. For example, the screenplay is informed and shaped by its industrial end point and therefore not necessarily focused on the textual experience. By varying the syntactical arrangement using repetition and parallelism and making decisions regarding ‘point of view’, the writer’s methodology can assist in defining style and authorial voice, which is an important aspect of this research.

Tufte discusses syntax as style and suggests flow and cohesion are an important aspect of style in any piece of writing. I suggest a conscious deployment of rhythm and cohesion that is ‘making clear the relationship of one idea to another’ is a defining aspect of the screen novel (Tufte 2006, p. 237). Jauss asks, ‘How can changing the structure of our sentences change the way we think and feel?’ (2011, p. 69). He suggests syntax is more than a structural device and suggests the movement of a sentence in time

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19 Percy Lubbock deconstructs Flaubert’s Madam Bovary (1856) in terms of his method as it relates to the authorial voice (1921, pp. 32–40).
and space can change the dynamics of feeling. This point highlights how rhythm, point of view, choice of words and patterning of those words can define a writer’s style. The screen novel aims to provide a vehicle for the screenwriter to explore the nuances of syntax and create a style that might inform the ongoing development process as it moves through the various stages towards production.

Because the screenplay is a working document open for directorial interpretation, I consider style is undervalued in screenplay writing. As noted by Corley and Megel, ‘It would not be helpful to make the director feel he or she was being told his or her job’ (2014, p. 26). The screen novel is not just about combining technical and poetic elements; it also provides a platform for the writer to exercise their style, hence the text needs to be written with both page and screen in mind. The task of the screen novelist therefore is to render the screen idea as both a good read and a foundation document for industry development. According to numerous screenwriting manuals the screenwriter is encouraged towards speed and economy. The screenwriter is commonly taught how to write only ‘what we see and hear’ and as noted, style is often attributed to the director.20 The privileging of the directorial style has been aligned to auteur theory, which positions the director as auteur. Maras points out that the separation of the stages of conception and execution in the 30s and 40s ‘has everything to do with the battles over credit that took place in the industrial structure of the “old” Hollywood’ (2009, p. 21). Francois Truffaut who was arguably influenced by the Hollywood system further supported this shift towards the privileging of directorial style. According to Winston ‘The auteur theory is derived from certain critical writings of Francois Truffaut that appeared in the Cahiers du Cinema in the Fifties and primarily dealt with la politique des auteurs [“the policy of authors”]’ (1973, p. 43). 21 When analysing the success or failure of a screen work, the cinematic realisation of a director’s vision is discussed at length. Referring to Maras’s notion of ‘screen writing’ and ‘screenwriting’, it would seem that the act of writing on the screen supersedes the act of writing on the page

20 There are exceptions to this observation where the screenwriter is encouraged to write more stylistically, for example see Batty, C (2013) ‘Writing the screenplay’, in Harper, G. (ed.) A companion to creative writing. Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, pp. 98–114.

21 Alexandre Astruc’s article published in 1948 titled ‘La Camera-Stylo’ [Camera-Pen] makes the connection between cinema and literature: ‘cinema [becomes] a means of writing just as flexible and subtle as written language’. Astruc qualifies this notion by adding, ‘the filmmaker/author writes with his camera as a writer writes with his pen’ (cited in Winston 1973, pp. 15–16).
when discussing style, unless the screen work is specifically noted for its rich dialogue or is written by an established writer and the text is of literary significance. This is not the usual case because most screenplays are a plan for something else.

Referring back to the ideas discussed earlier regarding active scene description, cohesion and flow, I suggested that detail can assist the writer in imagining the story world and argued that the screen novel may offer the flexibility to explore detail in ways that the screenplay does not. Earlier, Moritz identified the need to ‘hook the reader’ and although such an outcome is difficult to verify, the example of novel writing as evidenced in Evanovich’s Seven Up (2001) displays how the screen novel might offer the scope to create a strong authorial voice and thus counter the ideas of speed, economy and neutrality within the traditional industry screenplay.

The screen novel: past tense

A key point of difference between the screenplay and the screen novel is the use of tense. Television and film play in the present tense and therefore the screenplay is written in the present tense. According to Packard ‘novels are most often written in third person, past tense’ (2011, p. 144). This claim is broad and is relevant to particular kinds of fiction. Examples of fiction that do not deploy the third person, past tense can be found in Simon’s Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets (1991) and in Young Adult fiction such as The Hunger Games (Collins, 2010). Packard elucidates on his assertion that most novels are written in the third person, past tense and suggests that the past tense allows the narrator to look back and give the sensation of guiding the reader through the narrative (2011). By writing in the past tense, the narrator has ‘lived’ the story and can recount it from multiple characters’ points of view. The omniscient narrator exists outside of the temporal dimension of the mise en scène and I suggest this narrator’s objectivity is analogous to the eye of the camera, and is therefore relevant in terms of writing the screen novel as a work intended for the screen. In this section I discuss the use of past tense and its relationship with the industry protocol of writing the screenplay in the present tense.

Jauss discusses the disadvantages of using present tense and suggests that it does not allow the narrator to build suspense, as they have no ‘knowledge of upcoming

22 Here I am referring to authors whose novels have been adapted for the screen, such as Cormac McCarthy, James Ellroy and Stephen King.
events’ (2011, p. 109). He asserts that it can restrict the ability to manipulate time, especially order and duration (2011, p. 105). Jauss makes the point that time can be manipulated through the use of flashbacks and flashforwards, but argues these elements undermine the sense of present-ness and the reason for writing in the present tense in the first place. Because the present tense is only concerned with the ‘now’, Jauss argues it is difficult to form complex characters because the causality is not evident. By using the past tense, the ordering of an event and the manipulation of time might assist the writer in creating complex characters and consequences for their actions. Whichever tense is being used, it is important to note that tense does influence not only point of view and voice but also pace and tone. As the screen novel is primarily a vehicle to explore and develop a screen idea and by this I mean story, character and theme, I intend to use the past tense due to the flexibility it offers in creating backstory and complex characters through the ability to utilise cause and effect.

The screenplay is written in the present tense to communicate what is seen and heard. Present tense offers a different voice to the telling of a story and using the past tense has the potential to give a sense of the ‘story being told’, and also to write from different characters’ point of view, in a non-linear timeframe, with variable pace and mood. Relating back to the screenplay, this means the screen novel allows me to write a new scene without having to establish a slugline and thus move between events that have happened or are happening. Different characters’ points of view can also be presented in this way. The task of negotiating the properties of the screen novel and the screenplay is to balance the need to tell a story in a novelistic style and at the same time lay the foundations for the imagined screen work. The role of the narrator is useful here to highlight how writing fiction and writing for the screen share similar ground. In the following section, I outline how the literary technique of the ‘framed narrator’ is deployed in film and TV to demonstrate how novelistic techniques might be utilised in screen practice.

**Framing the narrator**

The framing narration is a long-standing literary technique\(^\text{23}\) that allows the writer to set the scene for the main story. According to Kori Morgan (2017), ‘A framed narrative is a

\(^{23}\) Examples of the framed narration can be found in Henry James’ *Turn of the Screw* (1898), Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818).
story or set of stories included within the framework of a larger story’. The narrative voice of the framed narrator is from a first-person perspective and provides a context for the story to be told. An effect of using the framed narration creates a personal tone because the first-person account sets the scene and provides a context for the way a reader might interpret the story. This voice can also be used later in the story within the frame. Conversely, the omniscient third-person narration is more objective. The framed narrator can also shift perspective from within the story, that is, from a first-person to a third-person narrative voice. In addition, it might bookend the story so it is framed between a first-person introduction and a first-person ending, which is evident in the upcoming creative artefact *Coyne*.

Consequently, I am interested in exploring how the framed narrator might be applied to a screen idea and how it might relate to the screen novel. For example the framed narrative can be found in classic film noir and contemporary TV drama, which I discuss shortly. Totaro (2007) maintains the framed opening offers dramatic, narrational, stylistic and thematic elements. The framed narration provides information about the narrator and the context of the narration, and is useful in the way the screen novel is structured, particularly because it evokes a novelistic sensibility. By this I mean the framed narration draws on a literary technique of placing in context a story and imbuing it with a sense of the story to be told. This literary device can be found in classic and contemporary film and TV drama in the form of the voiceover. For instance, the framed narrator reflects classic noir story structure as seen in films such as *Detour* (1945), *Out of the Past* (1947) or *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), and modern TV dramas such as *House of Cards* (2013), *The Honourable Woman* (2014) and *Narcos* (2015). Like the framed narration, the voiceover can provide a context for the drama. Writing about the voiceover, Batty suggests it can ‘deepen our understanding of character and story’ (2012, p. 166). It would seem the framed narrator in film noir and certain long-form TV dramas is a pervasive literary device, and highlights how novelistic elements can be deployed in developing a screen work, as in the case of the screen novel. For example, in the film *Detour*, Al sits in a café and when a record is played on the jukebox, the camera slowly zooms in, the lights dim and we hear Al’s thoughts:
That tune, that tune, why was there always that rotten tune?
Following me around beating in my head, never letting up. Did
you ever wanna forget anything, did you ever wanna cut away a
piece of your memory … those were the days.

*(Detour, 3:38)*

We read the film from Al’s point of view as the record spins on the jukebox, there is a
cross fade to a bass drum and we find Al sitting at the piano playing ‘that tune’. The
film continues with Al’s voiceover providing a first-person account of the story. The
emotional context in *Detour* is made evident in this opening sequence right through to
the point where Al says, ‘If only I had known what I was getting in to that day in
Arizona’ (15:34). The film’s theme deals with fate, a classic noir meme, and positions
the character of Al as a troubled, hard-done-by, flawed hero.

Framing the narrator has become a signature device in long-form TV drama
where the narrator is highly visible, either on screen or as a voiceover. Contemporary
examples as highlighted include shows such as *House of Cards* (2013), *The Honourable
Woman* (2014) and *Narcos* (2015). In Hugo Blick’s *The Honourable Woman*, visual
storytelling is amplified with the voiceover of the protagonist, Nessa Stein, as she
infuses the title sequence with an introspective introduction as can be seen in the
following dialogue.

*Who do we trust? … We all have secrets, we all tell lies just to
keep them from each other and from ourselves … So when you
think about it like that. It’s a wonder we trust anyone at all.*

*(The Honourable Woman, 00:36–2:45)*

The same voiceover introduces each episode of *The Honourable Woman* but the visuals
differ, which provides an interesting dynamic between text and image. The voiceover
continues throughout the individual episodes and the focus on other characters shifts.
When Nessa voices her thoughts about trust, each episode raises the possibility that a
different character is now a possible threat and hints at a change in the story’s
development. This dynamic rekindles the ‘framed narration’ in terms of establishing the
shifting narrative context of each individual episode. The framed narrator is also
represented in the Netflix version of *House of Cards* (season one, episode one) with the
character of Francis Underwood. In this show, Underwood speaks directly to the viewer\(^\text{24}\), for example when Underwood attends to an injured dog:

> There are two kinds of pain, the sort of pain that makes you strong or useless pain – sort of pain that’s only suffering. I have no patience for useless things (strangles dog). Moments like this require someone who will act – do the unpleasant thing, the necessary thing – there. No more pain.  

\(^{(House \text{ of Cards, } 00:55–1:25)}\)

The onscreen narrator not only gives a literary quality to the scene, but also a theatrical mood is created; as Underwood delivers his ‘aside’ he strangles the dog and then looks directly to camera: ‘There. No more pain’ (1:25). In this short scene we are introduced to the narrator and tone of the drama. Underwood establishes himself as a character willing to take matters into his own hands (literally) and his actions give us an insight into his persona. The effect of this powerful introduction is that a bond between Underwood and the audience is established, which continues through the multiple seasons of the show.

The voice of the drama might best be considered as the authorial voice. In the film and TV examples in this section, the narrator is positioned as storyteller. What is of interest in relation to the screen novel is how the ‘framed narrator’ can be deployed in a screen work either through the voiceover and montage or flashback/flashforward. The framed narrator is a literary device that has been repurposed by screenwriters and highlights how elements of writing fiction can inform the screenplay.

**Interior monologue**

The traditional screenplay does not provide the flexibility of writing a character’s thoughts and feelings easily except other than through specific situations such as voiceover, dialogue (comment), soliloquy, gesture or action. Writing the inner world of a character using interior monologue can be a useful tool for the screen novelist because it can bring the reader into the story world, thus closing the distance between the text and the reader. However, writing interior monologue for the imagined screen work raises a key problem: if the screen novel can offer thoughts and feelings of a character,

\(^{24}\) Speaking directly to the audience is a theatre convention commonly referred to as ‘breaking the fourth wall’. In film and TV, the ‘viewer is eavesdropping on characters who function within a three-walled environment. The fourth wall is a transparent one through which the audience voyeuristically looks’ (Auter and Davis 1991, p. 165).
how might these be realised on screen? Dialogue from a character might reveal perceptions of how another character might be feeling or thinking but in the novel, interior monologue is usually the voice of the omniscient narrator or first person. In Coyne interior monologue is used specifically for the central character of Chris Coyne. Having Coyne begin the story in a bookshop establishes the story from his point of view. In this way, the screen novel functions as a development tool as Coyne’s thoughts and feelings provide more information than a screenplay approach to character might. In film and TV, the voiceover is commonly deployed to reveal the inner world of a character as in the example of the noir film Detour or the TV series The Honourable Woman. However, given the visual language of film and TV it is gesture and action that can reveal thoughts and feelings with most effectiveness. Therefore, the screen novelist has the option of writing interior monologue from the omniscient narrator’s point of view using action or gesture as in Hammett’s The Maltese Falcon (1930) or voiceover.

Another way to utilise interior monologue in the screen novel is to view it as a type of parenthetical for the actor, as in screenplay dialogue where the performance is indicated. In this instance, the dialogue might indicate that the character is feeling agitated. In the screen novel, the narrator would simply write that the character is agitated. This suggests that when writing a screen novel, one should be mindful of how thoughts and feelings would be made visible and the manifestation of a character’s inner world should be considered. Finally, perhaps allowing the screen novelist to express the inner world of the characters is also a method of understanding the character and could be viewed simply as part of a development process or text that might be used as a character profile in a show bible or pitch document. This point is supported by an earlier example of Tarantino’s prose-like approach in the screenplay of The Hateful Eight (2015) where information written will not necessarily be included in the film but is useful as a development process and his imagining of the screen work.
The screen novel and image

In attempting to find innovative ways of developing a screen idea, the screen novel also draws on a well-established tradition of presenting image alongside the text as a means of telling the story, for example the graphic novel, comic book, illustrated novel and the photo novel. As such, the screen novel will use image as a prototype material to explore the tone and theme of the intended screen work, as might be seen in a post-development/pre-production text such as the storyboard. In investigating the role of image in the screen novel, Gillian Rose (2012) is a useful reference because she offers a framework with which to interpret image and thus identify its effect. Rose suggests the site of production has three different modalities that might assist in understanding the construction of an image: technological, compositional and social. The first, for which she cites Mirzoeff’s (1999) work on visual culture, sees visual technology as ‘any form of apparatus designed to be looked at or to enhance natural vision’ (Rose 2012, p. 20). In this regard I intend to take the images for the screen novel on a smartphone and render them in Photoshop to create a noir/crime style with high contrast, low resolution and angular composition. It should be noted that I want to explore the use of image as a screenwriter’s tool and as such, the images should not be viewed as an exercise in commercial photography. Perhaps a different style of work might benefit from a more sophisticated approach to the use of images, a rom-com or sci-fi story for example. The point here is that image can reflect the mood or theme of a work in the way a publicity shot might. For the purposes of the research artefact, I use low-resolution, black and white images, except for the front and back cover, to reflect the crime genre of the work and to reinforce the tone of the drama.

Rose suggests the second modality, compositional, is used for critiquing visual material, for example ‘colour and spatial organization’ (2012, p. 20). Again the crime genre of the creative work and the noir sensibility will inform the type of images that will be used in the screen novel. For example, according to Conard, classic film noir might include the ‘tone of dark cynicism and alienation’ (2006, p. 10). I assert the use of image can be utilised to relay the visual style of the proposed screen idea. As noted

25 According to Jan Baetens, ‘the photographic novel was immediately presented by its producers and marketers as a completely new genre’ (2015, p. 219). The photo-novel evolved during the 1940s in Italy and Europe (Il Mio Sogno [‘My Dream’] 1947) and re-emerged in the UK and US in the late 70s and early 80s as a movie tie-in production … primarily as melodrama and romance. The photo-novel predates the VHS era and as such recreated films and TV episodes as novels (e.g. The Invasion of the Body Snatchers 1979) (Baeten 2015).
by Rickard (2016), visual elements of noir include: shadows, chiaroscuro, fog, rain, venetian blinds, ceiling fans, long twisting roads, and the city as spectacle. Some of these visual elements will be incorporated into Coyne in both words and pictures.

According to Rose the third modality, social, is broad and encompasses the ‘economic, social and political’ context that surrounds an image (2012, p. 20). By using images of actual locations in the screen novel, I intend to give a sense of verisimilitude and authenticity. For example, I attended several protest rallies against the East West Link tollway development project and collected images that might assist in placing the fictional narrative in a real-life context. Photographs of protest signs, maps and locations will assist in writing and developing the creative work, which will be demonstrated in Part 2 and reflected upon in Part 3 of this dissertation.

Rose’s reference points – technological, compositional and social – provide me with a framework to think about the way an image might be utilised. Using these three modalities, the screen novel explores the use of image with the intention of developing and manifesting a strong authorial voice. Furthermore, Rose makes the argument that ‘the most important aspect in understanding a visual image is what its maker intended to show’ (2012, p. 19). She expands on this idea by aligning the maker’s intention with auteur theory, which she asserts is ‘rarely considered in recent visual studies’ (2012, p. 19). I find the use of image as a visual cue to the author’s intention to be a useful line of thought to explore because the screen novel is intended to be a vehicle to represent the author’s aspirations for the screen work. Considering this purpose of the screen novel, it is interesting that Rose notes ‘most of the recent work on visual matters is uninterested in the intentionality of an image’s maker’ (2012, p. 19). This is because the modalities of the image’s production, the wider visual context and the audience interpretation may counter the author’s original intention. This point is echoed by Maras who notes that the screenplay relies on an ‘act of reading’ where the reader sees the imagined film in their mind (2009, p. 69). An image, specifically a photograph or graphic, also requires an act of reading and highlights the difficulty in controlling how an image might be interpreted. Nevertheless, I maintain keeping aspects of Rose’s visual interpretations such as technological, compositional and social in mind when using image would ultimately declare key intentions of the author, and for this reason the use of image is a viable tool at the disposal of the screen novelist.
Using prototype materials, the screen novel explores the possibilities of image within the narrative as a way of assisting the writer in developing a screen idea, and also in assisting the reader’s visualisation of the screen idea. Image can be used in a number of ways to develop a screen idea for example exposition, mood and genre. In Coyne news headlines and maps are used throughout the body of the work. The use of news headlines as a graphic reinforces the role of the protagonist, Chris Coyne and the story world that he inhabits, as well as pushing the narrative forward. In addition the ‘map’ is a literary and cinematic trope that can anchor the reader/viewer by providing a visual cue. The screen novel combines prose and image in developing the screen idea, which I suggest advances not only the traditional approach to the screenplay but also the tradition of the film novel and literary scenario, which favour the written word. Furthermore, the screen novel draws on the tradition of the comic book or graphic novel and I view the deployment of image in the screen novel as a novelistic technique. Image is an interesting addition to the creative work and opens new ways of thinking about the screen idea. There is a discipline in working with a still image in that the act of condensation or distillation can focus which kind of image to use and encourage the writer to question its purpose within the narrative. An iteration of the still image as a development tool is the storyboard.

The storyboard is an interesting crossover between novel and screen and storyboards are an essential element of screen development. According to Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, 10th edition (1996) a storyboard is ‘a panel or series of panels on which a set of sketches is arranged depicting consecutively the important changes of scene and action in a series of shots (as for film, television show, or commercial).’ Storyboards can assist in the visual telling of a story and can provide a very interesting approach to plot and event sequencing as well as editing and screen production elements. However, writing and developing storyboards is not the focus of this PhD, and I suggest future research into how storyboarding might be included in the screen novel could be explored.26 In the following section, I summarise the creative work: its premise, structure and intention, and place in context the deployment of novelistic techniques.

The creative work summary
As highlighted, the research methodology for this PhD is practice-based research. It is situated in the field of screenwriting studies and is based on the epistemological preliminaries that have informed my thinking about practice, which will now result in a performative research object – the screen novel. By drawing on established knowledge such as the film novel and literary scenario, and defining the difference between the screen novel and the adaptation of a novel, I hope to discover what the screen novel might offer through a make-and-reflect model. Until now I have discussed the traditional industry screenplay as being weighted towards a technical document with production as an end point, and position the screen novel as a development tool and precursor to the production process. As stated, the screen novel deploys the tools, resources and techniques usually available to the fiction writer, specifically active scene description, narration, dialogue and interior monologue, to explore the potential of writing a screen idea using the novel form. The screen novel also explores how point of view, tense, syntax, rhythm and flow might assist the writer in developing the screen idea and, as noted, also uses image to communicate the author’s intentions, visual style and thematic aspects of the story.

This screen novel is a six-part crime series titled Coyne and is inspired by the political events surrounding the infamous East West Link (referred to as the City Connect in Coyne) and the 2014 Victorian state election. The premise for the series is as follows: Chris Coyne is an investigative journalist who is conned into covering a story, which leads to an innocent man being jailed. The thematic concern of the series revolves around greed as an agent of political corruption and the search for truth as Coyne embarks on a journey to find who killed the Minister for Infrastructure, Gary Morley.

With the East West Link as a starting point, I have used a ‘What if?’ scenario to write and develop a multi-stranded narrative with an ensemble cast. Phillip Parker states that a screen idea requires ‘a clear sense of the story / subject and / or thematic concerns and its dramatic potential’ (2006, p. 57). I propose that the subject, theme and dramatic potential of Coyne might support a multi-stranded narrative with multiple characters that reflect a scale similar to that of a novel. The creative work uses Melbourne as the primary setting for the story and draws on prototype materials such as photographs and graphics in the form of news headlines and media screens to evoke a journalistic tone as
it relates to the story world. The story extends to regional Victoria, Perth and Karratha in the Pilbara. Although the setting is urban and focuses on the City Connect Link I wanted to include a wider landscape as a contrast to the inner-city drama that unfolds.

The scale of the creative work is an important aspect of this research because I am interested in exploring the potential of the screen novel as a development tool for a contemporary TV drama with multiple storylines. As each chapter of the research artefact is an intended self-contained TV episode, this detailed and comprehensive approach to developing a screen idea varies substantially from the traditional industry development process; one that I argue is skeletal. The screen novel offers the complete story as opposed to summary documents, such as the show bible in the case of TV or pitch documents in film, and through its novelistic writing, encourages the writer’s authorial voice and a reference point for the imagined screen work.

I should point out that some clichés have been used in writing Coyne. These relate to both dialogue and setting. This is because I set out to write a genre piece as a way of positioning the screen novel in relation to the existing canon of works that have been referenced in Part 1. In addition clichés ‘play an important role in filmmaking and screenwriting as a sort of shorthand expression that is easier to convey than the larger, more complex idea it represents’ (No Film School 2013, para. 1). In the context of this PhD clichés have been used as a bridge between the screenplay and the novel.

From a technical point of view it should be noted that in the screen novel a scene change is identified by a single space, italicised text and present tense is used in flashback scenes, and screenplay format is employed when the story is told through a second screen such as a TV. These elements are discussed in detail in Chapter 4. Finally, Part 2 of this dissertation is this creative work, which includes the projected front and back cover, a prologue by protagonist Chris Coyne, cast list, episode titles and the complete six episodes of Coyne: A Road To Kill. Part 3 will then reflect on the writing of Coyne, in response to the theories and ideas presented here in Part 1.
PART 2
THE CREATIVE WORK
POLITICAL THRILLER

DECEIT AND CORRUPTION

The city was a network of roads, freeways, and trains linked by a web of imperfect order. This was a first-world metropolis bursting at the seams – a city driven by self-interest and run by Fat Cats.

Chris Coyne, 47 is a hard drinking, troubled investigative jounro who is conned into covering a story which leads to an innocent man being jailed.

When Coyne wins the first prize at the Australian Media Awards for his story A Road to Kill: The Murder of Gary Morley, the team at Northside Media are ecstatic. But not for long – Coyne suspects he’s made a terrible mistake.

Morley was the Minister for Infrastructure about to sign off on the City Connect when Wilson ran him down on a country road... or so the story goes. Did Wilson kill Morley? Who wanted Morley dead?

In his search for the truth Coyne unravels a story he thought was watertight and discovers a world of corruption at the highest level.

A SCREEN IDEA FOR AN IMAGINED TELEVISION DRAMA

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CAST

MEDIA
Chris Coyne: *Investigative journalist*
Harry Breen: *Editor*
Jean Sayer: *Digital Media Journalist*
Marla Davis: *Police Media Liaison*
Tony Natali: *Journalist*

GOVERNMENT
Don McAlpin: *Minister for Infrastructure*
Richard Glenn: *State Premier*
Allen Harcourt: *Leader of the Opposition*
Josh Tindal: *Leader of the Greens*
Baily: *Detective*
Garver: *Detective*

BUSINESS
Belle Pieters: *Owner of VIP club and Pieters Transport*
Bob Pieters: *Truckie / Belle’s father*
Nick Artukovic: *Body Guard*
Sammy Naylor: *Bouncer*
Katherine Cheng: *Escort*
Frank Lester: *CEO Lester Holdings*
Darren Burke: *Owner of DB Constructions*
Fiona Burke: *Secretary at DB Constructions*
Karen Faris: *Lawyer*
Dale Wilson: *City Connect Protestor*
Cindy Wilson: *City Connect Protestor*
EPISODE LIST

Episode One – More Mobility – More Freedom
Coyne discovers political corruption surrounding the City Connect and suspects Wilson might be innocent for the murder of Gary Morley.

Episode Two – The Invisible Hand
Deals for the City Connect are made behind closed doors.

Episode Three – Fight or Flight
The City Connect goes ahead and Katherine is a liability.

Episode Four – The Hour of the Wolf
Did Wilson kill Morley and can Coyne find the truth before it’s too late?

Episode Five – The Dead Don’t Lie
Coyne traces Morley’s last trip to Little River.

Episode Six – The Body Politic
The State Election delivers a fatal blow as corruption is revealed.
PROLOGUE

Chris Coyne stood at the back of Readings bookstore in Carlton and looked at the small crowd, eager for the launch of his debut novel: *A Road to Kill: The Murder of Gary Morley*. His skin looked pale under the down lights and his brown hair and hooded blue eyes revealed his Irish DNA. Coyne looked nervous he took a sip of water and cleared his throat. ‘Thanks for coming, this has been a while in the making and seeing as there’s been plenty of coverage in the news I’ll let the book speak for itself.’ Coyne turned the page and read:

‘Melbourne was a city of high-rise buildings; hipster cafes and inner city apartments surrounded by a sprawl of brick veneer dreams. More people, more infrastructure for one of the most liveable cities in the world. Developers were awash with money and money talked. The politicians listened and businessmen rubbed their sweaty palms in anticipation of the next deal. City Connect was to link the West with the East – like a butter knife it would slice through the Western suburbs across to the East and eventually down to virgin land in the South East – Hastings. This plan was not without its opponents and rallies and protests continued for months as the Premier, Richard Glenn, tried to spin the plan as the most important development to happen in Melbourne in fifty years.

When the Minister for Infrastructure was murdered only a few months away from finalising the deal, I was a journo at Northside Media. I followed the story and with the evidence at hand – Dale Wilson, a pain in the arse protestor against the City Connect, was guilty as guilty can be. This story follows my investigation into the murder of Gary Morley and the conviction of Wilson.’
EPISODE ONE
More Mobility – More Freedom

The Little River Road cut across the Werribee plain just below the volcanic ridges of the You Yangs. As the sun disappeared behind Flinders Peak the high beam of a Ford pick-up shone on the car in front, highlighting the bumper sticker: More Mobility – More Freedom. Morley looked into the rear-view mirror ... the Ford accelerated and rammed the car, causing it to skid across the white line and broadside into the gravel apron. Morley spun the steering wheel left, right, left as sweat ran down his face and pooled around his neck. PANIC – his bulging eyes and shallow breathing a dead giveaway.

The Ford rammed a second time and Morley’s car catapulted forward. He stabbed the brakes – the car flipped on its side and slid into the scrub, metal screeching and sparks flying. The pick-up stopped – stillness, except for the ominous idling of the engine. Morley opened the door and his short, full frame fell onto the ground. He got to his feet – blinded by the headlights, doubled over with blood running from his temple, he limped to the side of the road. The engine growled, low at first then HIGHER and HIGHER. In a desperate attempt to escape Morley climbed the fence, but his trouser leg snared in the wire. Gears crunched, brakes released and the pick-up rolled Morley in barbed wire and dust. In a final statement the truck reversed, tyres inked in blood, revealing the body – LACERATED, MANGLED, DEAD.

SIX MONTHS LATER
The city was hot, dry and dusty. The wipers of a car streaked across the windscreen. A pedestrian held a handkerchief over her mouth. Sparrows pecked at an empty drink bottle and Melbourne baked in the longest and hottest summer since records began.

Northside was a small affair. You could easily miss it except for the black lettering on a glass door. *Northside Media* was an independent online news site located in an old reno’d leather factory in High Street, a part of Preston that had been a dead zone for years. Now it’d come to life with the Excelsior Apartments across the road, a hair salon and a soy candle shop on the corner. Coyne was the first to arrive. At 47, Coyne was still passionate about journalism and amidst an industry that seemed to be imploding he knew the value and power of a good story. The office was musty and airless. The overhead fans strained. A photo of his partner, Talia, and their young son, Will, sat next to his computer – he looked at them, paused, and then threw his bag onto the large trestle table that functioned as a collective workspace and turned the kettle on. The distressed red brick walls were tired like Coyne – he’d had a bad night’s sleep; mozzies, heat, sweat. Coyne switched on the large screen TV. He lifted the coffee to his nose and inhaled the single origin fragrance – sweet. He rifled through the kitchen drawer looking for a teaspoon. A cockroach ran across his hand, which he quickly flicked to the floor. He dumped two spoons of coffee in the plunger, poured the steaming hot water and stirred.

Owner Harry Breen lived upstairs. He was insecure, neurotic, refused to open windows and was morbidly overweight. Harry came down the stairs wearing his dressing gown and kangaroo moccasins. Still half asleep he grabbed Coyne’s coffee.
The news on the TV caught Coyne’s attention. He stared at the screen and Harry followed, like when a person points at the sky.

Harry yawned and scratched the back of his head. ‘Timing’s good – AMJA tonight.’ Jean pushed her bicycle through the front door. Harry thought she was too cool for school with her inner city chic and retro Dr. Seuss leggings, but she was a hungry stringer and a top hand with a camera. When she saw Harry she barked. ‘That’s my cup!’

‘Don’t look at me,’ said Harry as he looked at Coyne. Coyne ignored them both and stared at the TV while Jean grabbed the coffee from Harry’s hand. Harry made his own coffee while Coyne continued to watch the newsbreak. Coyne had worked the Wilson story and he thought good riddance. He picked up his phone and tweeted.

Chris Coyne  
@northsidemedia  
Wilson loses appeal. Good riddance! Wilson is a murderer and he was caught.  
8.45 AM - Dec 16

Don McAlpin turned his back on the Wilson news report and looked out over the Treasury Gardens. It was another hot day. Don was cool and pleased with his new position as Minister for Infrastructure and the Arts. He moved away from the window and sat behind his desk. It was a big desk for a little guy. Don carried himself with certain aplomb. He had a head full of hair and a boyish charm, but from Don’s point of
view there was a downside – it was his height. He suffered from small dog syndrome. The media referred to him as *The Poodle*.

Megan Mathers appeared in the doorway. ‘I’ve got these files on the City Connect.’

Don responded in his good-natured, slightly condescending tone of voice. ‘Good, leave them on the desk.’

Megan had been Gary Morley’s secretary until his untimely death. Don was her new boss and she was keen to step up to the plate. ‘Do you need me to do anything before I go?’

Don nodded ‘No’, but Megan demonstrated initiative. ‘I’ve put your things in the meeting room. Do you want me to get them?’

Don loved the attention and nodded ‘Yes’. He checked the time and made his way to the Minister’s private bathroom. He lathered his hair and sang – *Every time it rains it rains, pennies from heaven*…

As night fell, flames from the five concrete pillars in front of Crown Casino shot into the air like some ancient Zoroastrian fire temple. Preparations for the Australian Media and Journalism Awards were in full swing. White linen tablecloths billowed like sails then collapsed onto circular tables; glasses and cutlery were laid out and a water lily centerpiece was positioned in the middle of each table.

The MC, ABC journo Tony Natali, held several pieces of paper and went over the running order. Tony repositioned his earpiece to make sure it was secure. ‘You’ll cue me?’

The event manager wore headphones and speaker mic. He nodded affirmative while the audio guy asked Tony to speak into the microphone. ‘Check, check.’

Good, said the tech with about as much life as a dead fish. The AMJA was another corporate event in the never-ending corporate calendar year.

Down at Docklands a Chrysler rose from the underground car park. It inched forward in a sea of traffic. Belle Pieters sat with Nick Artukovic, a gun for hire. Belle paid him well to look after her business matters, which were substantial. Nick was a
thug but a handsome one, early 30s, thick black hair, dark eyes, strong chin, slender hands and loyal. Nick was ex-military.

Don was feeling impatient. Where is she, he thought. They’d planned drinks at South Bank and the flames from Crown seemed to echo his temperament. He rang Belle.

She had her phone on speaker – stuck in traffic. Belle’s driver was Sammy the Kiwi, his porcine gut pressed hard against the steering wheel. He honked the horn.

Don still on the phone. ‘Where are you?’

Belle was annoyed at Don’s tone. ‘I’ll meet you at Crown.’ She took out a cigarette and Nick provided the flame. She inhaled then expelled a cloud of smoke, which quickly filled the car. She opened the window. A tin rattler with a visy vest and a gammy leg hobbled amongst the stagnant traffic. His tin had a multiple sclerosis sticker wrapped around it. Belle waved the guy over. She handed him fifty dollars then butted her cigarette in the tin and said, ‘Nothing’s for free.’

A slow ride in a fast car, Belle eventually arrived at Crown for dinner and drinks – lights, camera, action.

Inside the Palladium at Crown guests sat at their tables trying not to get drunk, waiting, anticipating recognition for all their hard work. The nerves were palpable at the Northside table. Harry tugged at his tie and kicked his shoes off as a way of containing his excitement. Coyne looked across the crowd and caught the eye of Morley’s wife, Jane. She stared back – her thin lips parted momentarily then retracted.

Natali introduced the contenders for the best investigative journalism trophy. ‘The finalists are: ABC Dateline – Bruce Shamrock and Erica Austin; Southern News –
The lights dimmed and a short grab played from each of the contenders. When the Northside story appeared on the large screens framing the stage, Coyne could feel his heart miss a beat.

NORTHSIDE MEDIA
A ROAD TO KILL: THE MURDER OF GARY MORLEY

The vision rolled to show Dale Wilson standing at a Save Public Transport rally with the Minister for Infrastructure, Gary Morley. The protestors were a mix of young and old. Children ran to the face painting table to have glitter sprinkled on their faces, silver haired greenies stood with their bikes and angry mums booed and chanted – NO TO THE EAST-WEST, STOP THE CITY CONNECT.

Morley stood at the microphone, the sun causing him to squint his eyes. ‘The government is committed to all forms of transport. That means the city connect…’

A protestor with a megaphone bleated. ‘Get off! No to city connect.’ The crowd followed. ‘No to city connect.’

Morley continued. ‘If you let me explain … public transport is an integral part of our planning policy…’

A cyclist yelled. ‘Bullshit!’
Morley wiped the sweat from his forehead with his arm, his face reddened. Frustration turned to anger and he left the stage. Deep in the mob a young woman approached Gary. Her hand grabbed his for a short moment then released.

The video continued to play as Coyne watched with renewed interest; after all this was prize-winning journalism on a big screen. The woman in the crowd grabbing Morley’s hand seemed odd. He’d seen the footage before but now on a large screen, the detail was noticeable. He wanted to watch it again but people were applauding and he wondered if the booze was clouding his judgement.

Natali then introduced Don McAlpin, Minister for Infrastructure and the Arts. Don glided across the stage and Natali adjusted the microphone to account for Don’s diminutive stature. ‘I’m honoured to announce the winner for Best Investigative Journalism is Northside Media and Chris Coyne for his story, A Road to Kill: The Murder of Gary Morley.

The Northside journos made their way to the stage with Harry in his socks. Harry always looked disheveled. His blonde hair was sticking up like some kind of street sculpture. Coyne wasn’t much better, at least his hair was in place and his smart casual suit coat only had a few creases. Jean looked sharp. She was the only one at Northside who had some understanding of style – a printed batik scarf draped around her neck and giant earrings dangling from her tiny lobes. Coyne was first onto the stage and with wide-eyed enthusiasm he accepted the Perspex award. He moved towards the microphone. ‘This is for Talia and Will. Nothing can bring them back, nothing, but one thing I know – they’d be stoked at this’, he held the award into the air, ‘thank you.’

Harry seized the moment. ‘I want to thank Chris and Jean. I want to acknowledge Gary Morley’s family, in particular Gary’s wife, Jane. Journalism has a role to play beyond phone hacking and celebrity meltdowns. More power to independent media.’ Harry was a showman. He understood the industry and his heartfelt speech ticked all the boxes. Applause.

The AMJA proceedings were short as the real show was about to get under way – the pressing of flesh and flashing of teeth. The event was full of media sharks and minor celebrities. Don circled the room shaking hands, smiling and waving. It was a good publicity opportunity – McAlpin Attends Media Night – Supports the Arts. The small
jazz combo, Velour Jam, played their particular strain of insouciant musak as the crowd networked.

Belle Pieters looked stylish and business-like in a well-cut pants suit. She raised her glass to Don’s ever-watchful eye as various guests congratulated him on his new position as Minister for Infrastructure and the Arts. People mingled – flamingos on a lake, but Coyne couldn’t think of anything but the image of the mystery girl grabbing Morley’s hand.

His thought was broken by the unctuous manner and voice of Tony Natali. ‘Congratulations, Coyne.’

Natali was old school ABC. He didn’t particularly like Coyne and Coyne didn’t particularly like him. They knew each other from Monash University and as far as Coyne was concerned, Natali was a snake – one of those social media journalists – speculative, opinioned, smug. He said, ‘Road Kill is a real winner. The media nailed him before it even got to trial. Big story I’m not surprised you won.’

Coyne replied, ‘You suggesting I milked it?’

Natali, ever the smiling assassin. ‘Like I said congratulations.’

Natali moved towards the buffet and Jean approached Coyne; he frowned and looked quizzical. ‘The footage of Morley…’

‘What?’ asked Jean.

‘When Morley stepped off the stage a woman grabbed his hand.’

Harry slapped Coyne on the back. ‘There’s a lot of buzz.’

Coyne redirected his question to Harry. ‘Was Morley having an affair?’

Harry was on cloud nine and had no intention of mucking up a perfectly wonderful evening. ‘Not that I know of.’

On the other side of the room Don approached Belle. She turned and faced him. ‘I’m not happy.’

Don reminded Belle who she was talking to. ‘Don’t be petulant, the wheels are turning.’

Belle knew exactly who she was talking to. ‘Cut the spin and push it through.’

Yelling could be heard across the room. People looked frightened, others smiled thinking it was some kind of agit prop theatre moment – a flash mob or a prank? It was a protestor, in a tight fitting waiter’s jacket. He jumped onto an empty table – glasses fell over, some onto the floor. Chatter stopped, jaws dropped.
Flyers sailed through the air and littered the floor. Security grabbed the rebel and dragged him through the exit door and down to the car park.

Sammy and Nick sat in the front seat of the Chrysler and witnessed the waiter rip off his jacket throw it at the security guard and storm off ranting. ‘We don’t need another road!’

Sammy sniffed. ‘If we was in New Zealand, we’d beat the shit out of a prick like that. Look at those guys, piss weak.’

Nick turned to Sammy. ‘Why don’t you go back?’

Sammy’s tone took a serious dive. ‘Bikies. Street gangs. Everyone is fucked up.’

Nick came from Croatia. ‘Back home we take care of shit like that.’

Nick’s phone rang.

Belle spoke, ‘Get the car, I’ve had enough of this swill.’

The VJ’s continued with their low-key jazz as the guests moved and chatted amongst themselves. Belle turned to Don and whispered in his ear. ‘Thank you for a lovely evening, Don, I thought you looked marvelous on stage.’ She then made her way to the Casino Atrium and waited for her car.

With his newfound notoriety Coyne answered questions about the future of journalism. He watched the staff across the room as they picked up flyers and put them in champagne buckets.
Marla Davis, red hair and dressed in a grey pencil skirt with matching jacket, approached. ‘That was dramatic. Great job on the Morley story.’

Coyne knew Marla from his days as a courtroom reporter. ‘Haven’t seen you around.’

‘Media liaison.’ She gave a cheesy smile, sending up her new position in the Police Media Unit. ‘Call, we’re here to help.’

Coyne smiled.

Marla had been an investigative detective on the Piranha Task Force. She’d spent ten years in homicide and it’d taken its toll – shot in the arm, clavicle fracture pinned with a metal rod. She’d seen despicable acts by hate fuelled maniacs – she requested a desk job and she got it. Marla turned to find her guest, Jake – highway patrol cop, who waved from across the room – a shag on a rock.

She left Coyne. ‘See you round.’

Coyne finished his drink.

The mirror ball spun and laser lights dazzled the room as the band started to play their Latino bracket. It was Don’s cue to bust a few moves. Lizzie Halpern joined him. Photos of the politician and the weather girl dancing were destined for the social pages and they knew it.

Brunswick Street was bumper-to-bumper. Neon lights, booze and the excitement of a hot summer’s night fuelled the crowds. A drunk rushed towards the taxi and banged on the window. ‘You goin’ to Footscray?’

The driver turned to Coyne. ‘Look at this idiot.’

The run was slow from Alexandra Parade through Clifton Hill and along High Street. After thirty minutes the taxi pulled up at Northside Media. It was late and while Harry and Jean continued to party at Crown, Coyne had other things on his mind. He stepped into the office, clicked on the down lights and pulled out a cardboard box stuffed with folders and documents. He retrieved the folder ROADKILL and sat at his computer. He played the footage of the City Connect rally, confirming what he had seen – mystery girl holding Morley’s hand. He took a screen shot of the moment and sent it to his mobile. He adjusted the photo of Talia and Will and when his phone pinged he checked the jpg looking at it carefully with fixed eyes.
From the quiet suburban streets of Preston to the inner city vibe of Docklands with steel and glass rising skyward, the city was changing rapidly. Nick lived in an apartment at Waterfront City, which Belle had set up for him. He turned on the large screen TV and played a DVD – Thompson, a heavy metal band, thumping and grinding their axes. Sammy smoked a foil and made a deep impression on the plush lounge.

Nick looked at Sammy and shook his head disapprovingly. ‘You should take more care of yourself.’

Sammy lit up. ‘Whaddaya think I’m doin’?’

‘Getting drug fucked. Go back and kick those gang fucks in the arse.’ Nick admired the guitarist on the TV, ‘you like this music?’

Sammy was getting wasted. He nodded his head. ‘Yeah it rocks. I’m goin’ to the club, you comin’?’

Nick turned up the music and jumped on the exercise bike. ‘Later.’ As he pedalled he looked out over the Westgate – it sparkled with car headlights snaking their way in and out of the city in a steady constant stream.

Coyne walked back to his apartment in Miller Street. As he waited to cross St. George’s Road he checked the photo on his mobile and thought about the Roadkill story. Morley and the girl looked pretty friendly. Coyne managed a few hours sleep – a mozzie tormented him throughout the night. He tossed and twisted and held the pillow over his head to stop the buzz and the bites – he fell asleep around dawn and it was then that the past came flooding back.

**A Wattlebird squawked and Coyne reluctantly opened his eyes. The first thing he saw was the AMJA award sitting on the bedside table. The Miller street address was the**
family home. Remnants of their past life were found in pictures of overseas trips: the Sagrada Familia, Will sitting in a Manila Jeepney, Rockabilly Elvis’s in Harajuku, ornaments like the Raku vase that Talia had made at the Northcote Pottery, Will’s swimming goggles and the Sherrin footy kept the memories alive.

When Coyne arrived at Northside Harry had the television on, wanting to catch every glorious moment of their night. Coyne walked in to see Harry glued to the screen – the Minister for Infrastructure and the Arts giving a doorstop interview. To Harry’s dismay it wasn’t about Northside.

NEWSREADER
Don McAlpin was hounded by City Connect protestors today as he arrived at Parliament House.

STEPS OF PARLIAMENT HOUSE

PROTESTORS
Trains not Tolls. Stop the City Connect! No more Roads.

REPORTER #1
Is the City Connect going ahead?

DON
The City Connect is a part of the overall strategy to free Melbourne from the increasing gridlock created by the Labor Party, who did nothing for their entire term of office. This project is most definitely going ahead.

REPORTER #2
Will the government wait until the election is over before signing off on such a major project?

PROTESTORS
Trains not Tolls. Stop the City Connect! No more Roads.
DON
No. The Labor government sat on their hands for too long. We are moving ahead.

REPORTER# 1
Mr McAlpin any comment on Dale Wilson’s appeal?

DON
Wilson’s a convicted killer. I don’t have anything more to say.

A SCUFFLE BREAKS OUT IN THE CROWD.

REPORTER #2
Mr McAlpin, the investigative journalism award went to Northside Media. Was that a political decision?

DON
I don’t know what you’re talking about.

REPORTER #1
What happened at the AMJA last night?

DON
I had a great night.

DON MOVES TOWARDS HIS CAR – AN EGG SPLATTERS ON THE WINDSCREEN. HE OPENS THE DOOR AND DISAPPEARS BEHIND TINTED GLASS.

Harry turned away from the TV. ‘Professional jealousy, they don’t want to talk about us because we beat them to it.’
‘Maybe it’s not that newsworthy.’
‘And McAlpin is?’
Harry clapped his hands together and rubbed them greedily. ‘The City Connect is a hot topic.’

Coyne emailed the screenshot of Morley and the girl to Marla Davis, requesting ID information. He turned to Harry and said, ‘Something stinks about the Morley story.’

‘He was probably having an affair. He was a politician. Think about his family.’

Coyne was thinking about the girl.

‘We won – you wanna say the story was wrong?’

Harry was getting tetchy, hot and sweaty, he took several deep breaths. ‘The trouble with you is you don’t know when to give up.’ He slipped on his jacket, left the office and said, ‘I’m gonna press the flesh.’

The Speaker slammed his gavel on the anvil. The sound was hollow and reverberated throughout the chamber.

The leader of the Labor party, Allen Harcourt yelled, ‘Labor will not support this decision.’

The Greens representative for Darebin, Josh Tinda stood. ‘We don’t need more roads we need more intelligent decisions. He turned to the backbench. ‘McAlpin’s all style no substance. Stop the City Connect.’

‘Order, order in the house. Would the Honourable Member for Darebin, please refrain from interjecting and allow the Minister for Infrastructure to continue.’

Don nodded and puffed his chest forward. ‘Mr Speaker, the City Connect project is in the final stages of securing the tender for phase one.’

Tinda interjected. ‘No way, you’ve got no right.’

The Speaker banged the gavel with a single ceremonious thwack! ‘I will ask the member for Darebin to leave the chamber for a period of one hour.’

Don smiled and nodded in appreciation of being given the floor once more. ‘Mr Speaker, my department is currently reviewing the tender submissions and will make a decision. A decision I might add that will benefit, will absolutely benefit, the people of this great state of Victoria and their generations to come.’

Cries of approval could be heard. ‘Hear, hear!’
Don shook hands with fellow members and strolled down the corridor with his secretary, Megan Mathers, holding a notebook and pen. ‘Cancel that meeting with Tindal – a waste of time. Don’t reschedule anything till after lunch.’

Megan was on the job. ‘Will you need your car, because they’ll have to send it out to be cleaned.’

Don hated having an egg thrown at him. It was humiliating and now the Minister’s car needed a $1,000 makeover. He paced around the desk, swore under his breath. ‘Bastards, who do they think they are?’ Megan stood and watched as Don displayed the maturity of a hamster. He picked up a document from the table. ‘What’s this?’

Megan stood with her arms by her side. ‘I need you to sign off. It’s authorisation for the car to be detailed.’

Don threw it back onto the table, ‘Later.’ Don loved to see himself in the celebrity pages of the news, stylish and important not as target practice for angry rabble. Being egged was an insult to a man who had risen through the ranks to become the Minister for Infrastructure. ‘No, I have a meeting in Docklands it’ll be easier to take the tram.’ He grabbed his sunglasses and slammed the door on his way out.

Belle turned off the shower and wrapped a beach towel around her body. She shook the water from her hair, tied another towel around her head and walked into the main living area to find Don sipping tea and enjoying the morning sunlight as it streamed through the luxury Docklands apartment.

‘I suppose you think you looked good this morning.’
‘Apart from having egg on my face, I like to think I look good at all times.’
Belle moved to the kitchen bench and poured tea for herself.
‘Things are moving slower than I’d hoped.’
Belle’s voice took a tone of urgency. ‘I got a call from Harry Breen, says his gun journo Chris Coyne is asking questions about Gary Morley.’

Don’s eyebrows lifted. ‘The journo from last night? Gary’s death was unfortunate – shows how desperate journalist are. He won an award, what’s his problem?’
Belle joined Don on the lounge. ‘I’ll keep an eye on him.’ Belle’s hand circled Don’s face then slapped it hard. She grabbed his tie and pulled him close – he could feel the breath between her lips. They were interrupted by a loud thump.

Belle turned to see a smear of blood on the fourth floor window. She stood up and looked at the blue sky with wispy strands of cirrus clouds. Her gaze dropped downward, peering to see what it might have been. Don moved towards Belle and slipped his arms around her waist. ‘Where were we?’

Belle turned to face him. ‘I’ll take care of the media and you get on with being the Minister for Infrastructure.’

Don pulled Belle closer to his chest. ‘I like the sound of that.’

A council street sweeper with its amber light spinning around like it was an emergency flicked the carcass of the seagull to the gutter as it rumbled along the promenade. Nick sped up the ramp of the underground car park. He pulled up in High Street, Preston, about a block back from the Northside office – binoculars, focus, zoom and watch. He waited. Coyne stepped out of the office; sunglasses, 90s blue Toyota Corolla, engine on, indicator on. Nick followed.

Coyne took the Western Ring Road. It was adorned by industrial sculptures and architectural textures – multi-lane freeways with crossovers and lane changes. Nick didn’t miss a beat.

Coyne rang Marla to discuss the girl – speakerphone. ‘She’d be about mid twenties, maybe Young Liberal?’

Marla was keen to assist Coyne; the intrigue got her juices going. ‘I got the pic but that’s not much to go on. What about a name?’

Coyne took the Barwon Pringle turn-off. ‘That’s where you come in.’

Barwon Prison car park, a government institution made of pale green corro and concrete. Once he’d passed through the boom gate, Coyne parked and felt the vibe – misery. The car park was a no man’s land – hot, dry wind burnt your face and the bitumen heated the soles of your shoes. A desolate stretch that spanned the prison walls – white lined parking bays sectioned off with small shrubs that were dry and lifeless. The Southern end of the car park was closest to the visitors’ entrance. Midway to the
main prison was a designated helicopter pad. Coyne walked towards the visitors’
entrance past the helipad – Nick watched from the Southern end of the car park, close
enough to see Coyne disappear into the bowels of the satellite city of misfits and
murderers.

He was led through the hi-tech security: drug detector, X-ray, metal detector and
iris scan. The visitors’ area had blue carpet, cream walls and white plastic tables with
seats bolted to them. Wilson entered and sat opposite Coyne. Wilson’s hearing was
gone – deaf as a doorpost. He turned up his hearing aids, they squealed and shrieked.
He ran his hand over his thinning hair. His narrow face rock hard, eyes clear blue and
motionless. ‘What do you want?’

‘Ask a few questions.’

Silence. Wilson stared at Coyne. He thought here’s the bastard who helped to
stitch him up; Coyne the award winning jounro come to gloat? Come to admire his
work? Wilson stood up and began to walk.

Coyne persisted. ‘Did you know Morley was having an affair?’

Wilson stopped and turned. ‘News to me.’

‘Did you ever see him with a girl, maybe 20-25?’

Wilson thought for a moment. He turned his head and cast his eyes towards the
floor, then looked back at Coyne. ‘I couldn’t say.’

‘The night you killed Morley …’

Wilson moved forward, leaned in across the table. ‘I didn’t kill Morley.’

‘You don’t remember because you were drunk. Come on, you were found
behind the wheel. You crunched him into the dirt.’

‘He was a snake … doesn’t mean I killed him. I was spiked.’

‘I’ve heard this story before. What was your problem with Morley?’

‘They were gonna take my house.’

‘So you killed him?’

‘What do you want Coyne?’

‘The truth.’

‘Truth is a strange thing.’

‘If you can’t remember anything, then I guess the truth is what you wanna
believe.’

‘How about some justice?’
How about the facts.’ Coyne handed Wilson his business card, ‘tell me something I don’t know.’

Wilson was led back to his cell – painted cream besser brick walls, bed, shower, toilet, intercom. He would be locked in there for the next 20 years, 16 hours a day – plenty of time to remember. He stretched out on his bed. His hands cupped behind his head. He recalled walking into the Little River pub.

*Four locals at the bar. Wilson looks at his watch, orders a beer and sits outside. It’s dark. The sound of the cicadas breaks an otherwise peaceful summer’s night. He drinks his beer and waits...*

***

Wilson held Coyne’s calling card in his hand.

CHRIS COYNE
NORTHSIDE MEDIA
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Standing in the car park, Coyne called Harry. ‘I’m at Barwon.’

‘Not Wilson? I thought we agreed to let that go, mate, there are other stories out there. We won the prize – you have to know when a story has run its course.’

‘You want Wilson to rot for something he didn’t do?’

‘Of course not, but Morley having an affair doesn’t change anything.’

‘We don’t know that.’

The sun set over the You Yangs as trucks and cars vied for the optimal lane on the Geelong freeway. Coyne stopped off at the Spice and Treasure for a paneer tikka and a vegetarian vindaloo. He decided to drop in and see Harry – smooth things out.

Coyne climbed the stairs and called out Harry’s name. No answer. He switched on the light and found him asleep on the couch, naked. Harry bolted upright. He swung his legs to the floor and awkwardly shoved his legs into his pyjama shorts. After a moment Harry assumed his position of chief editor and owner of Northside Media.

Coyne grabbed a couple of craft beers from the fridge. ‘You hungry?’
‘Smells good,’ said Harry.
They laid the food on the coffee table and popped the beers.
In a spirit of friendship Coyne asked, ‘Since when did you become a naturalist?’
‘You mean naturist ... I’m not.’
‘You just like to free-snake it?’
‘The anxiety seems to be getting worse. The doc said I should do the yoga thing.
It helps to get my gear off.’
Coyne noticed Harry’s shoes by the wall, remembering the ‘no-shoes’ at the awards night. ‘You just get a feeling?’
Harry remained silent and then turned on Coyne and asked him what the hell he was doing at Barwon.
‘Is he guilty? If he’s guilty that’s all good but if he’s not then I’ve made a major stuff-up. We’ve made a major stuff-up.’
Harry said it was a done deal, keen to ride the wave of popularity. ‘The trouble with you is you don’t know when to give up.’ Harry was groggy and in no mood to argue. ‘Let it go.’ He took a swig of the beer. ‘Nice that Talia and Will got a mention.’
Coyne nodded.
‘You were like this when you broke the ice story.’
‘When they were gunned down I made a choice. I follow the story. You can’t hedge your bets Harry, that’s not a life.’
Harry sighed, stood up and dragged himself to the bed, which was behind one of those folding screens with dragons and tigers. ‘Wilson’s guilty. That’s the end of that story.’
Coyne curled up on the banana lounge and tossed and turned throughout the night. The morning light filtered through the transom windows. Coyne groaned and opened his eyes and for a moment had a look of where am I. When Harry came downstairs Coyne was at the computer. Harry scratched the back of his head and started to make coffee.
‘Find anything?’
Coyne ignored him.
The coffee started to percolate.
Harry placed two cups on the bench. ‘We’re not cops, we’re journos; bloody good ones.’ He poured the coffee.
Jean arrived flustered, waved her hands, twisted her head and began to rummage through the shelves. ‘Public transport! If only they kept to the timetable, is that so hard?’ She grabbed a camera bag, tripod and batteries. ‘Glenn and McAlpin are giving a press conference at ten.’

She was halfway out the door when Harry shouted. ‘Find out what they’re on about.’

Jean climbed the steps of Parliament House with the camera bag slung over her shoulder. Once inside, she took a seat with the other journos as Richard Glenn and Don McAlpin walked towards the podium.

Glenn spoke. ‘Thank you for coming. I am pleased to announce my support for the next phase of City Connect. This project will provide economic growth for Melbourne for the next 25 years. Our future relies on infrastructure, and the City Connect will be one of the most ambitious developments this city has seen in decades.’

Jean called out, ‘What about the tender?’

Don said, ‘The truth of the matter is – we’re working our way through the contracts. Leasehold have pulled out and we have two others, DB Pty Ltd and the UK group, Lester Constructions.’

A journo in the front row asked, ‘Didn’t Gary Morley favour DB?’

Don looked uncomfortable. ‘Thank you, no more questions we’ve got work to do.’

They exited stage left.

Jean noticed the Member for Pasco Vale, Allen Harcourt, at the back of the room. ‘Allen, Jean Sayer from Northside Media, any comment?’

‘This is a sell out. City Connect should be delayed until the election. It should be taken to the people. It’s being rushed through and you have to ask yourself – why?’

The Chandler Bridge was a notorious bottleneck. Traffic had ground to a halt – drivers stared vacantly at their mobiles – the daily grind. Once Coyne was over the bridge he took a right turn onto the boulevard and around to the boathouse – serene parklands and the slow meandering of the murky brown Yarra.

The historical boathouse had been repainted and up-scaled. What was once a shed for kayaks and canoes was now a fancy cupcake and coffee oasis. Coyne bought a
packet of tourist breadcrumbs for the ducks and sat underneath the large canvass umbrella. Jane Morley stepped from her black Prado and walked down the path towards Coyne.

‘Thanks for coming… coffee?’
‘You wanted to talk.’

Coyne paused then opened his laptop and played the scene where the girl grabbed Morley’s hand. Jane watched and her eyes suggested she knew about the affair. There was no surprise, just a hard stare. ‘I suspected something. I wanted out but Gary begged me to stay.’

‘He was having an affair?’
‘Katherine Cheng.’ Jane moved her eyes away from the screen.
‘Did she have anything to do with Gary’s death?’
‘He was seeing her at a Bed and Breakfast in Little River.’
Silence.
Jane didn’t want to talk about Gary or his affair – she cut the meeting short.
After she left, Coyne rang Marla. ‘Her name is Katherine Cheng. She works as a hooker.’

Marla sat at the computer, her left shoulder stiff and sore. She rubbed the back of her neck as she brought up a list of Chens. ‘Okay, I’ve got a K. Cheng in Epping, Croydon, Richmond … Interstate?’

‘Send the list, I’ll do the legwork.’ Coyne rang several numbers – no luck.

He tried the Richmond address – parked the car in Bridge Road and walked towards Neptune Street where he was met with a funeral procession. The mood was solemn. A coffin pasted in white and yellow holy paper was carried by six pallbearers and placed on the side of the road. The small crowd of mainly Chinese stood respectfully while gongs and bells were sounded. The coffin was then lifted into the hearse. Michael Cheng, his sister Katherine and their elderly mother Lily rested their heads on the vehicle for a moment. Michael led the group, holding a lit joss stick.
Katherine stared at Coyne and for a moment their eyes met. The procession moved solemnly as mourners tried to subdue their grief. Coyne watched as the hearse slowly passed by.
A lady at the gate of her house told Coyne that old man Cheng had died. She pointed to the family. ‘That’s Lily Cheng, her son Michael and his sister Katherine.’

Once the hearse drove away Coyne approached Katherine. ‘I’m sorry for your loss. I’m Chris Coyne from Northside Media. I’d like to make a time to discuss your relationship with Gary Morley.’ He handed her his card.

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about, leave us alone!’

Michael Cheng saw his sister in distress. ‘Who are you?’

‘Chris Coyne, Northside Media. I just want to ask a few questions.’

‘Are you for real?’

Coyne nodded apologetically and made a strategic departure. ‘Maybe another time?’

Pink clouds morphed into grey streaks and the sun fell in the Western sky. Night – heat – insects buzzed around the entrance light of the VIP club – Belle’s escort agency for the well heeled. It was an exclusive club: the foyer had a marble rotating ball fountain; corporate art hung on the walls; and there was a cocktail bar to the side. Katherine sat at the bar. She was plastered – her father had died from cancer and the memory of Gary Morley had left her feeling depressed.

Ashleigh took a seat at the bar. She was younger than Katherine – twenty-two. She looked smart, sharp, confident. ‘Sorry babe. Life’s shit.’ Ashleigh placed her hand on Katherine’s hand, which brought a faint smile to Katherine’s lips. ‘Anything I can do you just let me know. We gotta stick together.’

‘I took this job ’cos my dad was sick.’

‘You can trust Belle, she understands.’

‘If mum ever found out…’

‘What does she think you do?’

Katherine took a sip from her glass. ‘She thinks I’m a waitress.’

Nick approached. ‘You’re not supposed to drink on the job.’

‘I buried my dad today, so who gives a shit?’

‘A nice girl, such a filthy mouth,’ said Nick.

‘I told Belle I wasn’t on tonight.’

‘Sure, sure, drink.’
Katherine handed Coyne’s card to Nick. ‘This came today. Some journo asking about Gary.’

‘What did you say?’

Katherine was slurring her words by now. ‘I didnnn’t tell him anythin ... I told him to get lost.’

Nick nodded. ‘Good.’

‘What time is it, Nicky?’

‘After six.’

Coyne sat in his apartment holding the Sherrin, *To Will* signed by Collingwood star Scott Pendlebury. He was rolling the ball between his hands when he received a call from Marla. ‘I’ve got something, Southbank?’

The city had been dry for longer than anyone cared to talk about. Commuters stood on platforms, anger in their faces waiting for trains that were never coming – tracks buckling and signals malfunctioning. Bullhorn speakers barked inaudible updates while Metlink staff handed out ice creams to placate the crowd. Coyne got out of the taxi at Flinders Street station and witnessed an altercation in the crowd. A young woman, eyes like a zombie, dragon tatt on her leg, pinkish hair in a ponytail. She ranted and punched a guy. ‘You’re all fucked! Get out of my way.’

He did just that as she whooshed past him – an urban banshee on ice. She was just one of a rag bag of homeless who had camped along Flinders Street to the annoyance of traders and the upright citizens of Melbourne. Food parcels, blankets, plastic water bottles, bongs and a guy about mid-fifties bare-chested with his hand out.

‘Can ya gis us some change, brother?’ Against Council advice Coyne handed the guy twenty bucks and then wheeled his way around the corner into Swanston towards Southbank. He sat on the promenade and stared at the stagnant water of the Yarra. He thought about being homeless – warm summer nights hanging out with your mates, living free and easy. No. It was a miserable sight and a miserable existence.

Marla arrived. ‘I checked and you might be on to something. Katherine Cheng had two hundred and fifty thousand dollars go through her account; about twenty-five thousand a month.’

‘Who made the deposits?’
‘Came from an account under the name of Centurion Holdings.’
‘Where do they come up with these names?’
‘It’s set up as some kind of not-for-profit foundation. That’s all I’ve got at the moment. You should relax – drink more. I’ll call if I know anything else.’

The Yarra Princess motored along the Yarra, past Southbank with a party group – music pumped, girls shrieked with laughter as blokes wore Groucho masks and made humourless gestures with fake cigars.

Belle watched from her high tower at Docklands with a cocktail in one hand and a cigarette in the other. Nick called. ‘Katherine Cheng.’
‘Yes, I know her Daddy died.’
‘The journalist was at the funeral.’
‘Coyne?’
‘Kathy said he was asking about Morley.’
‘She knows too much.’
‘I’ll take care of her.’
Nick ended the call and returned to the bar.

A short while later Nick led Katherine to his car parked at the rear of the club. A cat yowled then scurried from a dumpster. Katherine was drunk and unsteady on her feet. She sat in the passenger seat and her head lolled back onto the headrest.

‘Where are we going, Nicky?’
‘Need to lay low for a while.’
‘Why?’
‘The journalist will make trouble. I’ll take care of you.’
‘You’re a good man. I need to tell my brother, he’ll be worried.’
‘You can call once we get to the safe house.’

Nick played his heavy metal music – a ballad – and Katherine wound the window down and felt the sobering effects of the rushing breeze.

‘I won’t say anything.’
‘What’s to say?’

The music calmed Nick. The pulsing beat of Thompson, the guttural tone of the lead singer and the soaring guitar solo almost made Nick want to cry – with both hands
on the steering wheel, eyes forward, his head gently bobbed to the rhythms of his homeland. Katherine just sat. The booze fizzing in her head, her mouth felt dry. It was dark by the time they drove onto the M79. The full moon left the sky strangely illuminated. Nick pulled into the scrub at Ravenswood and stepped from the car. He walked towards a clearing and stopped when he felt the metal sheet under his foot. He stomped on it several times to loosen the dry earth then he bent down and lifted the corrugated sheet to reveal the opening to an old mining shaft. He called out to Katherine to give him a hand. She took a few steps towards Nick then stopped. She stood for a moment and even though she was drunk, she wasn’t so drunk to realize – the shaft was for her. She backed away and then ran.

Nick called out. ‘Katherine it’s okay, no problem.’

She picked up speed, pushing her way through the scrub but slipped and rolled down the embankment of the Ravenswood creek. She landed hard, knocking the wind out of her. Nick listened. Katherine crawled along the dry bed, using her hands to steady herself. Terrified, she staggered through the darkness. Nick crossed the creek and followed the sound – twigs cracking, heavy breathing. She hid behind the tree as he edged closer.

She couldn’t contain her fear. She screamed – ‘No!’

Nick lunged and grabbed her by the throat. Katherine held his wrists, choking back tears, she felt weak. Nick pushed and smashed her head against a tree. Katherine didn’t want to die like this she struggled but she could feel the life being squeezed out of her. Nick was dragging her towards the mineshaft when his phone started ringing and, in a moment of distraction Katherine twisted away from him and kneed him in the groin. Nick doubled over and she made her escape into the dense bush. He answered his phone.

It was Sammy. ‘Where are you, bro?’

‘The mineshaft. Get up here now...’

Nick spent the night searching through the scrub. Mosquitos swarmed around his head. There were sounds but nothing distinctive – a wombat, a snake? A roo bounced through the scrub. He followed the creek but it was dry and the pebbles and stones made it difficult to negotiate. After several hours he gave up and fell asleep on the embankment.
Sammy drove to the mineshaft and as the sun rose he honked the car horn. A flock of Galahs took flight. Nick woke and followed the sound. He appeared from the bush with red welts on his face from the mozzies, and flies that had bitten him throughout the night.

‘What happened?’
‘You rang. You fat prick!’
‘Whoa dog, I dunno what you’re talkin’ about but you can’t speak to me like that.’
‘You screw me like that ever again and I’ll cut your heart out and throw it to the dogs. She’s somewhere … find her.’

Nick arrived at Belle’s apartment. ‘We have a problem. She got away.’
Belle’s face hardened. ‘She what?’
‘It was dark. Sammy is up there looking for her. Don’t worry, we’ll find her.’

Sammy smoked a foil. He clicked his MP3 player and reclined in his bucket seat. Chill-out sounds of electronic hip-hop wafted through the trees; a far cry from heavy metal.

Michael tried to call Katherine. He stood at the window of the family home and left another message. He turned away from the window and stared down at his mother, sitting in the Queen Anne chair with bowed mahogany legs and faded fabric. The light was low but the room was neat with everything in its place. He moved to the sideboard and clicked on the old cassette player – classical Chinese music filled the room and Lily just sat there solemn and dignified with her hands clasped in her lap. Michael said, ‘I have to go out.’

Jean uploaded the footage of McAlpin onto the Northside website. ‘Can you write some copy on McAlpin?’
Coyne replied, ‘Like what?’
‘You’re turning into one of those people that answers a question with a question.’
‘You want me to write something about McAlpin?’
‘There you go again. You’re a journo.’
Michael Cheng entered. ‘Looking for Chris Coyne.’

‘Michael.’

Coyne was pleased to extricate himself from the arduous task of writing something interesting about McAlpin.

‘Have you seen my sister?’

‘What’s the problem?’

‘I’ve been trying to contact her.’

‘Come in. Coffee? Sorry about your father.’

‘Something’s not right. She went to the club and they haven’t seen her.’

‘What club?’

‘VIP club in West Melbourne.’

‘I’ll look into it. What do you know about her relationship with Gary Morley?’

Michael stalled but eventually said, ‘She was seeing him.’

Coyne parked out front of the VIP club in West Melbourne. It was a light industrial area with empty warehouses quickly being snapped up by developers. As he stepped from the car he could see the rail yards that fed into Southern Cross station – overhead gantries and a crisscross of tracks and freight trains. He watched as the silver and blue Overland snaked its way towards Adelaide. As it faded into the distance Coyne turned and faced a line of red brick derelict factories with windows either boarded up or painted over. He could see a light on the corner building; it burned brighter as the sky turned darker. The entrance had a canvass olive canopy and steps leading to a solid black door with a gold knocker. He entered and was met by Ashleigh

‘Hello, come in. Can I get you a drink?’

Coyne was shown into the cocktail lounge. The dim downlights, the girls hanging around, the sultry jazz playing softly in the background. He thought it was sad if not pathetic. Who was he to judge? He took a seat and Ashleigh brought him a sidecar in a brandy snifter.

Ashleigh smiled and left Coyne to his drink. A few moments later. ‘Hi I’m Carol.’

Coyne didn’t know what to say and so he smiled and said, ‘I’m looking for Katherine.’

‘I’m sorry I don’t think Katherine is here.’
Nick sat upstairs, surrounded by monitors, which covered the entrance and cocktail lounge. He sat with his feet on the desk and the speakerphone on. ‘You know the mineshaft. She has to be somewhere near there.’

Sammy replied, ‘I’ve been lookin’– nothin’. I reckon she hitched a ride on a truck. She could be in Sydney.’

‘I don’t need you to tell me where she could be. I need you to find her. Watch her brother’s house. She’ll call her brother. Chinese, they’re fucked up about family.’

Nick looked up at the monitor and saw Coyne sitting at the bar. He routed the phone to Belle at her apartment.

‘The journalist.’

‘What?’

‘He’s here at the club.’

Belle ended the call and placed the phone on the granite bench top. Nick continued to watch the CCTV. Coyne finished his drink and left.

Coyne had a late night meeting with Marla at his local in Thornbury. Carwyns was a cellar and bar on High Street, a couple of blocks up from Northside – retro designer globes with orange filament, dangling like stalactites. The entrance was through the bottle shop with the dark and cosy bar at the back. They sat to the side in what used to be an old furniture shop.

Coyne said, ‘I had a visit from Katherine Cheng’s brother – Michael. He’s worried – hasn’t heard from her since yesterday. Reckons she works at a place called the VIP club in West Melbourne.’

Marla took a sip of her cider. ‘I’ll make a few calls but it’s a bit early to be putting her on a missing persons list.’

Coyne held up two fingers like he was Winston Churchill. Barman nodded and served two more of the same – vodka shot and a cider.

Marla opened her notebook. ‘Centurion Holdings, no address just a P.O. Box. Headed up by a guy called Marcus Agrippa.’

‘Who’s he?’

‘A Roman General, 63-12 BC.
‘Marcus Agrippa paid Cheng?’
‘Well, Centurion paid Cheng.’
‘Paid her to sleep with Morley?’

Belle gathered the girls in the cocktail lounge. ‘Katherine is missing – if anyone hears from her then I need to know. We’re really worried.’ She reminded them that the VIP club would look after them – Katherine would be okay.

Ashleigh couldn’t care less as she checked her nails and rolled her tongue over her lips before applying a fresh layer of matte ruby red lipstick.

Sammy arrived in Neptune Street and parked his car a few doors up from the Cheng family home. He unwrapped a burger, ate – watched. The back seat of his car was strewn with fast food wrappers and junk. Somewhere in the mess was a baseball bat and on the floor was a sawn-off shotgun.

Nick arrived at the truck depot. He parked the car behind one of the sheds then entered the office. Bob Pieters was in the back room where he’d set up a daybed and mini bar. Bob was Belle’s father and owner of the biz – reluctantly retired. ‘Who’s there?’

Nick replied, ‘Don’t worry Bob, pour me a drink.’

Bob poured two shots of Johnny Walker. ‘Where you been?’

Nick ignored Bob’s question and leafed through a porn magazine. He dropped it on the desk and made a call to Sammy.

‘Yo.’

‘Have you seen her?’

‘How long do I have to…’

‘Shut up. When you see her, call me.’

Sammy grabbed the Pepsi bottle on the passenger seat. He unscrewed it and gulped – emptied half. He burped, reclined the seat for a long night.

Nick took another shot of Johnny and asked, ‘You got the keys for the HiLux?’

Bob nodded in the direction of Belle’s desk.

It was a warm night with a light shower making the air sticky and humid. Coyne and Marla stumbled onto High street and headed towards the Northside office. Coyne was tanked and tripped on an uneven rise of the footpath, they laughed and walked up to the Junction hotel. Marla hailed an approaching taxi. She opened the door and slid across
the back seat – leaned forward towards the window – bye. Coyne slammed the door and the taxi disappeared.

Coyne crossed the road and continued to walk up High when the lights of the HiLux shone in his direction. The car mounted the footpath and Coyne realised he was the target. He felt panic, then fear. His survival instinct kicked in, he stumbled away from the curb looking for cover. He fell, hands on the footpath, clawing, feet slipping from under him. Coyne turned to see the car coming towards him. Who was behind the wheel?

Man wearing a balaclava, leather gloves. Blinding headlights – seconds to impact.

The car hit a row of wheelie bins pushing Coyne into the alcove of the Lucky 7. Coyne was dazed, he groaned and felt blood seeping from the back of his head, he passed out.

Nick got out of the car and gave Coyne a kick to the guts, then lent down and punched him ONE, TWO, THREE – blood ran freely from the side of his mouth.

Nick stood over the unconscious journo. ‘Scumbag’.

Ambulance, streetlights, hospital, voices – ‘Chris, Chris can you hear me? You’ll be right mate.’ He was lifted onto the gurney and wheeled into emergency.

Coyne lay behind the curtain in the emergency department while the doc shone a light in his lifeless eyes.

Harry arrived at the hospital. He went to reception. The nurse pointed to the sliding doors that led into the emergency area. She handed him a visitor’s lanyard and Harry marched through the doors. He pulled back the curtain and looked down at Coyne and wondered what the hell had he got them into. In a flash Coyne went into cardiac arrest. The ECG flat-lined and the nurse pushed Harry back against the wall and yelled ‘Resus!’ The emergency doctor called for epinephrine as they pumped his chest with a defibrillator. Coyne’s body arched and convulsed with every shot.
Coyne sat up in bed while the nurse checked his stats. The medical team arrived shortly after and the senior doc, wearing a bow tie and polished oxfords, smiled and offered a cheery, ‘Good morning, how are we today?’ He then turned to his students. ‘Mr Coyne has suffered a severe beating and as a result he experienced a myocardial infarction while being treated in emergency. What type of complications might arise from this condition?’

A young intern wearing large black rimmed glasses replied, ‘Ventricular fibrillation.’

The doc continued to question the small group gathered around Coyne’s bed. ‘How would you treat that?’

‘B-blockers?’ said the girl with black hair tied in a ponytail.

The doc turned to Coyne. ‘It seems you have tachycardia in the atria, in plain speak a rapid heart rate most likely exacerbated by your injuries, so you have to rest and we’ll give you some beta-blockers and you should be out in a few days.’

The group moved to another patient in the ward and Coyne quietly reclined the bed back to the horizontal position and stared at the ceiling.
A tower crane glided across the sky. At street level the traffic had come to a full stop. Pedestrians were moving faster than cars and trucks.
A young girl in a Mazda checked her mobile.
A van driver gulped a chocolate Big M.
A cyclist weaved between the lines of traffic. It was hot and the day had only just begun.

The bruises from the beating had subsided but his neck was still crook. After five days in St. Vincent’s Coyne had enough and checked himself out.

Belle arrived in a taxi for her meeting at the prestigious Melbourne Club in Collins Street, an old school-tie bastion of right wing wheeling and dealing. She entered the men’s only club as a guest of Don McAlpin. The host knew Belle but the stronghold of male collusion required certain protocols.

Don could be heard laughing and snorting and rabbiting on about the AMJA awards. ‘One of the perks of being a Minister is you’re invited to public events.’

Frank Lester saw Belle and waved her towards their table. The white-gloved waiter approached with oversized menus in hand – crisp linen napkins and silverware that sparkled under the light of the crystal chandeliers. The room was opulent with impressive arches and thick carpet. Don grabbed the menu like a dog fetching a stick. Frank wasn’t so hungry and looked at it fleetingly.

Belle made up her mind – snapped the menu shut. ‘Vichyssoir with a chicken salad.’

Don continued to study the menu. ‘Lobster, prawns, chicken? Is Wagu on the menu?’

They ordered lobster, beef and a couple of bottles of cab sav. The wine arrived and the three relaxed in the plush and regal setting of the Melbourne Club dining room. It was a long lunch and most of the diners had left. Not so for Lester, McAlpin and Pieters. After another two bottles, Don was well oiled and he started to let loose. ‘Once we sign, Harcourt won’t have a leg to stand on!’

Belle reached for her glass. ‘I’ll drink to that.’
Don lifted his glass. ‘To City Connect and the end to civil unrest.’ He drank greedily, placed the glass back on the table, cracked a lobster claw and gnawed at it with his little piranha teeth.

Frank asked, ‘Why haven’t the contracts been signed?’
‘Richard is still keen on Burke – he’s a local.’
Frank sat back in his chair. ‘I thought this was a meeting to discuss my involvement with the City Connect.’
‘It is, Frank,’ said Belle.
Don topped up his glass. ‘Don’t worry I’ll bring Richard around. A link down to Hastings will generate value capture – infrastructure means development, development means revenue. Leave it with me,’ said Don.

The midday light filtered down from the transom windows at Northside. Coyne sat hunched staring at the computer screen. He rubbed the back of his neck and rolled his head left then right. His phone bounced across the table with the ID: Allen Harcourt. Coyne hit the speaker icon. ‘Allen, thanks for returning my call. What can you tell me about City Connect?’
‘I’m not a fan.’
‘What about jobs?’
‘What about them?’
‘Can you tell me what you really think?’
‘Ah, Coyne, never one to be shy.’
‘Do you think DB will get the tender?’
‘There’s political mileage in using a local, but loyalty isn’t their strong point.’
‘Will you invest in public transport?’
‘Of course.’
‘What’s your position on a second container port?’
‘No comment.’
‘So you’re not opposed to it? Do you consider Bay West as a suitable site for a container port?’
‘No comment.’
‘There’s a rumour that the City Connect will lead to a container port in Hastings?’
‘I wouldn’t put it past McAlpin – he’s reckless.’
‘So Labor will scrap the City Connect if elected?’
‘Absolutely.’
‘Thanks, Allen.’

Coyne started to write: The leader of the opposition, Allen Harcourt, maintains McAlpin is reckless in committing to the City Connect development.

Harry came downstairs carrying a small package wrapped in a cream chamois cloth. ‘No flashbacks?’

‘We’ve been through this. He came out of nowhere. I was trying to work out if it was me or the road that was moving – I was drunk.’

Harry unwrapped the package and revealed a Smith & Wesson .32 Long. It was holstered and well oiled. ‘You’re high profile now. I want you to carry this.’

Coyne looked askance at Harry. He took the gun, held it, felt the weight and the strangeness of the metal object. ‘Where'd you get this?’

‘Won it in a card game.’ He handed Coyne a small box of bullets. ‘Put it in the glove box, just in case.’

Coyne was unconvinced, am I supposed to use this? Does it work? He wrapped the gun and bullets in the cloth and placed it in his satchel.

Harry moved closer to the computer and peered over Coyne’s shoulder. ‘Maybe you should ease up on McAlpin.’

‘You pay me to have an opinion, Harry.’

‘Yep, love your work, I just don’t want to cop any flak by the boys at the golf club.’

Frank, Belle and Don continued their lunch well into the afternoon. Frank said, ‘I hear that journalist won an award for his story on Morley. Bad business.’

Belle’s eyes were fixed – reptilian. ‘He's been sniffing around.’

Frank smarmed. ‘What’s to sniff?’

‘Journos,’ said Belle with a tone of exasperation, ‘we should keep an eye on him.’

‘Tindal is the one to watch, bloody Greens,’ said Don.

‘If there’s a chance that Glenn sways to public pressure then I want a letter of comfort, a guarantee that the project will go ahead as planned.’
Don was surprised at Frank’s demand. ‘A letter of comfort?’

After a short black and a rich Tiramisu the conversation wound down. Don had hit the booze hard. He stood up and stumbled back into a chair – a grinning, witless drunk.

Belle and Frank left with smiles and handshakes between them. Don was on the steps swaying, rocking, intoxicated when a female pedestrian stopped and shouted. ‘Get your snout out of the trough, McAlpin.’ Don casually gave a royal finger.

The woman held her mobile phone and snapped the gracious reply.

The pic went viral – Jean gasped. ‘Harry! Chris!’ They gathered around the screen and watched as the image of McAlpin giving the finger played into the meme of political arrogance and privilege.

Coyne and Jean climbed the steps of Parliament House and joined the media throng that had gathered in the corridor. Megan opened the doors to the small media room and waved in the eager journos.

Don entered through a side door, still pissed but sober enough to know what he needed to say. ‘I had a few too many drinks and I would like to apologise. It was inappropriate and I’m sorry. I’m sorry if I have offended anyone and in the future I will attempt to restrain myself from such actions.’

It didn’t wash.

Don retreated to his office and Coyne followed.
‘What do you think you’re doing?’ Don hit the intercom. ‘Megan, call security now!’

Coyne quickly glanced at a document on McAlpin’s desk.

**CITY CONNECT AND THE HASTINGS CONTAINER PORT**

**FUTURE PLANNING FOR VICTORIA**

**AUTHORISED BY**

**THE MINISTER FOR INFRASTRUCTURE AND THE ARTS, DON MCALPIN**

‘Hastings? Will there be a toll? Continuing growth, the invisible hand at work.’

Don grabbed the file and shoved it into the desk drawer. He then moved to the sideboard and poured himself a glass of water and took two Panadol. ‘Do you want to borrow my phone?’

‘What for?’

‘So you can relay your economic theories to somebody who cares. I’m busy.’

‘You had lunch with Frank Lester and Belle Pieters – business or pleasure? What about Darren Burke?’

‘This is out of your league, Coyne. Why don’t you try your hand at human-interest stories? Leave the heavy lifting to the ones who have a mandate.’

‘Can I quote you on that?’

‘Next time, make an appointment.’

Don picked up his briefcase and moved towards the door as two security men arrived. They showed Coyne the door and he obliged.

Reporters lurked in the alcoves and when they saw Don McAlpin they moved like a school of salmon. ‘Mr McAlpin, any comment on the finger?’ Minister! The chicken or the lobster?’

More reporters had gathered on the steps and Don pushed his way through. ‘No comment … enough, no more to say … I’ve said what I had to say, thank you.’

Coyne watched McAlpin as he stepped into his Ministerial car and wondered how people like McAlpin got to be in positions of power.
The sky turned from streaks of pink grey to charcoal and the city lights came into view. It was a quiet night at Carwyns. Hipsters in trucker caps sipped Watermelon beer, vinyl turned on the record player and Coyne sat on a glass of Vodka rolling the ice from side to side.

Marla stood by the table with a cider in hand. ‘How ya doin’?’

‘I had a meeting with McAlpin. I accused him of feathering his nest.’

Marla sipped her cider. ‘Alright, what have you got on McAlpin?’

‘I think he’s done a deal with Lester. I saw a report.’

‘And?’

‘Morley recommended DB and Morley is dead, now McAlpin is pushing for the Lester Group. I saw a report by McAlpin and he’s pushing for a container port in Hastings, which is why they’re hell-bent on linking the City Connect to the south east.’

‘I thought it was going to be at Bay West.’

‘My guess is Morley favoured Bay West; he was the Member for Corio – not a safe seat. A second container port in Geelong would’ve made sense – already got rail. It would’ve taken City Connect off the table.’

Marla finished her drink. ‘You’re connecting Morley’s death with the Lester deal? Interesting.’

The hipster barman placed a Madder Lake album on the turntable; prog rock blues from 1973.

Coyne drove over the Westgate and descended onto the plains. The Werribee sewerage plant was particularly on the nose. He wound up his window and ran his tongue over his lips trying to get rid of the taste of shit that was in the air. The grasses had long died and the hard cracked earth that stretched either side of the freeway was sign of another long hot summer. The transmission towers that looked like stick men were dotted across the flat grasslands and the M1 hummed with cars and trucks in both directions.
Coyne arrived at Barwon in the early afternoon. He walked up the path to the entrance and handed over his phone and keys. A middle-aged woman in a Hawaiian shirt and trackie-daks shuffled down the corridor with her arms folded and head down. As she passed Coyne she looked across at him and spat. He stopped and watched her walk towards the exit. Coyne took a hankie from his pocket and wiped the saliva from his face then continued walking towards the meeting room.

Coyne nodded to Wilson. ‘How ya doin’?’ Wilson was silent, his hearing aid squealed. He adjusted the levels.

‘What were you doing in Little River?’ asked Coyne.

Wilson folded his arms across his chest and gave a weary look. I’ve told this story. ‘Got a phone call – Morley wanted to meet.’

Coyne looked quizzical, it didn’t make sense.

Wilson unfolded his arms and leaned in towards Coyne. ‘I lived in Gold Street. There were seven of us that had our homes rubber-stamped for demolition. I was making too much noise. I think Morley was gonna raise the payout.’

‘Or he was gonna scrap the project and give you the good news?’

‘It was always gonna be built. The house was up for compulsory acquisition.’

‘So you compromised your politics for a paycheck?’

‘You could say that.’

‘When he didn’t offer you enough, you killed him?’

‘No. The prosecution took that line and it’s bullshit.’

‘You were prepared to do a deal?’

‘Maybe.’

Coyne had heard all this in the courtroom – the prosecution mounted a strong case. Wilson was of questionable character, he had travelled to Little River, it was his car that mowed down Morley and he was found in the driver’s seat pissed as a newt.

‘Your wife hasn’t changed.’

That comment drew a wry smile from Wilson. ‘She doesn’t like journos.’

‘Next time you see her tell her I’m on your side.’ Coyne stood and leaned in close to Wilson so he could hear real good. ‘I think you were set up. I think we were both set up.’
Johnny, ex ADF – flame tattoo around his neck and snake on a vine down his arm – watched from the gantry. He headed to the front desk and called Nick knowing all calls were monitored. ‘Hello Vic, just a quick call to say thanks for the newspaper.’

Decode: The journo was back to interview Wilson.

Nick was on his exercise bike, spinning and sweating to grinding guitar riffs.

‘No problem, let me know if you need anything else.’

‘Will do,’ said Johnny.

Nick slowed, wiped the back of his neck with a towel and stared out over the Westgate.

As Coyne drove back along the M1 dark clouds hovered over the horizon. Melbourne looked ominous – it was about to bucket down. The day had started with sunshine and roses, by afternoon the wind gusts had stirred the dry earth and the sky was full of brown dust. By late afternoon thunder cracked and the light changed from brown to gloom. It poured and Coyne shifted forward in his seat. He eased off the accelerator.

Wipers swished: one-two, one-two, one-two. He felt bad for stitching up Wilson with the Road Kill story, bad for wallowing in booze and bad for being a slacker.

The car in front skidded – a long piercing, screeeeeech. Coyne hit the brakes and aquaplaned within centimetres of the now visible red VW.

Coyne returned to his apartment. He could see lightening flashes from his bedroom window and the crack of thunder made the building shudder. He sat down on the couch, about to turn on the television when the power cut out. Darkness – intermittent flashes of light bounced off the wall. Coyne stretched out on the couch and stared at the ceiling.

Talia kneels next to Coyne and gently strokes his forehead. She says, ‘I was thinking we should go to that restaurant, you know the Japanese Teriyaki place near the plaza. It’d be nice to try something new.’

Coyne replies, ‘Have you asked Will?’

‘He’ll love it.’
Coyne sits upright and sees Will standing in the corner with a bullet hole in his head. He looks at Talia and her face starts to decompose. A news headline rushes towards him. ICE GANG RETALIATES – JOURNO’S FAMILY TARGETED.

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Coyne looked where Will had been standing. He rose, went to the kitchen and splashed water over his face. He cupped his hands and drank from the running tap and then leaned against the bench with both arms outstretched and head bowed. The power came on abruptly and the television boomed – Grant Denyer the host of Family Feud barked, ‘What are people often chased by in the movies?’

The following morning Don was getting nervous – his best friend was the shredder. He fed the City Connect and the Hastings Container Port Future Planning for Victoria files one after the other, and requested security after Coyne’s latest trespass. The guard sat out in the corridor and twiddled his thumbs. The Greens leader, Josh Tindal, approached McAlpin’s door. ‘Since when does he need security?’

‘Some journo broke in.’

‘Tindal knocked on the door and Don froze. He stared at the door, then turned off the shredder and pushed the files behind his desk. ‘Hang on.’ He unlocked the door and wasn’t pleased to see Tindal.

‘You got a minute?’

‘Josh, mate, not a good time…’

‘What’s this about Hastings?’

Don stood at the door. ‘See Megan and we’ll make a time – read the news, they seem to have it all pretty well covered. Now’s not a good time.’ Don slammed the door and locked it.

Tindal heard the click and shook his head in dismay.

Coyne arrived at DB Pty Ltd. There were five haulage trucks parked in a row and another five front-end loaders lying dormant against the cyclone fence. On the other side of the yard was a mound of scaffolding stacked dangerously high. Two painted
white tyres flanked the path that led towards the main office. Coyne pushed on the door and entered.

The receptionist was a middle-aged woman – floral dress, long earrings and a lavender perfume that permeated the office. She was Darren’s wife, Fiona. She was cold with crow’s feet surrounding her dull eyes, suggesting a life of mistrust. Fiona took an immediate dislike to Coyne.

‘Chris Coyne to see Darren Burke.’
‘Who are you?’
‘Journalist – Northside Media.’
‘He’s not in would you like to make an appointment?’

At that point Darren came out of his office. Coyne introduced himself and asked for an interview, saying he had questions about Don McAlpin and the City Connect project. Darren told his wife he wasn’t taking any calls and guided Coyne into his office.

‘What’s your take on the City Connect project?’ asked Coyne.

Burke smirked, giving the impression he knew more than he was letting on. He was suspicious of journalists and rightly so. ‘Off the record – I’m up to my neck in this. Morley gave me a verbal that I had the contract. What am I gonna do?’

‘I heard Morley was considering Bay West for a second port.’
‘That’s right.’
‘Morley was the member for Corio, there must have been pressure to expand south to Geelong?’

‘What are you getting at?’
‘Did Morley offer you Bay West?’
‘We talked about options, Bay West and City Connect. I’m in construction, I’ll build wherever the money is.’

‘What’s your relationship with McAlpin?’
‘I know he’s a two-faced prick, he was supposed to keep the deal. People think politicians are corrupt and they’re right.’

The flag on Parliament House drooped in the heat of the day – brown air hung over the city. Office workers ate lunch in the shade of the Treasury Gardens.
Josh Tindal was young for his position as a member of parliament. He worked his way up through the Greens. He was articulate and ambitious. He stood with his back to the window in Allen Harcourt’s drab public service office: a photo of Harcourt’s wife and kids on the desk, a rack of books that looked like they’d never been opened, and a corporate fern that was watered by contractors who came every fortnight to spray and wipe. Allen sat in his high back chair and said, ‘If they sign the contract with Frank Lester and if we win the election, tearing up the contract may increase our Sovereign Risk.’

‘Sovereign risk! You need to step up and state you will tear up any contracts signed by McAlpin and his gang – simple. Grow a spine. You know the city will be in gridlock in five years and what then, another tunnel, a flyover?’

‘If they go ahead with the contract then we’ll act accordingly.’

‘Weasel words! The Greens won’t preference unless you agree to wind back the City Connect.’ Harcourt stood up from his chair and moved towards the window, his back to Tindal.

‘There’s talk of a letter of comfort.’

Harcourt spun on his heels. ‘Guarantee!’

‘You heard me.’

‘Business wants stability. I can’t just change course – we don’t make pie-in-the-sky decisions, Josh.’

‘This city is going to hell, and you’re just as responsible as Glenn and McAlpin.’ Tindal slammed the door on his way out.

From Spring Street to Spencer the city was a rat’s nest. Peak hour had morphed into anytime in the day, commuters, delivery vans, shoppers, buskers, traders – economic development 24/7 and the trickle down effect. Day turned to night and the nest continued to thrive.

Northside office: The phone rang and Harry answered. ‘Now?’

Harry arrived at Belle’s Docklands apartment. He passed through the frosted glass foyer, stood in the lift, dusted some dandruff from his shoulders and straightened his jacket. He exited the lift, walked towards Belle’s pad and knocked gently on the door.
Belle was standing in her bathrobe with no makeup and her hair plastered to her scalp. ‘Harry.’

Harry took a seat on the couch and Belle sat opposite in a stylish grey lounge chair with a straight back, high armrests and a buttoned cushion. The panorama that stretched clockwise from the Port, to the Westgate, the Dandenongs and 180 back to the docks twinkled with lights.

‘Impressive view at night,’ said Harry.

‘We have what we might call a symbiotic relationship.’

Harry sat uncomfortably, adjusting his body on the couch. ‘That’s one way of putting it. You asked me to profile the Morley story – I did exactly what you asked.’

‘And you won an award, congratulations.’

‘Is Wilson guilty?’ asked Harry.

‘Of course he’s guilty. What’s your problem?’

‘One of your thugs tried to run down Chris Coyne.’

‘I had them send a message. You should do the same. The Morley story is old news. Your journo has been asking questions. I thought you of all people would know how the business works.’

Harry said in a plaintive tone of voice, ‘I’m asking that you ease up.’

‘It’s your job to keep him in line.’ Belle paused and then said, ‘How much do you owe me?’

‘Enough. Don’t get me wrong, I appreciate your support.’

Belle poured a chardonnay from an already opened bottle she moved to the window and spoke with her back to Harry. ‘I’d like you to run a story on the benefits of the City Connect and mention the Bay West container port. Put a positive spin on it.’

She turned and stared at Harry. He could smell the product emanating from her hair. He felt nauseous and his mouth felt dry – he tried to swallow.

‘Nothing’s for free, Harry.’

He rubbed his face and nodded agreeably.

Belle smiled. ‘Good, I’ll look forward to reading it.’
Standing in the Bourke Street mall facing east, Parliament House looked epic. The steps leading up to the grand columns framed the entrance and gave the building an impressive sense that all was well with the world. Inside, nothing could be further from the truth. Josh Tindal rose to his feet and gave the government a serve. ‘Mr Speaker, when will this debacle be put to bed? The government is confused – they think they’re building a road but really, it’s a car park! The City Connect should be taken to the election. Let the people decide.’

Allen Harcourt interjected, flailing his arms. ‘Take it to the election.’

Tindal backed Harcourt. ‘Exactly, take it to the election. The government’s rhetoric is based on fairy dust; they find their ideas in a pot at the end of the rainbow.’

McAlpin jumped in. ‘I object.’

Objection sustained. The House became agitated, members started yelling and groaning. Harcourt mocked McAlpin and other members. ‘He objects. So do I!’

‘Order, Order.’ The Speaker slammed the gavel on the wooden anvil the sound reverberated throughout the chamber.

Harcourt held the document over his head. ‘You know what you can do with this.’ He turned his back on the government and waved it at his Frontbenchers. They laughed and motioned to throw it away – thumbs down.

‘Would the representative for the Opposition please adopt a professional attitude when addressing the House.’ As the commotion died down members folded their arms
and leaned back into their seats, awaiting their next chance to have a go. ‘The Minister for Infrastructure and the Arts has the floor.’

Like a jack-in-the box McAlpin sprung into action. ‘Thank you, Mr Speaker. The City Connect is a once in a lifetime opportunity to secure the future for all Victorians. I will be making a final decision on the tender for the construction of stage one of the City Connect project and I will remind Mr Tindal that the so-called car park will actually connect the Western suburbs with the East. Make no mistake it will improve the flow of traffic across Melbourne. This is a good news story for all Victorians.’

Tindal approached the bench. ‘Will the Minister please confirm that the second container port will not be built in Hastings? Is the City Connect just the first stage in the development of a container port in Hastings?’

‘I think the minister is referring to media speculation about such matters. There is no decision about a second container port. Our focus is the City Connect.’

Parliament wasn’t pretty. Politicians mumbled, groaned, yelled and postured throughout the sitting and Josh Tindal and Allen Harcourt were losing the battle, both demoralised and frustrated. The government had the numbers and the contracts for the City Connect were looking more like a done deal. There was little they could do except wait for the election.

After the sitting of Parliament, Don entered the Premier’s office. Don was emphatic. ‘We have to sign the contract before the election. Lester is ready to go. Richard, this is the time to show leadership.’

‘How serious is Lester about this letter of comfort?’

‘He’s very serious.’

‘Burke is a local, how are we going to explain giving the contract to a UK outfit?’

‘We’ll do an evaluation and an assessment, and the Lester Group will offer the best outcome for all Victorians.’

A seagull perched on a bollard took to the air. Footsteps on the walkway, boat shoes, white stitching over brown leather uppers, leather laces in a neat bow. Don McAlpin wore a blue and white striped polo shirt, collar popped and an Akubra Balmoral.
Frank waved. ‘Come aboard.’

Don continued up the plank onto Frank’s motor yacht: 1950’s Halvorsen 42, timber hull, Chrysler 318 V8’s, teak platform and side decks, cherry cockpit. Don sat at the table, looked over his shoulder left, right, looked out to the bay. He didn’t want any more impromptu photos on social media sites. He turned his mobile off.

Frank sat at the back with an ice bucket and sparkling wine – floral shirt, capri pants and cigar smoke rolling out of his mouth. Belle arrived suitably attired in casual wear and red tortoise shell Sophia sunglasses.

‘I thought we might have a little more privacy here,’ said Frank.

Frank poured a glass but Don held his hand – not for me. Belle smiled and accepted a wine.

‘Is Glenn still having problems with the City Connect?’

‘You have to understand his position. We’ve got an election coming up. Richard is worried we’ll lose Corio.’

‘That’s your seat.’

Don nodded yes.

‘Tell Richard, Corio is a shoe-in for two reasons: you’ll get the sympathy vote with Morley murdered by a Greenie, and you’ll tell your constituents that the second container port is going to Geelong. I’ll fund your campaign.’

‘We’ll need to keep Hastings under wraps,’ said Don.

‘See Frank, I told you Don was our man,’ said Belle.

Frank thought for a moment and then said, ‘Send a truck and a bulldozer down to Little River, clear some land and give Coyne something to write about.’

‘I can do that,’ said Belle.

Don said, ‘I will have that drink and by the way, Richard will offer the letter of comfort.’

Harry was at Northside listening to meditative classical music. Coyne powered up the stairs – two at a time. ‘You actually wrote this?’
Harry sat upright, indignant at Coyne’s attack.

‘Slow down mate, what’s your problem?’

Coyne held his iPad and read out loud, his body taut with anger. ‘City Connect is ambitious! Where’s this coming from? Bay West the most likely site for expansion! That’s not true. You’re a mouthpiece for McAlpin?’

‘No. This is a way of presenting both sides of the argument. If Northside is seen as a pack of lefties then only lefties will read us. As editor and owner I think you might want to pay a little more respect to the person who actually pays you.’

‘What you’ve written is propaganda. I know it and you know it. I got into journalism for the right reasons.’

Harry gave a cynical laugh. ‘I got into it for all the wrong reasons. It’s a business, not a career.’

Harry offered Coyne a beer. ‘You have to get off this Wilson story, it’s taking up too much time and it’s not going anywhere.’

The following day reporters gathered at Parliament House. Richard Glenn, Don McAlpin and Frank Lester sat side by side with multiple copies of the City Connect contract on the table. Camera flashes lit their faces as the sheepish Premier signed the contract. McAlpin added his moniker and shook hands with the Premier, creating an historical photographic moment.
Darren Burke and Fiona left the Rockpool Bar & Grill and headed in the direction of Federation Square – a designer wilderness of geometric shapes, mainly triangles, buildings housing art spaces, cafes, bars and a tourist information office. It was a cultural destination, a safe haven for townsfolk and tourists complete with a large outdoor screen overlooking the designer paved open space. The Lester deal was broadcast on the imposing screen.

Burke watched in disbelief. ‘I’ve been done over! I knew it. Glenn said it was in the bag. I could’ve done it for half the price and done a better job.’

The electorate seemed unaware of the implications of the deal. Road tolls for the next thirty years for some, for Darren it was the loss of a huge government contract that should have been his. His blood pressure rose, veins on his neck went blue. He’d worked hard all his life, losing the City Connect was an insult. Fiona slipped her arm under his and dragged him away from the screen. They disappeared into the crowd.

Jean ran through the busy city streets, up Collins, across Spring and into the Treasury Gardens.

She set up the camera as Harcourt gave a press statement. ‘Today the government has seen fit to sign the contract for the City Connect project, a six billion dollar lemon that will do nothing to ease the congestion on Melbourne’s roads.'
Furthermore, they have awarded the contract to a foreign company and it has been revealed that a letter of comfort has been offered guaranteeing payment whether the project goes ahead or not. This government has over-stepped the mark. The City Connect should be taken to the people. This is policy on the run and make no mistake, heads will roll.

Belle entered the office at Pieters Transport. Bob looked up momentarily from his trucker’s magazine as Belle took a sit behind her desk.

Bob raised his head again and looked towards Belle.

Belle was in good spirits she smiled and said, ‘The contract has been signed.’

‘The Poodle came through?’

‘He’s the Minister for Infra –’ Belle was stopped short by the sound of the dogs barking.

Yard dogs yelped and strained at the leash. Bob came out from the office. ‘Shut up.’ He picked up a tyre lever and threw it at a disused wheel-hub – CLANK! The dogs backed off.

Belle saw Coyne from the window and came to the door. ‘It’s alright, Dad.’

After his stoush with Harry, Coyne decided to rattle the cage at Pieters Transport.

‘What do you want?’ asked Belle.

‘We’re doin’ a story on the trucking business, I hear you got the contract with Frank Lester for the City Connect. I reckon that’s a rags to riches story, how do you wangle a deal like that?’

‘None of your business.’

‘You’ve been in the news lately, I think our readers would like to know what really goes on behind the wheel.’

‘I think you’d better leave.’

Nick drove through the front gates of the depot. He got out of the car and marched towards Coyne. The dogs started barking again. Nick stopped and stared them down. He approached the office. ‘We have a problem?’

Belle said, ‘He was just leaving.’
‘I just wanted to give you the opportunity to set the record straight. You know how the industry is perceived to be shonky; fake log books, drugs, rogue drivers, that sort of thing?’

Belle and Nick remained silent.

Coyne continued. ‘I’m not suggesting you … but other carriers have a reputation.’

‘Get lost,’ said Belle. She turned her back on Coyne, leaving him with Nick. They stood for a moment.

‘You heard – get lost.’

Coyne stood his ground and eyeballed Nick.

‘Go away’.

Coyne gave an uneasy smile, turned and left the yard.

Once the jouno had gone, Belle resumed her conversation with Bob. ‘I want you to take a dozer down to Geelong.’

Bob was excited at the thought of being back behind the wheel.

‘Take the Anteater.’

‘When?’

‘Today.’

Bob ran his hand under his nose, snorted, stood up and walked gingerly out of the office. Belle made a call to Harry Breen. ‘Harry, I want you to cover a job.

Harry called out to Jean. ‘Can you get down to Little River this arvo, take some shots?’

Jean looked tired. She paused, hoping Harry would change his mind then nodded yes.

Bob entered the work shed and peeled a tarp off the old prime mover. He wiped his hand over the door and revealed a Florentine script: *La Belle*. This old truck had seen many a day and Bob was eager to be back driving. He climbed into the cabin and sat high in the seat. He started the engine, released the hydraulics and backed the bobtail up to the trailer, hooked it up then wheeled 180 and exited the depot. Bob picked up the dozer and a couple of bobcats and headed out along Geelong Road. He took the Little River turn-off and pulled up at the site of the proposed Bay West container port. Lester had sent a team of his people to receive the earth moving equipment and within hours land had been cleared and surveying flags posted.
Jean arrived, pulled out the camera and started filming.

Bob was keen to get back to town. He gunned La Belle down the Geelong Road when sparks started to crackle from the dashboard.

A Bulldog coming the other way made the call. ‘Breaker 1-9 B-B-Q on Geelong Road.’

Bob picked up the handset, ‘Guns n Roses, what’s that? Over.’

Cars from the other direction honked their horns and Bob looked down to see people waving and pointing to the truck. Flames appeared from the bull bar. He remained calm and steered the truck to the side of the road. He jumped from the cabin as the fire engulfed the rig. Within minutes the truck was cactus. Black fumes billowed into the sky, and the charred remains of the truck and its load were the talking point of the daily news services.

Belle sat in the office and read the news update. She closed her laptop, leaned back into her seat and stared into space.

Her mobile rang. ID: Frank Lester. She answered. ‘Frank.’

‘This was meant to be a feel good story about Bay West and you’ve turned it into a sideshow.’

‘Frank, calm down – the truck had an electrical fault.’

Frank wasn’t impressed, Bob Pieters was too old to be driving and his truck was too old to be on the road. The Bay West photo opportunity was meant to coincide with the first shovel photo op on the City Connect. Frank reminded Belle – the truck inferno was sucking the oxygen out of more important matters.
Coyne sat in the car and tweeted:

Chris Coyne @northsidemedia
Pieters Transport awarded City Connect while shonky truck burns!
2.30 PM – Jan 19

John Braxton @theindependent Jan 19
Replying to @northsidemedia
I smell corruption.

Michelle Grode @publictransportnow Jan 19
Replying to @northsidemedia
Why are they building another road? We need public transport.

Barry Peek @Roadhouse Jan 19
Replying to @northsidemedia
This is a distraction get on with building the City Connect.

The tweet did the rounds, fuelling a discussion about Pieters Transport and their ability to fulfill the City Connect contract. Talkback radio announcer, Ricky Simon, fielded questions about the dangers of shonky trucks. ‘Truckies are on drugs, the industry is full of cowboys and they don’t maintain their fleet. Somebody could have been killed, what is the RTA going to do about this rogue industry?’

The burnt remains of the Anteater arrived at the Pieters depot. Bob looked hangdog as he entered the office. He sat on the two-seater and raised his head slowly. Belle was furious. She walked around the desk and stood over Bob and gave him a serve. ‘You lost the truck!’

Coyne suspected Pieters of inside deals and upped the talk about the City Connect.

Chris Coyne @northsidemedia
Pieters, City Connect and the VIP club. Sounds suss?
9.00 PM – Jan 19

News of the Pieters Transport woes quickly became a talking point in Parliament. The Greens member, Josh Tindal, accused the premier, Richard Glenn, of a hatchet job in delivering the City Connect.
Harcourt was angry. ‘Mr Speaker, this project was rushed – what do you get from a pack of amateurs that hires another pack of amateurs? You get the dodgy brothers – a dodgy outcome from a shonky government. Richard Glenn and Don McAlpin should step down for sheer incompetence. Incompetence!’

The Opposition laughed. Don folded his arms – he didn’t like the attention.

Harcourt continued with his attack. ‘Belle Pieters runs an escort agency … it’s on the internet, Mr Speaker. Northside Media, look it up, read all about it.’

Richard Glenn came to standing. ‘Mr Speaker, Allen Harcourt reminds me of a drunk.’

‘Objection.’

‘Sustained. The Premier will refrain from calling the leader of the opposition a drunk.’

Glenn continued. ‘He’s intoxicated by the media limelight. Make no mistake we won’t be distracted from the job ahead. The City Connect is on track and adjustments will be made where necessary.’

Belle sat in the back seat of the Chrysler and told Sammy to turn on the radio. The Drive show had Coyne on the phone.

‘Tell me Chris, you’ve been writing that Pieters Transport isn’t up to the job. What do you mean?’

‘Pieters have been awarded the City Connect contract and there’s good reason to believe that the project is out of their league…’

‘Turn it off. Coyne is having a field day. Where’s that burner?’

Sammy handed it to Belle. She held Coyne’s business card, the one that Katherine had shown Nick. She texted: SHUT UP OR DIE.

She threw it back to Sammy. ‘Destroy that.’

With the news cycle desperate to keep tabs, the ABC organised a panel discussion for their flagship program – Point of View. Coyne sat with the leader of the Opposition, Allan Harcourt, and expert in corporate law, Danielle Yeardly.

Coyne’s message alert activated: SHUT UP OR DIE. Coyne had no doubt the message was from Pieters. As he mused over the text, the studio floor manager raised his hand and counted with each finger flexing upwards as he shouted, ‘Three, two, one –
we’re on.’ Coyne placed the phone in the inside pocket of his jacket and composed himself.

JACINTA
Welcome to *Point of View*. On tonight’s program we discuss the politics of power as the Premier, Richard Glenn, pushes for the City Connect development against a backdrop of public protest and party politics. Chris Coyne, your story on the former Minister for Infrastructure Gary Morley exposed a dark background to the City Connect.

COYNE
My involvement began when Northside Media covered the Morley murder. We interviewed several key players and our investigations assisted police in charging Dale Wilson for the murder of Gary Morley – political assassination is dark.

JACINTA
With the upcoming election, the Greens are asking for the City Connect contract to be torn up. The Labor Party says they are investigating the legality of the letter of comfort. What do you think, Danielle?

DANIELLE
The compensation would be huge, but yes it would be possible. The area of sovereign risk is grey. But in short, to pull a contract worth so much would send a very strong signal that we’re not a reliable State to invest in.

ALLEN HARCOURT LEANED BACK IN HIS SEAT THEN ROCKED FORWARDS AND CLASPED HIS HANDS SETTING THEM ON THE DESK.
ALLEN
I have to disagree with that statement. The message we wish to send is that we don’t make deals under the table and letters of comfort are simply not binding contracts.

COYNE WATCHED AND LISTENED.

JACINTA
Chris, do you think the government has an ulterior motive in building the City Connect?

COYNE
I believe the government will develop a second container port in Hastings and the City Connect is the first stage in that plan.

JACINTA
The Minister for Infrastructure and the Arts, Don McAlpin, says the second container port will be Bay West in Little River. What do you say to that, Allen?

ALLEN
He’s worried he’ll lose the seat of Corio. Can McAlpin be trusted?

JACINTA
Chris Coyne, will this election be about the City Connect or the Bay West container port?

COYNE
Both. The government is trying to please everyone. They want Corio but development in the South East would also gain votes. The question is what is the best outcome for
COYNE (CONT’D)

the people? City Connect will mean more cars and traffic. The benefit of a second container port in Geelong is the already established rail link. In my view that would be the better outcome.

Harry watched the program and felt ill. He shook his head, smashed his fist on the trestle table and circled like a dog chasing its own tail. His phone rang. The caller – Belle Pieters. He didn’t pick up; he paced the floor some more, driven by panic and the knowledge that there were going to be consequences. He succumbed to a minor anxiety attack. He took off his shirt, grabbed a towel and wiped the sweat off his torso. He cautiously circled the phone. Eventually he picked up and played the voicemail. ‘I thought we had an understanding. I told you to rein in Coyne, he’s on the television and he’s mouthing off.’

Coyne entered the Northside office and found Harry waiting for him – furious. ‘You sabotaged me!’ said Harry.

‘They asked me to do a spot on the show, what’s your problem?’

‘Why keep bringing up the Morley story, and why piss on the City Connect and Pieters? There are plenty of other stories to run with. This is the top end of town. We’re making enemies. I want you to lay off the Morley story.’

‘I’m just doing my job.’

‘I’ve heard that before. We’re in a good place at the moment and you’re meddling will only bring trouble.’

Coyne threw his arms in the air. ‘Alright, I’ll back off.’

Harry wasn’t convinced. His anxious eyes said it all as Coyne spun on his heels and left in a rage.

Coyne arrived at the SNAP fitness gym in High Street, wearing shorts and a T-shirt. He entered and was met by a young guy who looked fit. ‘Hey, what can I do you for?’

‘I think I’m still a member.’

The guy moved to the computer and clicked a few keys. ‘Your name?’

‘Coyne, Chris.’

‘Yeah … Chris and Talia Coyne.’
Hearing Talia’s name like she was still alive caused Coyne to freeze.
‘So the membership is for the two of you?’
‘Just Chris.’
The guy clicked a few more keys on the computer. Talia was deleted.
‘Are you still at Miller Street?’
Coyne nodded, ‘Yes.’
‘Now Chris, do you need a cardio assessment?’
‘I’m right.’
‘Okay. Welcome back. Enjoy.’

Chris walked into the main area, grey carpets surrounded by red gym equipment. He moved towards one of the many treadmills facing an array of TV screens. He started walking. He increased the speed until he was breathing heavily. Dots of perspiration formed on his forehead and then he stopped suddenly. With his arms stretched forward gripping the handrails and head hung down he breathed deeply. A newsbreak appeared on the TV screen.

IT WAS FRANK LESTER AND DON MCALPIN WEARING HARD HATS. THEY WERE USHERED BY THEIR MINDERS TOWARDS A FRONT-END LOADER WHERE SEVERAL MEDIA HAD GATHERED. DON AND FRANK SHOOK HANDS AS CAMERAS CLICKED. DON WAS HANDED A SILVER SPADE AND HE CEREMONIOUSLY PLUNGED IT INTO THE EARTH – MORE PHOTOS. PROTESTORS STOOD IN THE BACKGROUND, YELLING ‘TRAINS NOT TOLLS.’

Coyne rubbed the sweat from his forehead with his sleeve. His phone rang. It was Marla Davis.

‘Saw you on the TV. That’ll upset them.’
‘It upset Harry. Any word on Katherine Cheng?’ asked Coyne.
He listened, nodded and ended the call. He punched the vending machine buttons with purpose and a bottle of water rolled into the bin. He twisted the cap and gulped half the bottle. Coyne’s phone rang again. ID Harry.

‘What?’

‘Just to be clear – I need you to back off.’

‘Sure, sure I hear ya.’ Coyne ended the call when his phone rang again. He picked up his bag and let the phone ring out and left SNAP. It was Michael Cheng.
Katherine spent the night hiding in scrub at first light she hitched a ride on a Burdock Agricultural truck. The driver, mid-fifties, ruddy face, leathery skin, silver hair and green eyes, saw how messed up she was. He didn’t ask questions. He just said he was heading into Bendigo.

She sniffled. ‘Bendigo is good.’

Silence – the sound of the wheels on road. Katherine pushed her hair off her face and wiped her cheek with the back of her hand. She said her boyfriend was giving her a hard time – an explanation as to why she was on the road in the middle of nowhere. The driver understood: he’d seen domestic violence close up with the drought sending farmers to the wall. They drove the twenty minutes from Buckeye Creek to Bendigo. He dropped Katherine in the heart of town – the corner of Pall Mall and Williamson. Leaning across to the passenger side he said, in an avuncular voice, ‘Take care of yourself, darlin’.

Katherine felt conspicuous in the centre of town and quickly moved to the back streets and found an out-of-the-way motel – The Rainbow.

Nick stood in front of the large television screen and held the small guitar. He played along to Guitar Hero, Warriors of Rock – Anthrax. He was an accomplished player and felt the music as he riffed over the speed metal music of the animated longhairs. This was Nick’s way of winding down and getting in touch with his emotional side. Music and beast were hand and glove and Nick’s fetish for dark powerful rock was manifested
through this otherwise harmless pastime. His mobile flashed and vibrated on the glass coffee table. He paused Guitar Hero and answered the call.

Michael Cheng left the Richmond house in a hurry. It took Sammy by surprise. He clicked the seat into upright and tailed Michael. He dropped into a Coles New World and Sammy waited. Michael appeared with two plastic bags full of shopping. Sammy continued to follow Michael. No surprise when he found himself on the M79 to Bendigo.

When he arrived he called Nick. ‘The brother just arrived – The Rainbow, Bendigo.’

‘Good, don’t screw it up,’ said Nick.

*The Rainbow* had seen better days. It was a run-down motel on the fringe of town. A constant rumble of trucks day and night relegated it to truckers, itinerates and people like Katherine who needed a place to hide. She sat on the bed in a darkened room, her knees pulled to her chest. She held a kitchen knife with both hands, stared at the door.

Michael stood outside – Sammy watched. There was a knock on the door. Katherine tightened her grip on the knife. Michael whispered. ‘It’s me.’
Katherine stepped towards the door and peeped through the eyehole. She unlocked the chain and Michael entered. She wrapped her arms around him and bawled her eyes out. Michael began to unpack groceries and clothes.

‘Mum’s worried.’

‘I know.’

Silence.

Michael and Katherine were close – he could see her distress, her distant stare.

He picked up the kettle and took it into the bathroom, filled it with water – instant coffee from the small satchels provided by the motel. Katherine turned on the television and saw a regional TV advertisement – BURDOCK AGRICULTURAL SUPPLIES. FEED FERTILIZERS AND FRIENDLY SERVICE FROM BENDIGO TO THE RIVERINA. She cracked a sliver of a smile.

Sammy smoked a foil – focused, anxious, adrenaline running through his body. He grabbed the Glock from the glove box and had trouble with the magazine – he hit the grip with the palm of his hand. He checked the rounds, reloaded the mag, pulled the slide back to the ready position and approached the room. Sammy knocked on the door and counted:

ONE…

TWO…

THREE…

FOUR…

FIVE…

He held the gun mid high. Michael looked through the eyehole … four bullets pierced the door and found their target. Michael fell backwards holding his gut – disbelief on his face.

Katherine crawled to the door holding the kitchen knife. Sammy fired another shot at the lock. He kicked the door and burst into the room. Katherine had nowhere to run. She plunged the knife into Sammy's right butt cheek. He grabbed his leg and fired a shot into the ceiling. He turned and saw Katherine he aimed the gun and fired again but the mag locked – CLICK! He tried again. CLICK! CLICK! Sammy fell onto the bed face down with the knife embedded deep in his rump.
Katherine helped Michael to the car. She found his keys in his pocket and dropped him into the passenger seat, blood oozing through his shirt. She reversed the car smashing into Sammy’s SUV – she did a doughnut and disappeared in a haze of gravel and dust.

Sammy pulled the knife from his arse and shoved a towel down his pants to stop the flow of blood. He called Nick and said he’d been knifed.

Michael was losing blood. He slumped in the seat like a sack of potatoes. Katherine looked at her bleeding brother and knew it was bad. The short drive was erratic and she was in no state to be behind the wheel. She blasted the horn at a family in a white Subaru – overtook them and barreled down the wrong side of the road, narrowly missed an on-coming truck. All the while she watched as Michael slowly faded away.

Katherine arrived at the Bendigo base hospital. She shook Michael’s limp body. His head flopped to one side and a trickle of blood ran down the side of his mouth. She sat quietly for a few seconds but it felt like an eternity. She opened the car door and cried ‘Help!’ An orderly moved to the car. He checked Michael’s pulse – the reaction confirmed what Katherine already knew. Michael was dead. He’d been dead for some time. Katherine wept as he was lifted onto the gurney and wheeled into the hospital.

A nurse came to her aid. ‘You better come with me … what happened?’ Katherine stared blankly at the nurse; with her hands outstretched she backed away and returned to the car. Trembling and in shock she couldn’t get out of Bendigo fast enough.

Nick made the trip in under an hour. He found Sammy in his car, weak but alive. First things first – he went to the boot and took the 20-litre jerrycan and carried it to the motel room, splashed petrol over the bed and floor and set the room on fire. The smoke was black. The air had a plastic taste. The fire alarm sounded, guests fled their units. Nick torched Sammy’s SUV then got into his car and they left in a cloud of chaos and destruction.

Katherine was parked on the side of the road. The early morning light shone on the bloodstained passenger seat, a visceral reminder of the danger she faced.
Coyne was woken by the early morning call. His hand reached out from under the sheet and held the phone to his ear.

‘Chris Coyne?’ she asked.

‘Katherine?’

On hearing her name, Katherine panicked and ended the call. She felt alone, desperate – who could she trust? Coyne hit return but there was no answer. He rang Marla. He was sure it was Katherine. Marla asked for the number, and using the police database checked that it was Katherine Cheng.

Marla picked Coyne up from his apartment.

‘Get in – the call came from Bendigo. There’s been a shooting at the Rainbow Motel.’

‘A woman?’

‘Michael Cheng, D.O.A at Bendigo Hospital.’

‘She hung up on me. She’s scared. If I could see her, face-to-face, she might talk.’

Nick arrived at the VIP club carrying a plastic bag from My Chemist. He found Sammy in the back room with two of the girls, Ashleigh and Debbie. They were visibly distressed at the sight of Sammy’s rear end. It was a bloody mess. Ashleigh squinted her eyes trying to shield herself from the image. Debby clasped her hands, not quite sure what to do.

‘Help me get him to the table,’ said Nick.

‘Come on Sammy, gotta get up,’ said Debbie.

Ashleigh moved the table close to the couch and Sammy belly-flopped onto the flat surface. Nick stretched the latex gloves over his hands, and removed the damp towel. He turned to the girls. ‘No worries, you okay?’

Sammy flinched as Nick prodded the wound. The girls looked away and quietly shuffled out of the room. He handed Sammy a bottle of whisky. ‘Drink. Did she see you?’

‘Yeah.’

‘That’s bad.’ Nick stitched the gash and Sammy passed out.
Coyne and Marla drove up the Calder. They passed Ravenswood where Nick had tried to throw Katherine down the mineshaft. In the daytime it looked peaceful, just a shady spot along an otherwise open road lined by paddocks and wire fences. When they arrived at the Rainbow the police were there. Marla presented her badge to the regional detective and they entered the motel room. Coyne gagged from the smoky remains, the odour of melted plastics and synthetic fibre filled the air. He stood and looked at the crime scene – walls scorched by intense heat; ceiling caved in; melted electric jug; carpet black and burnt; windows cracked; the bed a pile soot and ash. Coyne was shaken from his reverie by the sound of a camera going click, click, click and the flash alerting him to the reality of murder.

Marla surveyed the room.

The detective had seen a lot worse – mainly road carnage and DV. ‘Not much to go on. The place is an incinerator. Looks like petrol. We found a knife blade, spent shells, maybe a Glock – 9mm?’

Coyne moved towards the door. ‘Michael Cheng?’

The detective turned to face Coyne. ‘He was brought into the hospital by a woman. The manager says she booked the room to a Katherine Cheng.’

Coyne stood with Marla in the car park and took a deep breath of country air.

No sign of Katherine.

Harry stepped onto the rooftop at Northside. He removed his wristwatch, then his shoes and socks. He placed the socks inside the shoes and rested the watch on top of a sock. He removed his trousers and folded them, then his shirt, which he placed next to his trousers. Standing in his underwear, he took a deep breath and walked towards the sunlight. He removed his undies and raised his arms above his head. Naked yoga had become a ritual for Harry; he felt free and energised. His anxiety wilted in sunlight, which was good as his involvement with Belle was taking him down a road he never envisioned. The thought of Belle and the Wilson story raised the hairs on his arms and exacerbated the rash on his legs. He was scratching and groaning with relief when his phone started ringing: ID Coyne. Harry tried to ignore the call. His ringtone was a retro sound, like an old phone; ring, ring, ring, ring – he eventually gave up. ‘Chris.’

‘I’m in Bendigo.’

‘You okay?’
‘Tell Jean to come up – Rainbow Motel. I’ll fill you in later.’
‘What are you doing in Bendigo?’
‘Following the Wilson story. Harry, I haven’t got time, there’s no time for this now. Tell Jean to get up here.’
‘Alright, I hear you.’
Harry dressed and was about to find Jean when the phone rang again. He looked at it like it was an annoying relative or a badly behaved dog. He picked up. ‘Hello.’
‘Harry Breen?’
‘Who am I talking to?’
‘Jill Jago, the *Guardian*. We’d like to do a story on you and Northside Media.’
Harry’s disposition changed. ‘Jill, great. What’s the angle?’
‘The people behind new media, the rise of independent companies like Northside, the future of journalism.’
‘Just a minute.’ Harry went to the top of the stairs. ‘Jean, Jean! Are you there?’
Jean was downstairs she twisted her head towards Harry’s voice. ‘Yeah. What?’
Coyne wants you up at the Rainbow Motel, Bendigo. Now! Take the gear and this better be good!’ Harry returned to the rooftop, layed down on the yoga matt, shirt unbuttoned, belly to the sun. ‘Fire away.’

Belle sat in the office and was going over the books when Nick entered. ‘Sammy’ll be okay.’
‘What about Katherine?’
Nick didn’t answer. He stared at his boss as if the question was irrelevant. ‘I’ll find her.’ He had programmed himself to find Katherine and that’s what he was going to do.

Katherine sat in the Eatup café at the quiet Mildura Airport departure lounge. She held her mobile to her ear and said, ‘Mum, there’s been an accident … Michael is dead. I have to go away for a while … love you.’

Lily Cheng was in her late 50s. She sat in the dimly lit front room of the Richmond house and her face hardened as the depth of the news washed over her. She stood and moved towards the sideboard where the family photos were proudly displayed.
Katherine looked at the tarmac as baggage handlers and maintenance crews attended to the plane. She felt removed from the activity, consumed by sadness – her brother was dead.

The attendant behind the check-in counter lent into the microphone.
‘QantasLink Flight Q400 to Perth is now ready for boarding.’

Katherine didn’t have any luggage, just the clothes she was standing in. She threw her phone into the bin and walked onto the tarmac. Her body looked small, her face drawn. She stared out of the window as the plane rose into the vast expanse of blue sky. Below, the lifeless red earth – dry, hot and empty.

By the time Marla and Coyne returned to Northside it was dark. Marla checked her mobile. ‘Katherine’s phone has been located at Mildura airport. I’ll see what I can do but she’s not a missing person.’

‘Her brother is dead.’

‘I know.’

Coyne stepped out of the car and took a deep breath as Marla drove off. He fished around in his pocket and took out a packet of beta-blockers. He tipped two into his palm and swallowed them. He entered his apartment, checked the fridge, ate a handful of black olives and went to bed.

Coyne sits in the bedroom in his boxer shorts and pours a whisky. Talia adjusts her sateen dress. It is purple with a gold trim neckline. She tugs at the fabric, fiddles with the hem and tries on an array of earrings. She scrutinises herself in the full-length mirror and is satisfied with how she looks. She turns away from the mirror, and resting her hand on the end of the bed pushes her foot into the ankle strap sling back with a gold turnlock. ‘You better get ready, we’ll be late. Will, make sure your shoes are clean.’

Coyne buttons his shirt. ‘I hope we’re doing the right thing.’

‘You’ve been talking about setting up your own place for years. You and Harry can do this. It’s opening night – Northside Media is on the map.’

‘I don’t deserve you.’ Coyne kisses Talia and wraps his arms around her.

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Early morning and a white Kluger parked in open wetlands. Tussock grass and reeds surrounded it with nothing in sight except for the tidal estuary, which was slowly rising. Don was in the driver’s seat and Belle sat in the passenger seat. Don pointed his finger left to right. ‘This is just the beginning. Everything you see in front of you is virgin land – ripe for the picking. We can’t have our names on any of this but with Frank onboard and a shop front I don’t see any problems. Trust me it’ll be a nice little earner.

‘It’s a swamp, let’s get out of here before we drown,’ she said. Don started the engine and the wheels spun in the muddy bog. He revved harder and louder and the wheels sunk further into the mud. He put the vehicle into first then reverse. He pushed the accelerator down then let off, and the wheels ground to a sticky end. They left the car and stomped through the wetlands.

Don held his mobile to his ear. ‘Megan, pick me up. I’m in Hastings. And organise a tow truck.’ Don indicated to Belle the pick-up point – approximately one kilometre across the muddy grassland.

They started to walk and Belle moaned, ‘This is prime real estate?’

Don opened his nostrils and took in the sea air. ‘Seaview Lakes.’

Belle stopped to take off her heels. ‘No sea level rise, no environment issues?’

‘Of course – I’ve got friends on the local council.’

‘How many?’

‘Friends?’

‘Houses.’

‘We’ll just keep building them – a capitalist dream, the more the better.’

Belle’s ankles were caked in mud. ‘Won’t they just sink?’

‘Who cares? With the City Connect it’ll be a corridor straight to here, and once the container port is up and running that’ll mean jobs – this area is set to take off and we’ll be in the driver’s seat.’

‘That makes me worried.’

As McAlpin and Pieters trudged through the mud seagulls squawked overhead. It was a strange situation with the sun beating down on them and the tide slowly rising.

Belle said, ‘We’ll have to build a levy or something.’

‘Absolutely, a little structural engineering that’s what I do.’
The heat was noticeable in town. The air was still and car fumes hovered like a thick layer of cigarette smoke at a 60s cocktail party. Coyne entered the office at Northside and found Harry wearing a sarong. ‘What’s the story?’ asked Harry.

Coyne didn’t answer; he sat down at the trestle table with a long face.

‘Michael Cheng has been murdered.’

Harry looked disturbed. His darting eyes didn’t know where to land. ‘The brother?’ He stood up and moved across the room. He ran his hands over his face then nervously rubbed them together. ‘His sister was working for Belle Pieters.’

‘How do you know?’ asked a surprised Coyne.

Harry sensed he was on shaky ground and became cautious. ‘She was the girl hooked up with Morley. Pieters paid me to profile the Roadkill story.’

‘Belle Pieters set Wilson up?’

‘No, I checked it out. His house was earmarked for demolition. He was a pain in the arse – protesting against the City Connect, pressuring Morley for a bigger cut for himself.’

‘Is Wilson guilty?’

‘I think so.’

Coyne lunged at Harry and pushed him up against the wall. ‘You set me up!’

Harry sputtered. ‘Wilson was behind the wheel. The cops never blinked an eye. It was a set-and-forget case; a done deal. We just framed it for the public. It was a good story.’

Coyne released Harry and walked across the room. Searching for answers – TRUTH, as if it had been misplaced like a pen or a set of car keys.

‘I was sure Wilson did it, everyone did.’

‘Why did Pieters pay you to run the story?’ asked Coyne.

‘Don’t get upset … she’s been covering costs for a while now.’

‘Pieters?’

‘She offered to help out and we needed the funds to stay afloat.’

‘This is the first I’ve heard about it.’

‘That’s because you’re an idealist, I have to face facts and the facts are we’re in the red. The good news is we can work our way through this.’

‘We’re s’posed to be independent.’

‘We are. Trust me.’
‘When someone says trust me that rings warning bells.’
‘Okay, now you know. That’s why I wanted you to lay off the Morley story. Winning AMJA has been the best business outcome since we started. I can tell you poking around the Morley story is playing with fire. I’m scared. If the brother has been killed then . . .’
‘You think Belle Pieters killed Michael Cheng?’ asked Coyne.
‘I don’t know but he’s Katherine’s brother.’
‘Do you know where Katherine is?’
‘We’ve done nothin’ wrong – we ran a story that was skewed.’ Harry licked his lips, pinched his nose and rubbed his eyes. ‘I’m sorry.’

Katherine landed at Perth airport early evening. With no luggage to collect she darted through the terminal, her eyes scanning everything and anything that might suggest trouble. She was on the run and her senses were on high alert. She moved to the escalator and as it descended she thought she saw Nick. False alarm, she passed the crowd circling the luggage carousel and made her way to the taxi rank. She jumped into a taxi and said in a quiet voice, ‘Sangstons’. Sangstons was a Men’s Club – her old friend Bec had worked there since leaving Melbourne 18 months earlier. Katherine had only heard about Sangstons and on arrival was nervous by the up-market feel of the place.

Bec appeared from the Savoy Room with outstretched arms and a wide-eyed smile. ‘Katy, hiya babe, you finally made it – way out west. You on holidays or work? Hey, Loki can I pleeeese have a coke and . . .’

Katherine spoke softly. ‘Whisky and soda.’
‘Comin’ up,’ said Loki.
Katherine sat at the bar. ‘I have to disappear.’
‘I could get you work here.’
Katherine took a sip from her glass. ‘No. He’ll know to come.’
Bec stared, noticing the tremor in Katherine’s voice. Her thoughts zeroing in on – he’ll know.

Bec was silent, thinking through who might be coming.
Katherine broke the silence. ‘Nick.’
‘Shit!’ Bec knew Nick and knew what he was capable of doing.
‘I need somewhere to stay.’
‘Here’s the key to my apartment. I’ll meet you after work.’
‘Can I use your phone?’

A client entered the club. Bec put on her best smile and moved towards the guy. She grabbed Katherine’s arm and whispered, ‘Gotta go.’ She passed the phone to Katherine. ‘Leave it with Loki. See you tonight.’

Katherine sat at the end of the bar, relieved that Bec was on side. She placed the keys in her bag, finished her drink and made a call to Melbourne.

Ashleigh was at the VIP club sitting on the divan painting her nails. She held the phone – shoulder to her ear and continued to beautify her hands.

‘Ash, it’s Katherine. I’m okay, I’m not coming back.’

Ashleigh continued to paint her nails and truth be known, didn’t care if Katherine returned or not. Girls came and went all the time. She suddenly stopped painting her nails and listened.

Katherine asked, ‘Are you still there?’
‘Yeah, sure babe.’
‘In the courtyard – there’s a loose brick. Behind it is forty thousand – cash. I need you to send it to the Perth GPO 6000 – it’s all I’ve got – please Ash.

Silence.

‘Of course Kathy, you can trust me.’ She put the phone down and blew on her fingers to dry the nail polish, then stepped into the courtyard and stared at the weathered brick wall. There were a few plants in Tuscan-style pots – Monstera, Aspidistra, Canna Lily. She reached over the garden seat and ran her hands over the worn bricks. Her fingers moved like she was trying to crack a safe.

Nick sat in the office at the VIP club. It was dark and the light from the desk lamp bounced onto his face. There was knock at the door. Debbie entered and took a seat. Nick leaned back into his chair and said, ‘How’s it going? No problems? Belle talked to all of you about Katherine, so you know she's missing.’

Debbie sat on the other side of the desk like she was being interviewed for a job.

‘I know it’s awful. Do you think one of the clients…’

‘We’re checking her clients. Did Katherine say anything that might help?’

‘She kept to herself. She talked about her mother and brother.’
‘If she calls, tell her everything is okay and she should come back.’

Ashleigh was waiting as Nick finished with Debbie. She entered and took a seat.

‘You wanted to see me?’

‘Have you heard from Katherine?’

Ashleigh paused – _did anybody see me in the courtyard?_ She composed herself and said, ‘She called me, asked me to send some of her clothes to Perth.’

Nick leaned forward. ‘Good, what else did she say?’

‘That she wasn’t coming back.’

‘Do you know where she is? What’s the address?’

Ashleigh started to crack under Nick’s interrogation. ‘Perth. That’s all I know.’ She checked her nails and kept her eyes low to escape Nick’s gaze.

After discovering Belle Pieters had paid Harry to run the story on Wilson, Coyne made an FOI request for details surrounding the public acquisition of the houses along Alexandra Parade.

Jean was busy editing a news story when Coyne said, ‘Don’t tell Harry but get a look at this.’ Jean moved closer to Coyne’s computer and he scrolled through the government document. Coyne continued, ‘These were houses marked for demolition in order to make way for Stage 1 of the City Connect. All the buyout figures are the same. If Wilson was trying to amp up the payout cost he wouldn’t have stood a chance – there’s your motivation. NOTHING.’

‘I thought this was all checked.’

‘Harry and Belle Pieters pushed the payout argument.’

‘What are you saying?’

Coyne had begun to seriously doubt the Morley story. He grabbed his coat and sunglasses and left the office.
Coyne arrived at Wilson’s house, keen to get a picture. He was met by Wilson’s wife, Cindy. She stood at the door draped in a pink terry towelling dressing gown and a ciggy hanging out of her mouth.

‘Clear off?’

‘I just want to get a photograph of the house.’

‘Haven’t you done enough.’

‘Have you been offered money to move?’

‘Yeah. I’ve got three months. We’ve all got three months.’

‘Where are you going to go?’

‘You don’t seem to understand. My bloke is in jail, they want to bulldoze the house and I haven’t got anywhere to go.’

‘So you’re staying?’

‘They’ll have to carry me out in a box.’

Coyne looked down at his shoes for a moment then raised his head. ‘Dale wanted to sell.’

‘No he didn’t he was never going to sell.’

Coyne returned to the Northside office and rang Marla who was sitting at her desk at the Police Media Unit.

‘Belle Pieters paid Harry to run the Wilson story.’

‘Harry set you up?’ asked Marla
‘The line about Wilson wanting more cash from Morley doesn’t stack up. I talked with Wilson’s wife. She says they were never going to sell.’

‘So she says.’

‘You don’t believe her?’

Marla pushed back in her chair. ‘People say stuff, doesn’t make it true.’

‘Harry is worried. Somebody wanted Michael Cheng dead.’

‘Somebody wanted Katherine Cheng dead. Her brother was in the wrong place at the wrong time.’

‘Pieters is the one to watch.’

‘And McAlpin?’

‘Him too.’

Glenn and McAlpin were getting itchy feet. Don had reneged on the deal with Burke, party factions favoured keeping the unions out of it – get a better deal with the Lester Group. Glenn was unsure – back Darren Burke and look good in front of the electorate, or get a sweetheart deal with Lester. The City Connect had a lot of opposition – not only the Greens and Labor but also public transport advocates, bicycle lobbyists, climate change fanatics and locals whose houses were to be demolished: Dale Wilson’s being one of them. In fact Wilson had played nicely into the chatter. How much sympathy was the electorate going to give to a murderer? With Wilson behind bars the pressure was off the City Connect; now all Glenn had to do was convince the people that Victoria needed a multi-billion dollar road with a substantial amount of taxpayer money going offshore.

Don knocked on the heavy wooden door and entered Glenn’s office. Glenn was sitting at his desk snoring. Don poked his head through the door. ‘Dick, Dick!’

Richard came to life. ‘Bloody hell – what?’

‘I’ve asked Megan to shred all communications regarding Morley and the City Connect.’

Glenn straightened himself in his chair and mumbled. ‘Good, good idea.’

‘I know you were uncomfortable with me dropping Burke but we can get a much better deal with Lester. We never know what the unions will pull they can’t be trusted.’
‘Burke’s not happy. Can we smooth that out?’ asked Glenn.
‘I’ll see if we can’t throw something his way.’

Bec arrived at her apartment in downtown Rivervale. The modern architectural style was popular with young professionals and the apartment boom was a sign of the times. The quarter acre block had become unaffordable and apartment living was a viable option. The unit came with stone bench-tops, walk-in robes and a spa in the bathroom.

‘Hi Katy,’ said Bec in an upbeat sing song voice.
‘I’m in the spa.’
Bec threw her bag on the designer couch and poured herself a dry white. She kicked her heels off and took the drink into the bathroom. ‘Have you thought about your next step?’
‘Maybe head North.’
‘Got any cash?’
‘I’ve got some coming.’
Bec pulled a wad of money from her bra. ‘Take this it’ll hold you over until you can get back on your feet. I hear some of the girls are making good money in Karratha but the boom is over.’
‘I’ll pay you back when my money comes through.’

Katherine had travelled from Bendigo to Mildura and caught a plane to Perth. Now she booked a ticket with Integrity Coachlines: a fifteen-hundred kilometre trip north.
Karratha was mainly fly-ins and fly-outs, blokes with too much money and too much testosterone. The heat brought out the best and worst in people. It was an excuse to strip down, drink-up and lair about. The vast expanse of arid desert and blue sky made Katherine feel lonely and insignificant.

She stared out of the window – spinifex and mulga plants dotted the landscape and day turned to night. The coach was half-full of back-packers and tourists heading for Broome. Karratha was a stop along the way. The stars were bright and the back-packers were in good spirits, laughing, singing and chattering. Eventually the night-lights were turned off one by one and the babble subsided. Katherine closed her eyes as the coach headed up the North West Coastal Highway.

It was early in the day when McAlpin stepped from the small shop in Hastings. It was a real estate office at the end of the main drag. A construction worker sat in his car eating a chicken subway and recognised Don as he shook hands with the young real estate woman and then made his way to the Kluger.

‘Darren … it’s Gary Shields. Look mate I’m just down here in Hastings, I thought you’d like to know that little prick, Don McAlpin just walked out of a real estate office here in the main drag. Looks dodgy… there’s a sign in the window. Hastings real estate … Seaview Lakes … now selling. Sounds like bullshit Daz.’

‘Thanks Gary, bullshit and McAlpin sounds just about right. I’ll look into it.’

Darren had struggled to control his anger when he heard McAlpin’s name. Now that the City Connect was off the table he knew it was only a matter of time before McAlpin would show his cards. He wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand and slammed the phone on the desk.
Coyne met Marla at Carwyns. She had her head down looking at her tablet, reading a news article.

![Survey shows journalists and politicians least trusted](image.jpg)

Marla raised her eyes and said, ‘Glad I’m not a journalist.’

*She didn’t know the half of it,* Coyne thought. Still furious at Harry’s involvement with Belle Pieters, he was keen to see the bottom of a vodka slammer. He slumped forward, ran both hands over his face and brought them back to the table with a dull thump.

Marla’s phone pinged – a message from her toy-boy boyfriend, Jake the cop. She’d double-booked and said, ‘Let’s keep this short.’

Coyne remained silent, pissed-off at being shunted by the toy-boy. The vodka arrived and the waiter carefully placed them on the table. Coyne grabbed the glass, downed it and ordered another one. He was distracted and felt edgy after his talk with Harry.

Later in the day Coyne parked across the road from the Pieters depot. He looked through his SLR and zoomed in click, click, click – 44-gallon drums, truck parts, dogs, a galvo shed, tyres and the small office. Sammy arrived in a taxi and Coyne slumped lower in the seat. He peered over the windscreen to see Sammy with a walking stick limping towards the office. Coyne perched the camera on the car door and snapped Sammy as he entered the building.

Sammy opened the door and Belle said, ‘Where have you been? I’ve been trying to call you.’ Sammy heaved and wheezed and plonked himself down on the two-seater. ‘Which number?’

Belle asked, ‘What do you mean?’
Sammy slapped his forehead. ‘Shit the meds are pretty strong. I meant to tell you, I lost my phone. It’s okay I’ve gotta a burner.’

Belle didn’t look pleased, she barked at Sammy. ‘Where?’ When did you last use it?’

Sammy thought for what seemed like a long time.

Nick says, ‘You screw me like that ever again and I’ll cut your heart out and throw it to the dogs. She’s somewhere … find her.’

Sammy reluctantly gets out of the car as he rolls to one side his phone falls from his pocket.

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Belle waited … eventually Sammy said, ‘I had it at the mineshaft.’

‘You idiot! Find it before somebody else does!’ Belle leaned back in her chair and lit a cigarette. ‘When you get back I’ve got a job for you.’

Coyne watched Sammy leave the depot. He started the ignition and followed. Sammy was in a rush. He put the pedal to the floor and headed out onto the Calder freeway. Coyne rang Marla – speakerphone. ‘Sammy Naylor he’s just taken the Calder.’

Marla wasn’t convinced that following Naylor up the Calder had any significance, or at least anything she could work with. ‘Where’s the connection?’

‘Katherine’s brother was murdered and Naylor works for Pieters.’

Marla brought the database and checked out Naylor. ‘Sammy Naylor, New Zealander, been here two years. Minor convictions ran with a street gang in Auckland called DMS – Dope, Money, Sex – gambling debts in Christchurch, bankrupt in 09. Run of the mill stuff …’

‘I’ll call you back.’

Sammy turned off the highway and drove into the scrub. Coyne parked his car on the other side of the highway along a dirt track behind the trees. He crossed the road, ducked under the barbed wire fence and circled back around to where he thought Sammy had disappeared.
Sammy stood in the clearing and pulled out the burner from his pocket. His chubby fingers pressed the keypad. A smile appeared on his face as the hip-hop ring tone rang out. He pushed at the twigs and leaves with his walking stick and found his mobile. Sammy had trouble bending down to pick it up and eventually got down on one knee, using the walking stick to balance himself. With a heave and a grunt he came back to standing. He took a piss then limped back to his car. Coyne watched from a distance. Sammy continued north towards Bendigo. Coyne walked into the bush, he was suspicious and scanned for clues, nothing except the wet patch. He stood and circled 360 looking for some reason why Naylor would stop other than a piss stop. He returned to his car and continued north and saw Sammy’s car out the front of a KFC. 

On the return trip Coyne called Marla. ‘I followed him into Bendigo. He stopped for a piss and I saw his car at the KFC. The whole trip looked sus.’

‘Wonder if he knew you were tailing him?’

Katherine arrived at Karratha as the sun rose over the flat coastal town. At the peak of the mining boom Karratha had it all: it was one of the up and coming towns of the Pilbara, from the eight story Pelago shopping complex to big box shopping at Coles and K-Mart. It had two hotels and a couple of restaurants. Katherine liked what she saw as she walked the five minutes from the town centre to the Karratha International Hotel. She half expected giant lizards to be slithering down the main drag; but no, this frontier land looked more like a DFO centre. With her suitcase in hand she sauntered into the lounge bar and ordered a Scotch and ice. She didn’t know what her next move would be. Staring at the ice cubes in her glass, she twizzled the plastic stirrer.

She had spent the best part of a year with Gary Morley. Katherine didn’t mind Gary. She was sorry for his untimely death, but she was on the payroll. Now she had to start all over again – broke, down at heel and on the run. Her options were few – start making tricks or go straight?

A man in his early 30s wearing a short sleeved shirt, Bermuda shorts and sporting a 70s moustache sat at the bar. He looked down at Katherine’s suitcase. ‘Just got in? Staying here?’

Silence.

‘I’m Geoff.’

Katherine turned her head to Geoff and said, ‘I’m happy for you.’
Geoff got the message. He slipped off the bar stool and retreated to the outside pool area. The middle-aged barmaid was a pin-up girl for the CWA – she leaned over the counter and told Katherine that Karratha was a family town. Katherine sipped her drink and left the bar, unaware that Nick was close at hand.

Nick arrived at Bec’s apartment. He knocked on the door and the moment Bec opened it he pushed his way in. He grabbed her around the throat and threw her onto the couch.

She pulled her legs up to her chest as a way of protecting herself and with fake confidence said, ‘Hey, long time no see.’

‘Shut up.’

‘What gives you the right to push me around?’

Nick ignored her and checked the apartment. He scanned the room looking for any clues. ‘Have you seen Katherine?’

‘Katherine? I haven’t seen her since Melbourne. How is she?’

‘You want to play games?’ Nick sat in the Eames replica. He picked-up a nail file from the side table and felt the pointed tip with his thumb. ‘Where is she?’

‘Adelaide, now get lost.’

Nick noticed the pad on the kitchen bench, and he stood to take a look. The page had been torn off but the impression of the pen on the paper remained. He lifted it close and turned to face the light. He ran his hand over the page as if it were in braille: Integrity Coachlines 1800-225-338. He rang the number and with a most affable voice asked about buying a ticket to Adelaide. The booking agent revealed Integrity only serviced the North West coast. Nick ended the call and moved towards Bec. She screamed.

Katherine arrived at the Civeo Karratha village, 8 km from the airport. It was a modular accommodation camp for miners and resource workers and the occasional German backpacker keen to experience the loneliness and isolation of the Australian outback. The cabins were a step up from the traditional ‘dongas’ with basic furniture, remote TV, bar fridge and en suite. She paid the taxi fare and booked into a single, which overlooked the undercover B-B-Q area. After a long shower in which tried to forget the road her life had taken her, she sat on the end of the bed and cried. She picked up her phone and swiped through pictures of Michael, her mother, and Morley who was
smiling. As the sun turned bright pink and the star finches and song larks began to squawk, Katherine dressed and walked over to reception.

The buildings were rust red with paths connecting each block to the next – in all, 208 rooms, 208 remote TVs, 208 bar fridges, and 208 en suites; not to mention the leisure centre and the food hall. Maddy sat behind the desk updating her Facebook profile. Katherine entered the clinical looking office – hard grey tiled floor, light blue melamine counter and blank stark walls. She stood and waited and Maddy ignored her. In her own time Maddy looked up. Life was slow in the Pilbara. Katherine asked if she could use the phone.

‘Five dollars a minute,’ said Maddy.

Katherine nodded and Maddy pushed the phone towards her. Maddy hit the timer on her mobile, prompting Katherine to start dialing – no answer.

The apartment in Rivervale was dead quiet. The curtains were drawn and Bec’s limp body lay on the couch with a nail file in her neck. She was on her back and her wide eyes stared at the ceiling, her mouth partly open. Her hand drooped by her side. Bec’s pet cat moved towards the couch. It stopped and considered the pooled blood that had flowed from her carotid artery. It hopped up onto her belly and meowed.

Maddy looked at the timer and asked for five dollars. Katherine fumbled through her bag looking for change – nothing – she handed over her credit card.

‘You looking for work?’

‘What have you got?’

‘Kitchen hand, seven days a week, includes accommodation. Start tomorrow morning.’

Katherine felt good about the Pilbara it was as far away as possible from Nick – so she thought. She returned to her cabin but was stopped in her tracks by a deadly King Brown that eyeballed her for a split second before slithering into the grass.

The long sunset over Western Port Bay cast a shadow from Melbourne to Geelong. Traffic was bumper to bumper and fumes rose into the air leaving a smoky stain across the sky. The days were hotter at this time of evening and the buildings at Barwon Prison
were stifling. Wilson and Johnny the Tatt were on kitchen duties. They stood at the bench peeling carrots.

Johnny whispered, ‘Stay away from the journo.’

‘What’s it to you?’

‘This isn’t a conversation, you’ve been told.’

‘Get lost.’

The kitchen supervisor told them to take the bins out to the loading bay.

‘Pretty little girl you got there, Wilson. What’s her name?’ asked Johnny.

Wilson responded by turning down his hearing aids. He turned his back on Johnny and began to wheel the scraps bin outside. As Wilson parked the bin against the wall Johnny approached from behind. He removed a table fork, lodged in his sock and stabbed Wilson under the right shoulder blade. He threw the fork in the bin and returned to the kitchen – business as usual. Wilson slumped to the ground.

Marla rang Coyne. ‘Wilson’s been stabbed.’

‘How bad?’

‘He’ll live. I thought you should know.’

Coyne ended the call and looked at Harry. ‘Somebody stabbed Wilson … why?’

‘To shut him up – you won’t let it go.’

Coyne looked at the photo of Talia and Will. He stared back at Harry with grim determination. ‘That’s right,’ said Coyne.

With daylight saving it was still light when Cindy Wilson answered the door.

‘I hope it’s not you again. I’ve got nothin’ to say to you journos.’

As she swung the door open she was met with a shotgun blast to the head. It was quick and final. She fell to the floor with blood and flesh splattered along the hallway.
Coyne couldn’t sleep. The beta-blockers lay on the coffee table, the blister pack had all but one intact. The table was strewn with newspapers, bills and a half opened bottle of red. He took a swig then clicked on the TV to find Wolfmother singing, *Violence of the Sun*. As he watched the lead singer mutated into Dale Wilson. Coyne reached for the remote and clicked the TV off but Wilson continued to sing at him.

Coyne passed out on the couch, legs half on – half off, empty bottle on the floor.

Snore …

Guttural choke …

Sunlight through the window.

When he woke he looked at the TV with a strange sense of unreality. He picked up the remote and turned on the TV. The news was sobering – Wilson’s wife murdered in cold blood. Coyne’s phone jumped across the coffee table. The ID was Marla Davis. Coyne just sat and felt numb. The phone vibrated and eventually stopped. His mind raced. Was he being followed?

When Wilson received the news of his wife’s death he went ballistic. They dragged him to an isolation cell as he screamed, ‘Somebody’s gonna pay for this.’ After 24 hours on suicide watch Wilson was sent back to his own cell. He knew her death was somehow connected to the City Connect – it had to be … she didn’t have any enemies. He’d been set up – she’d been silenced. Now more than ever, he wanted out.
Coyne arrived at Barwon. As he walked down the corridor towards the visitors’ area he remembered his encounter with Cindy Wilson.

*Cindy Wilson is wearing a Hawaiian shirt and trackie-daks as she shuffles down the corridor, her arms folded and head down. As she passes Coyne, she looks across at him and spits. He stops and watches her walk towards the exit. Coyne takes a hankie from his pocket and wipes the saliva from his face then continues walking towards the meeting room.*

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Wilson was waiting for Coyne.
‘I’m sorry about your wife.’

Wilson stared at Coyne with hateful eyes. Was Coyne was responsible for Cindy’s murder?
‘Go on say it. I can see it in your face,’ said Coyne.
‘You made her target.’
‘I had no idea it would play like that.’
‘Life’s cheap. Is a freeway more important than my wife?’
‘Who do you think did it?’
Wilson paused and then said, ‘She didn’t deserve that.’
‘I think you’re innocent. That’s why I went to the house. Her murder was a message – loud and clear. Do I pack it in? Walk away?’

Wilson looked at Coyne, his face drawn and his eyes dark and cold. ‘Get me out of here.’

Wilson sat in the recreation room with six other inmates. He looked calm on the outside but he was a ball of anger and fear. The prison psychologist recommended that he attend the art session with a volunteer group who came once a month. On the table was a cigar box of charcoal and crayons. No sharp objects. There was drawing paper – A3 and A4 size sheets. Some of the prisoners were drawing. Heads down, elbows on the table. Wilson took a seat and one of the volunteers encouraged him to draw. The image was a scratchy black ink impression of what looked like tree branches.
Wilson’s frustration grew as he tried to remember the night of Morley’s death. He drew, page after page, until he picked up the sketchpad and threw it across the room, then upturned one of the tables. He pumped his chest forward and clenched his fists – his body tense. He stepped back to the wall, aggro and scared. He was ready for a fight. The guards restrained him and dragged him back to his cell – bruised, shaken.

A short while later, after Wilson had settled down, he was taken to the office of the Operations Manager who had no time for prison theatrics. He leafed through Wilson’s sketchbook. ‘The recreation room is a privilege, Wilson. You should try drawing something a little more uplifting. You’re lucky you’re not going to solitary – extra duties in the kitchen.’ He threw the sketchbook at Wilson. ‘That’s all.’

Two days later, Wilson locked himself in the refrigerator surrounded by frozen meat and vegetables. He’d jammed the door with a rolling pin. Cold – his shoulders hunched forward, his knees locked and pressed together. He stared at the door. His lips were tinged with a bluish hue and his eyes drooped like a hound dog. The two guards one tall one short, looked at one another and the shorter one shook his head, intimating Wilson was nothing but trouble. The short one had a neatly trimmed beard and looked to be the senior officer. They stood outside the door and the short guard said, ‘Dale you’d better come out. You won’t last long in there, mate.’

‘Leave me alone.’

The tall guard looked at his watch and said, ‘I’m meant to knock-off.’

The short bearded one said, ‘Think of the overtime.’
The Operations Manager arrived and was at a loss as to what to do. After some thought, he told the guards to take the door off its hinges. This is not what the tall guard wanted to hear because he had his weekly pool comp down at the Corio Hotel. He cursed under his breath; he left and returned with a small red toolbox, threw it on the concrete floor while the shorter guard inspected the hinges. ‘You got a 20 ml hex?’

Coyne sat in his chair, hung-over and liverish. He picked up a biro and started clicking on-off, on-off. He stared at the computer screen and wrote on a post-it note: Katherine Cheng; Centurion; Bay West; Call Marla.

Jean arrived at Northside. She walked towards the sink and picked up her cup with the words: *I agree with you, but then we’d both be wrong*. She ran it under the steaming hot water. ‘Wilson locked himself in the fridge.’

Coyne stopped clicking and threw the pen on the desk. ‘What?’

‘It’s happening now.’ She clicked on the TV.

Journos were gathering at the front gate of the prison. The tech-heads were unloading equipment from their vans and setting up lights.

Tony Natali answered his phone. ‘What’s happening?’

A prison insider said, ‘They’re taking the doors off the fridge. Wilson says he’s innocent … can’t talk.’
Coyne arrived and strode towards the entrance. The guard turned him away and told him to wait until the situation had been secured. Natali appeared from the small group of journos and was surprised to see Coyne leaning against the bonnet of his car. He approached Coyne with his usual snide and blunt manner, ‘Milking Wilson for another award?’

Coyne had heard that Natali had left the ABC and was now working for the Clarion. Coyne said he’d been out to see Wilson several times and no he wasn’t milking Wilson; in fact he thought Wilson might be innocent. This raised Natali’s eyebrows, got his attention and took him off guard.

Natali sensed a story and toned down his sarcasm. ‘Innocent. What makes you say that?’

‘Just a hunch.’

Tony smiled and nodded, acknowledging the journalist code of confidentiality and a general mind-your-own-business etiquette between professionals. He patted Coyne on the back. ‘Good to see you, Chris.’

The prison officers lifted the door off the fridge. Wilson sat shivering on a tub of frozen peas. The door was heavy and took four blokes to manoeuver it. Wilson was lifted and dragged into the kitchen area and taken to the medical room for assessment. As they walked along the corridor, the short guard punched Wilson in the kidneys for good luck. Wilson winced with pain.

Tony Natali did a hatchet job on Coyne after their meeting at Barwon. Jean stood in the kitchenette at Northside and made toast and coffee. She reached for her iPad and turned to the Clarion News.
Natali had quoted Coyne from the day before and extrapolated the general comment that Coyne had made: ‘Between you and me I think he’s innocent.’ Such a simple off-hand remark, made in confidence, had the media in a whirl; one of their own was responsible for the jailing of an innocent man. Coyne had won the AMJA and had been lauded as the new face of journalism. Now Natali had his day.

Coyne arrived at Northside unaware of the media buzz surrounding his integrity as a journalist.

Jean said, ‘You’re not going to like this. You’re on the news.’

‘What!’

She held the iPad for Coyne to see – its magnetic power drew Coyne to the screen. He read the article and the silence was dark.

It was broken by Jean taking a bite of her toast. ‘What did you say to Natali?’

‘I was following the Wilson-in-the-fridge story and Natali was there … I said Wilson might be innocent.’

Harry stood at the top of the stairs in his undies and socks. ‘Upstairs, now.’ Coyne climbed the stairs and Harry was confused, angry, anxious and furious all at the same time. ‘Did you mention Belle Pieters or Katherine Cheng?’

‘Of course not.’

‘You’ve opened a can of worms. If Natali gets whiff of any of this, we’re cactus. You understand?’

‘I understand Wilson is in jail and if he shouldn’t be then I’ll do what I can...’

‘Stop. Stop right there. You’re not Pollyanna; you’re not the court of happy endings. Wilson killed a guy.’

‘We don’t know that for sure,’ said Coyne.

‘This’ll need damage control.’

Harry dressed and on his way out said, ‘Don’t say anything to anyone.’

_Coyne turns around and sees the Northside office full of friends and family. People are mingling, drinking wine, celebrating the opening of the new business._

_Coyne gives Talia a kiss on the cheek and moves towards the buffet._

_Jean approaches Coyne. ‘Don’t want to be a killjoy but we got another one of those messages.’_

‘Good. They’re scared.’
Harry arrived at the Docklands apartment. He looked summery in a beige safari jacket, white shirt and beige slacks. His hair was greasy from sweat and styling cream. He saw his reflection in the lift doors and thought he looked good until he noticed his fly was undone. The doors opened. A young woman stepped out while Harry zipped his pants. It was awkward. Harry smiled nervously then shot into the lift. He composed himself, patted his hair, exited at the fourth floor and walked down the corridor to Belle’s place. He checked his fly again, then buzzed the door and entered.

Belle was waiting for him. ‘Who’s Tony Natali?’
‘Nobody – a jumped up journo, worked at the ABC, moved across to the Clarion.’
‘What’s Wilson doing on the front page? What did Coyne say?’
‘Nothing.’

Belle took a deep breath and walked towards the floor-to-ceiling window. Harry sat on the couch, too scared to say anything. He leaned forward, admired the motion machine on the coffee table. It was a stand of silver balls. Harry pulled the first one back and released it setting the end one off. The sound turned Belle’s head. She walked towards the contraption and rested her hand on the balls – silence.

‘What are you going to do?’ said Belle.
‘What am I supposed to do? The story is out there.’
‘Shut it down.’
‘It's not that easy.’

The buzzer rang. Belle pressed the intercom and Don entered; he strode across the room like he was a ‘Best in Show’. Don eyeballed Harry with a tone of contempt.

‘Harry Breen! Mr Media himself I should have got into your game. You guys report the news, make the news, are the news.’

‘Shut up.’ Belle moved closer to Harry. ‘I need you to keep Coyne in line.’

Harry mustered up some confidence. ‘He’s writing a rebuttal.’

Don wasn’t convinced. He’d heard enough weasel words in his time and as a political careerist ‘rebuttal’ was just hot air. He moved to the glass and steel sideboard and poured himself a drink. Don was comfortable in Belle's apartment, unlike Harry who was as nervous as a schoolboy fronting the principal.
Don turned and said, ‘Rebuttal?’

Harry knew he was in a weak position. How the hell was he gonna rein in Coyne? ‘It’s not Coyne – Natali – he’s the one stirring up trouble.’

Nick rang Belle as he headed for the North West Coastal Highway. Belle picked up.

Nick was on speaker. ‘She’s up North.’

Belle stepped into her bedroom to continue the conversation.

‘I need you back here,’ said Belle.

‘You want me to find her or come back?’

‘Call me when it’s done.’

Belle paced the room. She went and opened the drawer of the bedside table and pulled out a pack of cigarettes – eyeballs and toes. She put a smoke to her mouth – paused then she threw it in the bin.

Don fixed himself a drink.

Harry stood up and clapped his hands together. ‘I’ll have one of those. He moved towards Don and said, ‘Don't underestimate the power of the press.’

‘Just do your job, Breen.’

Belle returned from the bedroom – pissed off. She picked up the paper and threw it in the bin. Harry gulped the gin and gagged and spluttered. Belle and Don turned on him and he backed out of the apartment as if they were a pair of attack dogs about to rip his throat out. Belle screamed. ‘I don't want Wilson in the news, shut it down, shut it down!’

Harry shook his head. ‘Sure, I’ll fix it.’ He licked his lips and made a beeline for the lift.

Belle turned to Don. ‘I’ll speak with Frank. We need to take care of Natali.’

Tony Natali met with Megan at a small bar near Parliament House. Megan was short of breath and Tony was sweating like a bush pig. The heat was above 40 and they quickly moved to the shadowy entrance. The aircon could be felt the moment the door opened, inviting anyone looking for some relief to enter. The bar was full. It was a cave, a dark cool respite. People were operating in half-life mode, just sitting in the breeze of the Daikon sucking on ice cubes and fanning their faces with the drinks menu. Tony and Megan were just two in a crowd. Tony wore dark blue chinos and a navy blue open-
neck shirt, Megan a yellow sleeveless shirt. They sat at the bar – down lights on the Galliano and Cherry liqueur creating a cosy mood.

‘How well did you know Gary?’
‘You know I can’t talk about this with you; especially not you.’
‘I’m just fact checking. I think Wilson is innocent and I’ve been going over the police files. He said he got a call from Morley's secretary.’
Megan dragged her cherry coloured cocktail closer and crossed her legs. ‘I was Gary’s secretary and I can tell you I didn’t call Wilson.’
‘What do you mean?’
‘Wilson made it up? I told the police. It’s in the report.’
‘Why was Morley in Little River?’
Megan paused, took a sip and then carefully placed the cocktail glass square and centre on the coaster. ‘I can't say anything more.’
‘What aren't you telling me?’
Silence.
‘Gary was having an affair. That's why he was at Little River ... don't mention my name.’

Coyne sat in the dim glow of his computer while Jean rolled out her Pilates matt and began to engage her core strength, which was accompanied by groans and cries of anguish.

‘How does this sound? Tony Natali is the worst kind of Journo – what I call, the newsmaker. His evidence is baseless. Something along those lines?’
‘You sure it’ll help?’
‘I have to respond.’
‘Okay, it sounds good.’
Coyne continued to draft his reply. He thumped at the keyboard while Jean continued to stretch and groan. Coyne knew it was futile. Jean stood up and raised her hands over her head in a final stretch which was followed by her asking, ‘Do you want a smoothie?’
Coyne ignored her he closed the file and stared at the computer. While Jean blitzed a banana and an avocado Talia appeared on the screen.
‘I got it wrong.’

Talia said, ‘Harry didn’t help. He gave you a bum steer.’

The screen started to break up and Talia disappeared into the ocean blue screen saver.

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The following morning it got worse. Natali was on the attack. This was personal. In both print and digital media – blogs and tweets and commentary were rife. The story was hot … the shonky journo who didn’t check the facts. Microphones were thrust into Coyne’s face when he arrived at Northside. He declined to comment. Harry stood in the doorway. ‘There’s no story here. This is coming from the Clarion … an established newspaper threatened by the quality of independent news. It says more about them than Northside.’

The pack jostled for position and barked questions:

Reporter #1: ‘Who was Morley having an affair with?’

Reporter #2: ‘Was Wilson connected to the affair?’

Reporter #3: ‘Did you know Morley was having an affair?’

Reporter #1: ‘Was there a cover-up?’

Harry slammed the door. He turned to Coyne and said, ‘Upstairs, now.’ Harry and Coyne continued their conversation in the privacy of the rooftop.

‘How does he know about the affair?’ asked Harry.

‘I didn’t tell him.’

‘Who’s talking to Natali?’
Belle met Frank and Don at the Melbourne Club. In the far corner a harpist unzipped a canvass bag and revealed a beautiful Irish harp. The young Chinese girl with shiny black hair wore black slacks and a white satin shirt. She strummed *Carolan's Dream*, a mid 16th Century Irish melody that floated across the room and time. She’d been booked for the group of Chinese businessmen who were being wined and dined by some local developers. They were in high spirits, clinking glasses and laughing. In contrast Frank, Don and Belle were restrained. Frank felt like the businessmen were laughing at him. The news of faulty trucks and Government handouts had made him look like an amateur and he didn’t like it. He sipped his wine and dabbed his lips with a napkin. He glanced at them with contemptuous eyes then he turned away.

Frank said, ‘This is on you, Belle.’

Don came to Belle’s defence. ‘Just a hiccup.’

Frank was unconvinced. ‘Unless it blows out – can you guarantee this won’t blow out?’

Belle said, ‘You’re jumping to conclusions, Frank. The fleet is good, we had a technical difficulty.’

‘Belle is right, Frank, a technical difficulty,’ said Don.

Belle said, ‘It’s put me in the spotlight. If anyone has a gripe it’s me. You wouldn’t believe the flack I’ve copped over the VIP club.’

‘It’s perfectly legal,’ said Don.

The waiter brought the oversized menus to the table. Frank waved him off – he wasn’t interested in dining. But before he had the chance to leave Belle asked for another bottle of Beaujolais.

Frank folded his napkin and stood up. ‘This is a shambles.’

Frank left. Belle was miffed. ‘Where does he get off, talking to us like that?’

Don reached across the table and squeezed Belle’s hand. ‘We’re still in the box seat.’

Belle pulled her hand away from Don, grabbed her glass of red and drained it. Marla rang Coyne at Northside. ‘There’s been a report of a girl who worked at Sangstons – murdered in her apartment. I requested the in-house CCTV. The victim was seen talking to Katherine Cheng.’

‘Who was the girl?’
‘Bec, her real name was … Bronwyn Forbes. She was found with a nail file in her neck.’

‘Katherine is in WA?’ asked Coyne.

‘Looks like it.’

Megan entered Don’s office. Dressed in her parliamentary pants suit and hair tied back, she looked nervous. She clasped her hands and her eyes darted left to right – anywhere but straight at Don.

Don stared at her becoming impatient. ‘What?’

Megan paused, cleared her throat and said, ‘I had a meeting with Tony Natali. I told him about Gary’s affair … I didn’t mean … we had a few drinks … and he was pushing me for …’

Don listened and tried to contain his rage. His face blushed to the point that she asked if he wanted a glass of water.

‘I thought this Wilson business was dead. Why was Natali asking you?’

Megan spoke in a soft and measured voice. ‘I know Tony from Uni. I did PR. He was asking questions about Gary.’

Don paced around the office. Talk of his dead predecessor was just gutter journalism and fuelled rumour and speculation. ‘Make a time to see Natali. Tell him to read the court transcript, Wilson killed Morley because he was drunk.’

Megan nodded that she understood and started to snuffle. She held a tissue under her nose and appeared to diminish in size as she walked towards the door. As she opened the door, Don yelled, ‘Meet him somewhere inconspicuous.’

Don rang Belle and told her he’d found Natali’s source – his own secretary Megan Mathers! He assured Belle that Megan would put an end to the rumours and stop the bad publicity.

Sammy tailed Megan right through the mouth of the laughing clown. Tony arrived shortly after and walked down the alley past the ticket box and Carousel – towards the Ghost Train. Megan appeared with her hands full of fairy floss.

‘Why are we meeting here?’ asked Tony.

‘We might be followed. The press are all over this thanks to you.’

‘I am the press.’
‘Someone takes a snap and we’ll be news.’
‘Okay, I get it. What have you got?’
‘Don doesn’t want this to go any further... he says Wilson was drunk and ...’

Sammy – wearing a baseball cap and white dust jacket, held a 9 mm Hush Puppy with his finger on the trigger. He stood two metres from Tony and Megan. Resting one hand on his walking stick, he fired a bullet, which pierced Tony’s arm. The crowd of fun seekers was slow to understand what had just happened. Sammy fired another shot – miss. Megan SCREAMED. Tony jumped the guardrail, pushed the attendant into the waiting queue and took cover in the Ghost Train pavilion. Sammy followed. The ride was already in action – strobe lights brought creatures to life – zombies, ghouls, bats, Tony and Sammy. GUNSHOT! FLASH – FLASH – FLASH. Tony crashed through the Dracula diorama and pushed the fake cobwebs away from his face. Sammy fired two more shots and Tony ducked, tripped and fell in front of the train – crushed skull, blood, grey matter on the track – DEAD. The attendant hit the emergency button and the train came to a sudden stop. Thrill seekers complained. Children cried.

Sammy bent down on one knee like he was concerned. He placed Coyne’s business card in Tony’s shirt pocket and limped away from the commotion. He slipped his dust jacket off and threw it in the bin, and left through the laughing clown entrance. Megan – shocked and terrified, disappeared into the crowd.

A plane taxied into position. Coyne sat in economy, his knees pushed against the seat in front of him prompting the passenger, a small boy, to raise his head above the seat and eyeball him. The boy was about the same age his son Will and for a moment they looked alike, the cheeky and vibrant face that was staring at him was unsettling. The boy was excited and smiled. Coyne pushed back into his seat and tried to sit up straight to give his knees more room and the boy disappeared behind the seat. Coyne pinched his nose and took a deep breath before checking his mobile – a text message from Harry – Where RU? Give me a call, urgent. The hostess asked Coyne to close it down. He buckled in and felt the surge of the engine as the jet lifted into the air – the overhead lockers shook. The wings dipped and the view of Melbourne’s Northern suburbs showed traffic backed up along the Western Ring Road and all along the Tullamarine Freeway. The plane climbed higher and the freeways and cars and houses grew smaller. A
comforting voice from the cabin came over the speaker. ‘Ladies and gentlemen we recommend you keep your seatbelt fastened. It’s a beautiful day in Perth, approximately 29 degrees. We hope you enjoy the flight.’ The hostess moved down the aisle handing out headphones, magazines and newspapers. Coyne took the Clarion and was alarmed at what he found.

Coyne breathed heavily as he read the article – the flight attendant asked if he was okay. He leaned forward, ran his hands over his face and asked for some water.

Nick sat at the bar at the Gecko Saloon, on the corner of Millstream and Hillview. The Legends of Funk were tuning up and about to play. Nick took his drink and sat towards the back of the room. Geoff, the engineer, was sitting at one of the tables. He'd blown it when he tried to pick up Katherine, now he sat on his own with a crownie and a candle. Nick perused the almost empty bar – a guy in shorts, a group of miners who’d emptied three jugs, and beyond the door there were two middle-aged ladies in thongs and floral patterned skirts, and a trucker wearing stubbies and a Jackie Howe. They were sitting at pokies punching buttons, hoping for three lemons and the sound of a zillion coins to spill into the dish. The band was loud and Signed Sealed Delivered bounced off the hard surfaces of the room. Two guys – one on sax, the other on bass. Fronting the band was a female singer – Maddy, the receptionist from the Civeo Karratha. She wore a hip-hugging silver dress and shook her booty with everything she had. Nick watched and listened, believing the song a portent of things to come. After the first set the singer approached the bar.

Nick bought her a drink. ‘I like you guys.’
Maddy loved to be flattered. She giggled and her dress sparkled under the mirror ball. Maddy stood close to Nick. ‘Got any requests?’

‘I could get you gigs in Melbourne. You got a card?’

‘Cool. Who do you know?’

The jet slowly descended from the blue cloudless skies.

After his tip-off from Marla, Coyne headed for Sangstons. He got out of the taxi and climbed the stairs. He just wanted a drink and a chat. Loki was behind the bar.

‘I heard about Bec.’

‘Bad shit man. I can’t talk about Bec.’

‘Whisky no ice.’

Loki poured Coyne a shot and slid the glass across the bar.

‘I’m a friend of Katherine … you know the girl from Melbourne. She was here a few days ago.’

‘Yeah, I remember.’

Coyne peeled four fifty-dollar notes and handed them to Loki. ‘What do remember?’

‘She was freaked out, needed a place to stay.’

‘Where did she go?’

‘Bec put her up. Fuck, I gotta get out of this game it’s too dangerous.’

‘You got Bec’s address?’

Loki picked up a tray of glasses and slid them into the dishwasher. Coyne peeled another hundred dollars and handed it to Loki.

‘You know I miss her.’

Coyne left the club and caught a taxi to Bec’s apartment in Rivervale. The police tape was still across the door and he found his way around the side. A dog barked and he crouched down. The neighbour came to the back door and yelled at the dog, telling it to keep quiet. ‘You’ll wake the neighbours’. Coyne used the drainpipe to lift himself up to the bathroom window. He climbed through the window and lowered himself down. He slipped in the spa bath but quickly found his balance. He crept in the dark. Coyne pulled the curtains and switched on the ‘flashlight app’ on his mobile. The bloodstained sofa
was all that was left of Bec. The flashlight shone on objects around the room: photos, a designer vase, a seashell, magazines, shoes.

He turned on the small lamp. He saw the notebook that Nick had found except the sheets were blank – no impression. He rifled through the kitchen drawer – rubber bands, take-away menus, pictures, post-cards. Three cards caught his eye, they were all the same except they were dated over three years – *Greetings from Dongara* signed, *The Girls*. He put them in his pocket and left by the front entrance. He ducked under the tape, wiped the door and pulled it closed.

The following morning Coyne hired a car from Burswood Rental – $30 per day, which included a GNS 8350 navigation system. Flies circled around his head as he took possession of the Subaru hatchback. The mercury was forecast to be in the low forties and he was keen to hit the road before the heat set in. He adjusted the seat and programmed the navigation for Dongara. As he drove out of Perth, he rang Harry.

‘Where are you?’ asked Harry.

‘I'm on the road. Got a lead.’

Coyne made a wrong turn and the GNS 8350 barked wrong way, continue and turn left in five hundred metres. Harry sounded worried and asked if Coyne had anything to do with Natali’s death. Coyne kept an eye on the next turn and told Harry in a dismissive voice, of course not. Harry pleaded with Coyne to come back and clear his name. GNS 8350 seemed agitated: turn left, turn left!

‘Sorry Harry, I’ll call when I know more.’

Coyne wiped sweat from his forehead and felt the heat. He switched on the aircon – it didn’t work. This was going to be one hell of a trip thought Coyne as the road opened up before him and the sun turned the car into an oven.

Bob sat on the couch, eyes closed, mouth open, head arched back – snort with a low guttural exhalation. Belle looked up from her desk and frowned at her father’s bucolic charm. Sammy pushed the door of the office open with his walking stick. He’d become one with his new appendage and used it at every opportunity.

‘Someone I can rely on. Here, I’ve got something for you,’ said Belle.

She handed him a wad of notes. Sammy leaned the stick against the desk and fanned the cash. ‘This’ll come in handy.’
Bob woke. Where am I? He focused his eyes and rubbed his jaw, yawned and on seeing the cash matter-of-factly asked, ‘What’s that for?’

Sammy turned to Bob and said, ‘None of your business.’

Jean set up her camera at the Collingwood site where Pieters trucks delivered equipment: bulldozers, bobcats, hydraulic excavators, portable buildings, graders, gravel spreaders, asphalt pavers, caterpillars.

A line of ants moved back and forth, night and day. Trucks moved equipment, workers, materials and the City Connect was underway.

The protestors were less than a dozen – a bedraggled lot of idealists who fought for a Green future – fat chance. City Connect would leave a great chasm of concrete and bitumen across the city and make a throughway for an endless line of traffic for the foreseeable future: More Mobility – More Freedom.

The sun rose over the Karratha Hotel. Staff in hospitality vests wheeled breakfast trolleys down long carpeted corridors. The reception staff were all smiles and teeth – they greeted tired American tourists in shorts and hats as they ambled through the air-conned foyer.

Maddy rolled onto her side and flopped her arm over Nick’s hairy chest. ‘What time is it?’ she asked, still in a dream state. She groped the air and her hand fell onto her mobile. ‘Oh, my God!’ Automatic mode – up and get ready. She shoved her silver gown into her bag and pulled out her denim shorts, which she quickly slipped on. ‘How long you in town?’

Nick woke and didn’t recognize the woman from the night before. No make-up, no silver dress – younger. ‘I’m looking for a girl. She just moved here.’

‘Shit. Look, it was nice knowing you.’

Maddy slipped on her tank top. ‘Sorry, gotta love you and leave you. What’s the name of your girlfriend?’

‘Katherine.’

Maddy stood at the door and paused. ‘There’s a girl started a couple of days ago – said her name was Bec.’
‘Bec?’ asked Nick, thinking the only Bec he knew was dead and gone. ‘Really? Was she Asian?’

‘Yeah.’

After Maddy left, Nick calmly and methodically prepared himself. He stood in the bathroom, shaved and washed. He combed his hair and pulled his belt tight around his waist. The small bag on the end of the bed contained the throat cutter, gloves and cable ties, which he double-checked. He was interrupted by a bang on the door – a scratchy high-pitched voice called out. ‘Cleaner.’ He zipped the bag and opened the door. The middle-aged woman asked if he was checking out and if so, was it okay to change the linen? Nick ignored her and left the room with the maid cursing under her breath.

Maddy fronted for work and went straight to the café where Katherine was wiping down the tables. She casually said, ‘Lover boy is in town.’

Katherine’s eyes changed from sleepy and dull to a wide-open look of fear. She knew who lover-boy was and stared towards the entrance of the camp. The dust from a taxi could be seen in the distance and Katherine ran towards her cabin.

Geoff stepped out of his Ford Territory and walked towards the canteen. He turned the corner and Katherine crashed straight into him.

‘Whoa easy – fancy seeing you out here. You should have told me.’

‘I need help.’

‘How can Geoff help?’

‘There’s a car coming and …’

Geoff looked at the taxi as it neared. Katherine pushed Geoff away and ran to the rear of the kitchen.

Geoff called out. ‘Hey!’

Nick calmly stepped from the taxi and walked towards the reception. Maddy was surprised to see Nick. ‘Where is she?’

‘The kitchen.’

Geoff saw Nick and stood between him and Katherine. Nick grabbed him by the throat and pushed him up against the wall. He kneed him in the groin and Geoff collapsed. Katherine smashed a serving tray over Nick’s head but it did little to stop
him. She picked up a chef’s blowtorch and aimed the flame. The heat seared Nick’s eye and melted the side of his face. He gasped for breath and ran from the kitchen.

Nick appeared in the doorway of Katherine’s donga, his face a mess of blood and burnt flesh. Katherine screamed. She was trapped – the cabin had one entrance and Nick was standing in it. Geoff came from behind, picked up a chair from the verandah and smashed it over Nick’s head. Nick turned and landed two powerful punches to the side of Geoff’s head, which sent him into a stupor and he collapsed again. Nick was in worse shape, more alien creature than human. He stood for a moment then dropped to the floor.

Katherine took a deep breath and stepped over both of them. She ran to the car park and jumped into Geoff’s Ford. She fled in a cloud of fear and dust. Maddy came running from the reception and saw Geoff and Nick slumped on top of him.

Katherine rang Coyne on the speakerphone. ‘I want to come back – I’ll talk.’
‘Where are you?’
‘Karratha.’
‘Stay there. I’m not far.’

Coyne took the road from Dongara across to the Geraldton airport. It was a regional hub servicing FIFOs, crop dusters, mining and domestic flights. He caught the evening flight to Karratha unaware that the police were waiting for him at the airport. Coyne walked across the tarmac and felt the scorching heat on his face. It was hard to swallow and his tongue felt thick. As he walked to the terminus, two Detectives approached him.
‘Chris Coyne?’
‘Yes.’
‘We need you to come with us.’
Coyne didn’t know how to respond – run? There was nowhere to run, the horizon stretched as far as he could see.
‘You’re wanted for questioning in relation to the murder of Tony Natali.’
Coyne was gobsmacked. ‘Can I get a cheese sandwich?’
Detective Garver grabbed Coyne by the elbow and pushed him forward. Coyne shrugged him off. ‘Let me go!’
Coyne was taken to the Karratha Police Station at 51 Welcome Road, where he was put into the interrogation room. Detectives Garver and Baily entered. Garver laid a manila folder in front of Coyne.

‘You knew Tony Natali?’
‘You’ve got it wrong. I’m here looking for Katherine Cheng.’
Garver opened the file. ‘It’s fair to say you were angry about Natali.’
‘Angry is a strong word.’
‘They found a gun in the glove box of your car. Is that the gun you used?’
‘No.’
Baily took notes. Coyne leaned forward and shook his head in disbelief.
‘You did a runner. It’s not a good look, Coyne. Who’s Katherine Cheng?’
‘She has information about the murder of Gary Morley.’
‘That’s an old story mate.’
‘I’m not making this up.’ In a moment of frustration and weariness he muttered ‘fools’ under his breath, which didn’t help matters.
Garver thought about smacking him across the head but managed to restrain his urge. ‘We’ll be escorting you back to Victoria for further questioning. Do you understand?’
‘Any word on that sandwich?’

A Qantas jet landed at Tullamarine airport. Detectives Garver and Baily escorted Coyne along the causeway. Photographers gathered at the bottom of the escalator – CLICK, CLICK, CLICK. Coyne was marched through the terminal. He hung his head – there was nowhere to go. He was on show. Coyne sat in the back seat of the patrol car accompanied by the two detectives. Photographers scrambled to get a shot – they circled the car, yelling, ‘Chris, what have you got to say?’ He was on the box, just before the weather girl.

MELBOURNE PRECINCT 9: INTERVIEW ROOM

Baily and Garver danced around the room, gesturing, questioning and making accusations. Garver provoked Coyne, lurched at him – backed off, came again, raised his voice then lowered it. He used the theatre of the interview room like it was a stage, an opportunity for him to remonstrate and console. Baily had seen this pitch before –
many times before. It worked on others – persistence and constant needling with a dose of factual evidence was all they needed.

Garver wiped the sweat on his skull with his handkerchief. ‘You didn’t like Natali – you killed him then got on a plane.’

Coyne sat in the sterile room – white walls, table, fluoros glaring, hot and white. He laid it out plain and simple – ‘I’m innocent.’

Garver left the room and Baily took a seat opposite Coyne. ‘We’re just doin’ our job. Natali really screwed you didn’t he? Nobody likes to be called a fraud.’

Garver returned and threw a plastic evidence bag on the table with Coyne’s business card inside.

‘This yours?’

Coyne picked up the bag and inspected the card. ‘Where did you get it?’

‘On Natali’s body,’ said Baily.

Even Coyne thought this was strange. He took a closer look at the card and shook his head – he didn’t have an answer. He threw the bag back onto the table.

Marla arrived at the station and was greeted by a former colleague Ray Delaney.

‘It’s the middle of the night. I thought you were a desk monkey,’ said Delaney.

‘Chris Coyne. What’s he done now.’

‘Garver and Baily are handling that.’

‘Where are they?’

Ray entered the interview room and whispered into Baily’s ear. Baily nodded, looked at Garver and they left Coyne to ruminate on the situation. Marla stood in the corridor and told the D’s that Coyne was innocent. Ray said, ‘They’ve gone over the CCTV at Luna Park … seems Mr Coyne doesn’t get a match.’ Ray held a report in his hand he shuffled some papers and then said, ‘Ballistics don’t match.’

Marla gave Baily and Garver the death stare and they caved. With nothing but circumstantial evidence against him, Coyne was free. Garver swung the door of the interview room open. ‘You can go.’ Baily picked up the manila folder and plastic bag and left the interview room.

Marla shook her head, signalling displeasure and concern simultaneously. ‘Go home. get some sleep.’
The sun had risen and Coyne’s tired eyes blinked under the morning glare. It was another stinking hot day, the air felt dry and threatening. The clang of a dump truck lifting one of those industrial size bins pounded in Coyne’s head. He stepped into the small courtyard and out of nowhere, dizziness, nausea and shortness of breath – big chuck – slag dripped from his mouth.

Coyne returned to Northside and was greeted by Jean. ‘You okay?’

‘I was set up and it left a bad taste in my mouth.’

‘You want a glass of water?’

‘You ask a lot of questions.’

Jean could see Coyne was more prickly than usual. She paused and then remembered, ‘Darren Burke called a few days ago, said he wanted to talk.’

‘About what?’

‘I dunno.’

Coyne picked up the phone and rang Burke. Darren was sitting at his desk with a standing fan blowing cool air on his face. He leaned back in his chair. ‘Mr Coyne, didn’t think I’d be hearing from you so soon. Did you do it?’

‘Listen Burke I’m returning your call ’cos I haven’t got anything better to do.’

‘I got a call from a mate … down in Hastings … said he saw that little short arse McAlpin leaving a real estate office in the main drag’

‘So?’

‘What’s he doin’ in a real estate office in Hastings? New land deals Seaview Lakes! Seems to me that’s a conflict of interest – him being the Lord of Infrastructure and master of having your nose in the trough. I thought it was my civic duty to let you know.’

‘Interesting. S’pose I should thank you.’

Coyne headed for Hastings to see what McAlpin was up to. He activated Google Maps on his mobile and tore open a packet of salted peanuts for the drive. He ate a handful and laid the rest on the passenger seat.
Estimated time from Preston 1hr 21 min (83 km)

Turn right onto Grange Rd/State Route 21 (2.0 km)

Continue straight to stay on Grange Rd/State Route 21 (800 m)

Use left lane to take the M3 slip road to Doncaster/Ringwood (450 m)

Merge onto M3 (50 m)

Take exit 28 for M11 towards Portsea (12 km)

Take exit 15 for C777 towards Somerville (450 m)

Keep left at the fork, follow signs for C777/Somerville/Hastings (90 m)

Turn left onto Frankston-Flinders Rd/C777 (3.9 km)

At the roundabout, continue straight to stay on Frankston-Flinders Rd/C777 (2.0 km) …

When Coyne arrived he was quick to find the Hastings real estate office and lo and behold in the front window – SEAVIEW LAKES SELLING NOW! He entered the office and was greeted by the young girl behind the desk with a beaming smile. ‘How are we today?’

‘We’re fine, thanks for asking’ replied Coyne, ‘and you’re…?’
'Alison.'
'Alison nice to meet you.' Coyne stood in the pop up office and his eye gravitated to the photocopy listings situated on the countertop.
'Is there something you're specifically looking for?' asked Alison.
'As a matter of fact there is. I'm looking for an opportunity. Is that how you'd describe Seaview Lakes?'
'Seaview Lakes is a real opportunity we’ve just started selling land packages. Are you a local or are you thinking of relocating?'
'Relocating? Absolutely. Who’s selling these land opportunities?'
'That’s confidential they’re a development consortium. We can offer land and house packages if that’s what you’re interested in or just land?'
'I hear a friend of mine was here recently, Don McAlpin the Minister for Infrastructure.'

Alison kept a straight face and replied, ‘I couldn’t say. We have had a lot of enquires this area is really opening up. Why don’t you go for a drive down to the foreshore and see for yourself?’
'Thanks, I will.'

As soon as Coyne left the office Alison picked up the phone and rang Don.

Don was sitting with Belle in her apartment when Alison called. He listened and nodded. ‘Thank you Alison.’ He turned to Belle and said, ‘Coyne is nosing around Seaview Lakes.’

‘What’s he doing down there?’ asked Belle.
‘Coincidence?’ said Don in a sheepish voice.
‘Unlikely,’ said Belle.

Don moved away from Belle and walked towards the window.
‘How does he know about Seaview?’ asked Belle.
‘I went down there… I needed to facilitate the …’
‘Shut-up.’
‘I thought you took care of him,’ said Don in an accusatory tone.
‘You said it would be a nice little earner. If Coyne links us to Seaview then Harcourt will have a field day with City Connect.’
‘He’s got no proof. Alison said so. Our names aren’t on any of this. We’re clean.’

Seagulls circled the Arts Centre spire around dusk. The sky turned orange to mauve and as night fell the lights from the spire made the birds look prehistoric and ominous.

Coyne was asleep at the desk when a Molotov came flying through the transom window at Northside. Glass shattered – fumes filled the space. ‘Harry! Harry! Wake up.’ Coyne ran to the front door and saw an SUV fishtail down High Street. Harry came running downstairs in his sarong and moccasins. The fire alarm activated and Coyne grabbed the extinguisher on the far wall and hosed down the fire. Harry was coughing and choking as he fled the building. Coyne reached for the photograph of Talia and William and followed Harry onto the street.
Coyne arrived at Northside. The front of the building looked charred and most of the windows had blown out. No surprises as journos gathered with cameras and microphones.

Reporter # 1: ‘Is the fire anything to do with Natali?’
Reporter # 2: ‘Coyne, do you have enemies. Is this retaliation?’
Reporter # 3: ‘What did the police say? Chris?’

Coyne was annoyed and defensive. ‘No comment. Now’s not a good time.’ He pushed through the pack and entered the building. The damage was superficial and the most of the office was intact, other than the ashtray smell that permeated throughout.

Jean was wearing a facemask to filter the stench. She walked up to Coyne and bear hugged him. ‘You’re a person of interest.’

‘Cops had nothing, they were fishing.’
‘Didn’t look good running off to Perth after Luna Park,’ said Harry.
‘Instead of chasing me they should’ve been looking closer to home.’
‘What do you know?’ asked Harry.
‘Is McAlpin behind the land deals at Hastings?’
‘He’d be a fool.’
‘Doesn’t answer my question. City Connect will open up Hastings – you’d be mad not to cash in.’ Coyne looked around the burnt office and rubbed his hands over his stubbled face.

Harry said, ‘First Morley then Natali. If writing about the City Connect gets you killed …’

‘I know – back-off. There’s just one little fact that you seem to be ignoring – Wilson is in jail and he shouldn’t be.’

Seagulls and pigeons flocked around the rubbish bins while prisoners walked in restricted Area 2. Wilson sat at the other end of the compound and watched the seagulls.

Johnny the Tatt approached Wilson. ‘Keep your mouth shut and everything is gonna be fine.’

‘I don’t know who’s paying you but when I get out of here I’m gonna make some inquiries. Who do you call? I bet that number is really juicy.’

Johnny didn’t like that kind of talk. He pushed Wilson in the chest and continued towards the reception. He got on the phone.

Nick was driving on Dynon Road past the huge container yards and warehouses. The left side of his face had third-degree burn – skin tight, distorted, waxy and thick. He answered Johnny’s call.

‘Vic just wanted to say I haven’t been feeling too good, and I know when I don’t feel good then you don’t feel good. I don’t know what I should do.’

‘Maybe you should see the doctor.’

‘Thanks I will.’

Nick arrived at the VIP club and Sammy recoiled on seeing him. ‘Whoa bro, you look …’

‘Shut up, get me drink.’

Sammy moved behind the bar, poured a shot of vodka and passed it to Nick. He held the shot glass and said, ‘Na Zdorovie’ then drank and slammed the glass onto the bar. He turned and went upstairs to the office.

Belle was expecting him. ‘Had some cosmetic work.’

Nick remained silent.

Belle prompted him. ‘Well?’
‘I found her in Karratha. She was a kitchen hand at a mining camp.’
‘You found her and you let her get away?’
‘Yes.’
‘Where do you think she is now?’
‘I don’t know.’

Belle walked across the room and stood behind Nick. She rested her hands on the back of his seat and leaned in – close. ‘You don’t know.’
‘I’ll find her.’
‘How? How are you going to find her?’

Another perfect day in WA. The serenity of the wide blue sky was interrupted by what sounded like a dog being choked to death. The brindle Staffy was chained to the clothesline and had wrapped itself around the pole. It squealed and yelped and gasped for breath, its tongue dripping with saliva.

The sound triggered her memory of Nick with his hands around her throat. Katherine pulled the pillow over her head to muffle the sound and stop the memory.

Geoff stuck his head over the fence and saw the animal. He climbed the fence and approached the dog, which strained at the lead. It reversed back around the pole and extended the length of the chain and charged at Geoff but stopped short – half a metre. Geoff stumbled backwards and hit the fence – trapped. The dog snarled – exposing vicious razor teeth. Geoff kicked at it with his feet. ‘Katherine! Katherine!’

Katherine ran to the backyard. She climbed the fence, picked up the garden spade; imagining Nick she hit the dog across the head. It yelped and dropped on its belly. Geoff took the moment to escape and climbed back over the fence. Katherine raised the spade over the dog, about to sever its head.

Geoff said, ‘No. Leave it.’
She looked at him with a blank stare.
‘Leave it. I’m okay.’

Geoff was shaken. Katherine returned to bed and Geoff stood in the brilliant, white sparkling kitchen with a photo of them at the registry office on the bench. He rotated the ring on his finger, thinking, have I made a mistake? He dressed for work, short-sleeved shirt, Yakka daks. He brought coffee to the bed and she smiled and kissed him on the cheek like the dog never happened.
Once Geoff had left, Katherine dressed. She sat in the lounge room – two faux leather recliner chairs facing a large screen TV, coffee table and a mantlepiece with a cheap trophy: GEOFF HIGGINS – BEST TEAM PLAYER SUBIACO CRICKET CLUB. She stared through the sheer curtains to the manicured cul-de-sac with trimmed nature strips and the guy across the road washing his car. This was far, far away from her life in Melbourne.

LITTLE RIVER TEN MONTHS EARLIER

Katherine and Gary lay in bed. Her head nestles against Gary’s shoulder. She rolls onto her back and says, ‘So when can I see you next?’

‘You’re seeing me now. The election will be soon, I’ll need to convince Glenn to throw some money at Corio or I’ll be out of a job.’ Gary slips his arm around Katherine. ‘I’m going to leave Jane once the election is over.’

Katherine kisses Gary on the cheek.

Gary says, ‘Maybe we could get a city place so we don’t have to drive so much. Would you like that?’

‘I’d like that.’

He checks the time, stands and goes to the shower. Katherine grabs her phone and places his driver’s license on the bed – SNAP.

More of Katherine’s photos from earlier days: Gary asleep; Gary’s car; Gary getting dressed, Gary’s driver’s license.

Gary returns from the shower and stands naked in front of her. She mimes taking a photo – thumb to thumb, index fingers vertical – right index finger – snap. She laughs.

‘Don’t laugh. If this got out my career would be over.’

‘Just between you and me.’ She giggles, holds out her arms and entices Gary back into the bed.

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Little River seemed like a lifetime ago. Her hair was shorter now. She had grown older. She’d lost her brother, survived Nick’s attempts to kill her and married Geoff the cricket playing engineer. Little did she know – Nick was alive … and angry.

Coyne arrived at Barwon – walked through the car park towards the visitor’s entrance. Searched and cleared. He waited ten minutes.

Wilson knew he was tempting fate by agreeing to see Coyne – he’d been warned but Coyne was his only hope. He adjusted his hearing aids – Screeeech. ‘Still digging up dirt?’

‘Trying to.’

‘You haven’t found Morley’s girlfriend?’

Coyne shook his head – No. ‘You say a woman who claimed to be Morley’s secretary called you?’

‘They never found my phone. I always kept it in my top pocket – vanished. Find my phone and check the log.’

‘Who stabbed you?’

‘Nobody.’

‘I had a fall in the kitchen.’

‘I’m runnin’ out of leads. Have you got a lawyer?’

‘What for?’

‘We should go for a retrial.’

‘On what grounds?’

‘That you were set up. I wanna get you out of here.’

Wilson was in pain and dismissive. He nodded to the guard, that he’d had enough. ‘That’s the best you’ve got?’

Harry was at the VIP club having a drink with Ashleigh. He was in good spirits because the insurance on the Northside fire came through and he was out to celebrate.

Ashleigh was interested in how much money was coming Harry’s way. He was a potential sugar daddy. ‘How much you gonna get?’

‘Thousands. If I’d known it was that easy I would have torched the place myself.’

‘Thousands? I could get to like you Harry.’
‘I could never entertain someone I didn’t trust.’
‘You can trust me.’
‘I knew a guy who had two girlfriends both named Michele one of them was a lawyer the other a politician, who he was about to dump. He gets an invite for a romantic night at the Hilton, room number and all, but he doesn’t know which Michele.’
‘He go?’
‘Yeah. He stands at the reception and says he’s there to see a friend in room number blah blah … her name is Michele … the receptionist says, “Michele Hawkins?” Neither of his girls were Hawkins. He says thanks and walks out the door.’
‘But he still didn’t know which Michele.’
‘He knew it was the politician … she lied.’
Coyne met Marla at Carwyns. The bar was crowded and they grabbed their drinks and sat outside with the smokers and the dogs and the purple graffiti wall. It was a warm summer night, the traffic flow along High Street was continuous and trams packed with commuters rumbled past.

Marla sipped her cider. ‘Are you taking your meds?’
Coyne sipped a soda water. ‘Yeah, they don’t work so well with booze.’
‘Wilson?’
‘He doesn’t look good.’
‘What have you got?’
‘I want an retrial.’
‘You’d need new evidence.’
Coyne leaned towards Marla adopting a tone of serious concern. ‘Morley was about to give the tender to Darren Burke and surprise – Morley is dead.’
‘The tender went to Lester and Pieters.’
‘Exactly.’
‘Where’s the evidence?’
‘Wilson says he kept his mobile in his top pocket. No mobile at the scene of the crime. Who called Wilson to arrange the meeting?’
‘Harry admitted he was paid by Pieters to run the Wilson story that might put the case on questionable grounds. The deciding factor is the testimony of Katherine Cheng.’
Coyne grunted and his face crinkled. ‘I think she’s dead.’
Marla remained neutral, took another sip of her drink.
‘A retrial as far as I see could be based on the premise that Wilson was set up.
‘You’ll need evidence, substantial evidence, something new that we can bring to the case.’
Coyne became emphatic. ‘Wilson was charged with vehicular homicide. He ground Morley into a barbed wire fence and he doesn’t remember anything.’ He pulled out a notebook from his shirt pocket. He flipped the cover then turned a few pages to find what he was looking for.

‘Wilson’s Ford was clocked at 5.30 pm on the Geelong Highway. He arrived at Little River at 6.30 pm According to Wilson the meeting with Morley was arranged for 7.00 pm. But Morley was clocked on the Geelong Road at 8.30 pm. Maybe Morley was late? One and a half hours late? Wilson necked a bottle of whisky to pass the time?’
Marla leaned back in her chair. Clasped her hands together like she was about to say grace. ‘Circumstantial.’
‘So you don’t see a retrial?’
‘Not without new evidence.’
Marla left and Coyne continued to think about a retrial when a sudden loud BANG from a beer keg being dropped jolted Coyne into one his dark moments.

Talia is wearing a purple sateen dress with a gold trim neckline. She is a little drunk and unsteady on her feet. ‘William, help your mother.’ She stretches her hand towards Will and they cross Miller Street. Coyne stops to tie his shoelace. He looks to see a motorcycle pull up beside them and the rider fire four shots – they drop to the ground like rag dolls.

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Coyne left Carwyns and stood on High Street. It was 10.00 pm and he needed to speak with Harry.

Harry’s mobile skipped across the bar – ID: Chris Coyne. Harry said to Ashleigh, ‘I have to take this. What … Wilson … timelines? Leave it alone … No. Can’t talk now – tomorrow.’ Harry threw back his drink and nodded for another.

The following day, Allen Harcourt arrived at DB Pty Ltd in a smooth State approved executive black Camry Atara SL. He strode up the path between the white tyres for handshakes and smiles.

Darren said, ‘Allen, mate, come in.’ He led Harcourt into his office.

Before Darren could sit, Allen said, ‘It’s a travesty – Lester should never have been given the City Connect.’

‘What are you gonna do about it?’ Darren asked.

‘Once we’re back we’ll tear up the contract. I can’t promise City Connect will have another life but I can promise infrastructure for you and local workers – spread that to the union.’

‘And if you’re not elected?’

‘Glenn and McAlpin aren’t popular. The electorate is angry for signing Lester. We’ll have a good shot and with the support of the unions we can make a stand.’

Darren heaved a sigh of frustration. ‘Heard it all before. Morley gave me the same pitch.’
Allen played Darren’s weak spot. ‘The Libs have already stiffed you. I’m your best shot – responsible economic management with a plan for the future.’

‘Cut the weasel words. You’re right McAlpin and Pieters can’t be trusted. If I can put a fire under ’em I will.’

Allen was earnest, businesslike. ‘The election will be soon and I want to invest in public transport, that’s where the jobs will be. We’ll remove fifty level crossings. I need to know the unions are on side.’

‘I don’t trust any of you.’

‘Think about it, Darren.’

The sun set over the city skyline. Tram, cars bumper-to-bumper – peak hour cyclists pedalled with fear in their eyes.

Nick arrived in Neptune Lane early evening. The sun had gone down and the streetlights had just kicked into action. He opened the squeaky gate and walked towards the front door. Paint was peeling off the weatherboard planks. He pressed the faded and worn plastic door chime – no sound. Pressed again, still no sound. He knocked, gently so as not to frighten the old lady. She came to the door and opened it as far as the latch chain would allow. When she saw Nick she gasped. In an instant Nick kicked the door wide open. Lily was thrown back into the hallway, landing flat on her back. Nick slammed the door and stood over her. He picked her up and pushed her into the lounge room where she fell into her velvet Queen Anne chair.

Nick sat opposite in the guest chair. ‘Katherine was in Western Australia last time I saw her.’

Lily blinked several times and nodded – okay. He slowly placed his hand in his pocket and pulled out the Srbosjek; the bladed glove from the old country. Lily made a silent scream. Her chest rose, her face contorted with shock and confusion.

‘I need you to tell me where she is. Do you understand?’

Lily nodded her head and tears started to trickle down her cheeks.

‘Has she called you?’

She nodded – Yes. Down up down.

An old black phone with a cord sat on a small table next to Lily’s chair. Her eyes glanced across at it then back to Nick.
‘Expecting a call?’
Lily shook her head – No.

The room was silent except for the continuous tick tock of the clock on the mantle and the sound of the minute hand jerking from one to the next. Nick ripped the curtain sash from the wall and tied Lily’s hands to the arms of the chair. He then sat back and waited, occasionally going to the kitchen to forage in the refrigerator.

ONE HOUR…
TWO HOURS…
THREE HOURS…

The phone rang and Nick picked up.
Katherine gently spoke, ‘Hi, Mum.’
Nick said, ‘Katherine.’
Katherine recognised the voice. She gagged – no air, her body went rigid and her lips trembled.

She ended the call and curled up on the floor like a cast from Pompeii. Nick’s voice had left her in a state of rigor mortis. A cockroach scampered along the skirting board. Her sense of the world was skewed and the feeling of gravity was immense. She looked vacant, her mouth slightly ajar. Shadow across the floor, late in the day. It was dark now. Katherine heard Geoff’s car in the driveway. She composed herself and began cleaning – nervous, preoccupied, strung out. Geoff slipped his key into the front door determined to put on a happy face. ‘Hi, I’m home.’

‘Hi.’ She was reserved, eyes down. ‘I’m tired, I’m gonna rest.’ She stood for a moment, turned and walked to the bedroom. Geoff nodded his head – frustrated and confused. He went to the fridge and grabbed a Swan, popped the pull-top and gulped.

Katherine locked the bedroom door. Geoff heard the click and couldn’t understand why she was so down. He tapped at the door. ‘Kath.’ No response. He turned on the TV and drank another beer. His eyes darted from the screen to the bedroom door. Eventually he stood up and yelled, ‘I’m going to the pub.’ Katherine saw him through the bedroom window and felt relieved. She dropped to the floor, reached under the bed and pulled out a shoebox. Inside was a mobile phone. She sat on the floor and cradled the box.
PIETERS TRANSPORT DEPOT SIX MONTHS EARLIER

A yellow taxi arrives at Pieters depot and Katherine steps out wearing a dark blue mini skirt, red scarf, sunglasses and platforms. She moves cautiously over the coarse stones of the yard, knocks on the door of the office and enters.

Belle smiles. ‘I want you to arrange to see Gary tonight, 9.00 pm, the usual.’

Katherine sits opposite Belle and takes her sunglasses off. ‘I’m not seeing Gary until Friday.’

Belle’s tone changes. ‘Tonight text him now – you don’t need to go.’

Katherine is nervous she nods and searches her bag for her mobile.

Belle pulls out one of several burner phones from her desk drawer and rings Dale Wilson.

Dale stood in his shorts watering the garden of his Collingwood home.

‘Hi, Dale Wilson, this is Gary Morley’s secretary. Gary wants to meet. He’ll be at the Little River Hotel 7.00 pm.’

Call ends – Belle throws the phone in the bin.

The sound of a bullhorn from Bob’s old truck echoes throughout the depot. It draws everyone to the door. Bob hits the horn with a monkey wrench but it continues to pierce the air with its unrelenting pitch and squawk. He reaches deeper into the engine and cuts the electrics – silence.

Bob yells at Belle. ‘The wiring.’

Katherine takes a gamble, her heart races – like a rabbit in the cross hairs she runs towards the bin and using the scarf around her neck picks up the phone. She takes another phone from the desk drawer and throws it in the bin.
Katherine stared at the mobile knowing it was the only collateral she had against Belle. She called Coyne.

Coyne picked up just after midnight. ‘Chris Coyne speaking.’

‘My mother is being held.’

Coyne was surprised, shocked – he thought Katherine was dead. ‘Katherine?’

Sobbing. ‘She, she… she wouldn’t… leave Richmond. It’s my fault.’

‘Slow down, who’s holding your mother?’

‘Nick. He works for Belle Pieters. He’s gonna kill her.’

‘Where is she?’

‘At the house.’

Coyne had been to the Neptune Street house before. ‘I’ll call you.’

He called his two best new friends, Detectives Baily and Garver.

‘Mr Coyne now what?’

‘There’s a lady being held hostage.’


Garver walked down the hall with coffee in hand.

Baily held the phone to his chest. ‘I’ve got Coyne on the line. Says there’s a lady, hostage in Richmond.’

He held the phone up to his ear and asked, ‘Where?’

‘She’s in Neptune Lane, Richmond, I can’t remember the number of the house but it’s a workers cottage with a wire fence … I think it’s green. It’s about half-way down off Bridge road.’

Baily and Garver moved into action and notified the Special Operations Group aka the Soggies and headed for Richmond.

Coyne was already on Hoddle. He turned at Bridge then Neptune. He ran along the dimly lit street lined with small weatherboard workers’ cottages. The house was in darkness. He could hear sirens in the distance. The Victorian cottage had two bedrooms, skinny hall, kitchen out back and lounge up front. Coyne looked for the gun Harry had given him but the police had confiscated it. He slammed the glove box shut. Unfazed, he moved towards the house – crouched under the lounge room window. Listened – no sound. He crept down the side of the old weatherboard and pulled out a garden stake.
from the vegetable patch. He opened the fly wire door. Floorboards creaked. He carefully placed each step and moved further into the house, down the hall into the lounge room. He switched on the light. Empty. Coyne went back to the street to meet the cops. The police arrived and Baily and Garver approached Coyne.

‘This is the house?’ asked Baily.

‘Its empty,’ said Coyne.

Meanwhile the Soggies were positioning themselves, securing the site. ‘What’s this about? You’ll have to come down to the station.’

Coyne nodded and muttered that Katherine had called him and her mother was being held … and he’d come down to the station immediately.

The house was checked and the area cleared. Neighbours returned to their houses.

Coyne drove back up to Bridge Road. He sat in his car. Now what? He felt anxious and agitated. It was a classic summer’s night and the street was pumping. Food Truck: Karas’s Kalamki Greek Street Food, fatties lining up for souvlaki and a Pepsi. Trams whooshed and shopfronts lit up bright like an emergency ward. Punters laughed, and chattered, Coyne was silent: Katherine still alive – waiting to hear about mother. He jumped out of the car – paced, NQR, distracted.

‘You right mate?’ yelled Karas.

‘Souvlaki.’

Coyne paid, shoved the souv in his pocket and called Marla. ‘Katherine’s alive.’

‘Where are you?’

‘Richmond. She rang, said her mother was being man handled by Nick. I’ve been to the house but no-one’s there.’

‘Did you call St. Kilda Road?’

‘The Soggies turned up – Baily and Garver too, I said I would file a report later. Nick works for Belle Pieters. I’ll call when I know more.’

The gate was chained and the dogs were asleep. He took the souvlaki from his pocket and whistled – ears pricked, a single bark then another and the two dogs rushed at the gate. Coyne fed bits of the take-away through gaps in the cyclone wire. The dogs
wolfed the food and waited for more. Coyne placed his hand on the cyclone fence and they charged, thumping and clawing at the wire.

A light in the office came on. Coyne ducked back into the shadows.

Bob racked his shotgun and opened the door. He squinted and yelled. ‘Shut-up.’

The dogs came running to Bob. He ushered them into the office. Looked again, muttered to himself. ‘Can’t get any sleep around here.’

Coyne threw a stone at the 44-gallon drum. Bob turned and ventured into the yard, moved towards the gate. He saw the wrapper from the souvlaki and bent down to inspect. The dogs scratched at the window, their teeth lay bare and tongues dripped with saliva.

Coyne grabbed the barrel of the shotgun and pulled Bob hard up against the gate, the gun slipped from Bob’s hands, Coyne now had it aimed squarely at Bob.

‘Open it.’

Bob took the keys from his belt and opened the gate. Coyne tightened his grip on the gun. ‘Where’s Nick?’

‘Who?’

Coyne pushed the gun barrel into Bob’s gut. ‘Where is he?’

‘He’s got an apartment in Docklands.’

‘Let’s go.’

The dogs barked and jumped up and down for a short while, then settled to a yelp and a muffled cry.

Coyne told Bob to drive and he sat in the passenger seat with the shotgun pressed against Bob’s ribcage. He was scared – anybody with a barrel of gunshot no further than the length of the barrel would be. He drove – 11.00 pm and Docklands was dotted with lights. The harbour was lit from Etihad Stadium right along the promenade, reflecting a kaleidoscope of white, orange, red and violet hues. Bob stopped the car, said he couldn’t remember which building Nick was in. ‘They all look the same.’

He was right – whether or not he was telling the truth was a moot point. ‘Give me your phone.’ Bob handed over his mobile. Coyne scrolled through the contact list and found Belle Pieters. He called.

‘Dad. What’s up?’

‘Your father is about to end up in the bottom of the harbour.’

‘Who is this?’
‘Coyne. Hand over Lily Cheng.’
‘I don’t know what you’re talking about. Let me talk to Bob.’
Bob yelled, ‘Belle!’
‘Bring her to the Harbour Town car park. I’ll give you one hour.’

Belle called Frank Lester. She was rattled. She brought Frank up to speed: Nick had Lily Cheng; Katherine was coming back – Bob for Lily. Frank knew the implications of Katherine Cheng spilling the beans. He’d always said she should’ve been disposed of right after Morley’s death. As far as he was concerned, Belle was too soft.

Belle called Nick. ‘Bring the mother.’

Coyne and Bob waited in the car.
‘It’s not her fault,’ said Bob.
‘She’s your daughter.’
‘Her mother left us and I was runnin’ the business. By the time she was 15 she was turning tricks with the truckies – she learnt how to play the man. It was a bad scene, no place to bring up a kid.’

Nick, Sammy and Belle pulled up in a dark blue SUV: Sammy in the driver’s seat, Belle the front passenger, Nick and Lily in the back. Lily had a hood over her head with her hands tied. Sammy and Nick checked their guns.

Coyne saw them in the distance. He pushed the shotgun into Bob’s left side. ‘Get out.’

Belle said to Sammy and Nick, ‘Wait here.’ She walked towards Coyne and Bob.

With the barrel tethered to Bob by the sheer threat of violence, Coyne pushed him towards Belle. He was twenty-metres away when a car screamed through the car park. It braked and stopped in between Belle and Coyne. The driver, wearing a balaclava, stared into Bob’s frightened eyes and put a bullet right between them. He fell backwards and hit the bitumen with dead weight.

Belle screamed. ‘No! Dad!’ The driver did a doughnut and fired two more shots at Coyne who took cover in the shadows. Nick and Sammy followed and fired everything they had at Coyne. He returned fire. Belle dropped to her knees and held Bob in her arms. He was dead; gone; the lights were out – the plug in his forehead made
sure of that. Coyne jumped into his car and raced along the promenade, swerved into Dynon Road and back towards the city.

Belle cradled Bob and heard Frank’s voice from behind. ‘Had to be done.’

Still on her knees, Belle turned her head and looked up at the man who had just executed her father. ‘Frank?’

He pulled off the balaclava and said, ‘We don’t bargain. I took the emotion out of it for you. When the girl arrives kill her, like I said, and we can get back to business.’

Frank got in his car and disappeared. Nick and Sammy picked up Bob and placed him in the back of the SUV, sitting him up like he was a dummy in a wax museum. Lily sat motionless.

Coyne headed back to Northside. He called Katherine on speakerphone.

‘Is she alright?’

‘I went to the house … no one there. I tried the truck depot. Took Bob Pieters to Docklands. He’s dead. Alright I’ll pick you up.’ Coyne drove through West Melbourne and headed north towards Preston.

Night – the city at its best: calm, old world buildings, Vic Market, Royal Parade elm trees, Princess Park, shadows, high-rise apartments, Californian bungalows, fences, letter boxes, porch lights, sleep.

‘Wake up. Harry, wake up.’ Coyne stood over Harry’s bed.

Harry groaned – eyes opened. ‘What’s up?’

‘I’ve found Katherine.’

Harry swung his legs off the bed and onto the floor. ‘Where is she?’

‘Can’t say. She’ll be coming in from Perth. Nick, the goon who works for Belle Pieters, has her mother hostage.’

Harry was standing now. ‘Hostage?’

‘Do you know where she is?’

Harry stared, ‘How would I know?’

‘Bob Pieters is dead.’

‘Dead?’

‘I’ll fill you in later. If I’m not back by tomorrow call Marla Davis at Police Media.’
Harry was freaked and wide-awake. He’d been complicit in his dealings with Belle and now an innocent person was getting hurt. His gut feeling was to run but this was a chance to do something. If he stood for anything then maybe now was the time. His first thought was the VIP club. *Ashleigh might know something.* He threw on some shorts and a floppy shirt and drove down Royal Parade, right at Grattan, dog legged across Flemington and parked two blocks away from the VIP club. No sign of Nick. He opened the boot of his car and grabbed the tyler lever – SCA Chrome 600 ml. He eased his way down the lane – jemmed the back door and entered. The back room of the lounge was a storage area: cardboard boxes stacked five high with cheap wine, a bucket and mop leaned against a tub of bleach, and rat shit dotted the floor. The fluoro hummed and shone a blue white light. He stood and scanned the room – nothing. His legs started to shake. Sweat rolled down over his gut. He followed the short corridor to another room and cracked the door open. Lily was tied to a chair, hooded, head hanging forward. Harry dropped the jemmy, took the hood off – she was gagged. He untied her hands. ‘It’s okay … I’m gonna get you out of here.’ His voice trembled.

‘Where’s Katherine?’ asked Lily.

Katherine walked into the bedroom. She leaned forward and whispered to Geoff. ‘I have to go to Melbourne.’

‘What?’

‘Mum needs me. I’ll call when I know more.’

‘Melbourne?’

‘Go back to sleep.’

Katherine took a one-way Red-eye from Perth to Melbourne: *Tigerair* departed 11.45 pm due to arrive Melbourne time 6.20 am. She texted Coyne – flight TT424.

Nick waited in High street, two blocks from Northside. Coyne ran out the door and jumped into his car and Nick followed – along Bell and onto the Tullamarine. Coyne parked in the short-term car park at the airport, reclined the seat and slept until first light. Nick sat in his car – eyes on his prey. Coyne woke with a shudder, *Where am I?* He rubbed his eyes with his knuckles and dragged his fingers over his cheeks: 6:05 am, time to grab a coffee. He marched across the air bridge.
Nick screwed the silencer onto the Glock, placed it inside his coat pocket and followed. Coyne checked the flight board, letters and digits clicked over. Origin Perth: Flight TT424 – Landed. The terminal was all but empty – courtesy car, BEEP, BEEP, BEEP.

Coyne waited at the gate and watched as weary passengers, some carrying pillows others hand luggage, made their way to the luggage carousel. From the line of people Coyne saw Katherine. Her hair was shorter and her face looked grim. She stepped out of the line and Coyne approached her. She recognised him and felt relief.

‘Have you seen my mother?’ asked Katherine.

‘No.’ Coyne slipped his arm under Katherine’s elbow and held on tight.

‘She’ll be alright, Nick won’t do anything until he finds you.’

Katherine wanted her mother safe. If anyone was gonna get hurt it’d be her. They marched through the terminal towards the carpark. Eyes wide open scanning for any trouble.

Nick kept back, watched – waited for the right time.

The boom gate swung up and they exited. Katherine opened her bag and pulled out an envelope. ‘Take this, it’s the mobile Belle used to call Wilson.’

Katherine looked up and saw the Melbourne skyline in the distance. The morning haze was lifting and the sun gave the city a golden glow.

‘We can talk about this later,’ said Coyne.

‘I want to see my mum.’ She turned and saw the driver in the next lane, dark sunglasses – Nick. He fired the gun and the bullet connected. Katherine slumped forward in the seat. Blood trickled down her neck.

Coyne swerved. ‘Katherine, Katherine!’

Nick fired two more shots – went wide. Coyne braked – wheels locked – rubber burned. Pedal to the floor, accelerate, he came up behind Nick and rammed him forward. Nick swerved to the right and Coyne came up on the inside. Coyne gripped the steering wheel and spun it down – bumped Nick onto the median strip. Last chance, he crossed three lanes and made it onto the Bell Street off ramp, leaving Nick on a one-way ride towards the city. Katherine’s head rested against the window – bullet hole with fractures fanning out 360, like snowflakes.
Coyne arrived at Northside, dried blood on his hands. He went to the sink, ran water and wiped the blood with a tea towel. Harry came downstairs and saw that it was Coyne. He looked to the top of the stairs and nodded to Lily, she came out of the shadows and said to Coyne, ‘Katherine?’

‘She’s okay.’

Lily said, ‘Where is she? I want to see her.’

‘Soon.’

Harry nodded in Lily’s direction. ‘I found her at the VIP club.’

Coyne said, ‘Katherine’s safe. I took her to your shack in Warburton. She’s been shot – grazed. She’ll be okay. Take Lily.’

Coyne rang Marla. ‘I’ve got Katherine and Lily. They’re safe. Ring Baily and Garver, tell them to put out a warrant for the arrest of Belle Pieters, Nick Artukovic and Sammy Naylor.’

‘What’s the charge?’

‘Murder, attempted murder, kidnapping – that’ll do for a start. Katherine will talk. Harry found Lily at the VIP club she’s okay. I’ll come in soon and lay it all out.’

‘Where are you?’

‘I’m headin’ to Barwon – Wilson needs to know.’

Coyne drove along the Geelong freeway, past the industrial sculptures, textured sound walls and the You Yangs, the scene of Morley’s murder. He was on a high knowing Wilson had a shot at being released. He turned on the radio.

NEWS FLASH

‘There has been an incident on the Tullamarine freeway. At this stage police believe a gun was fired at another vehicle. Witnesses say it appears to be road rage and two lanes of traffic have been closed as police investigate the scene.’

Coyne rolled his shoulders back against the seat, stretched his arms out and pushed against the steering wheel. Since the award night he had a gut feeling something wasn’t right and now he was confident that the truth would out and his debt to Wilson cleared.

On arrival Coyne was told that Dale Wilson had hanged himself. Coyne went weak at the knees. He stared blankly at the prison officer. ‘Hanged himself? How?’
When?’ There weren’t any answers that could change what had happened and Coyne fell into a stupor as he returned to the car – the shock turned to anger. He kicked the car door and slammed his fists on the roof.

_Talia and Will sit inside the car. They are still – shop mannequins staring blankly._

***

Coyne felt a deep sense of loss. He turned on the radio and listened to classical FM. Day turned to night as he drove back to Melbourne.

Johnny the Tatt stood in the corridor at Barwon. Phones lined the wall with inmates making calls to lawyers, friends, loved ones or in Johnny’s case – Nick Artukovic.

‘Hello Vic, I did what you said and I saw the doctor. I’m feeling much better.’


Nick listened, remained silent and ended the call. He rang Belle. ‘It’s been taken care of.’

Belle’s eyes were fixed and her mouth went slightly askew as she considered the unfortunate but necessary removal of Dale Wilson.
Warburton in autumn was picturesque. It was Harry’s private respite, a place to unwind and undress – now it was a safe house for Katherine. Lily looked small sitting in the passenger seat as she leaned forward to get a better view of the road. She was excited to be reunited with her daughter. Harry felt calm as they drove along the Mountain Highway, through the Yarra Ranges – Mount Donna Buang towering over the valley. The road ran close to the clear waters of the Yarra and nestled up against the steep embankment which was covered with large green tree ferns and towering mountain ash. Lily opened the window and crisp, fresh air blew into her face. The light was fading and the bush floor just became shapes, with clumps of fern and sword grass barely visible. The only light could be seen through the breaks in the forest canopy. Harry clicked the indicator and veered off the mountain road up a steep hill. The road was uneven and Lily grabbed the hand-rest on the door as the car rocked side to side over potholes and rocks.

It was dark. The headlights of the car cut through the mist. They followed the dirt road deep into the bush and came to the shack nestled in a forest of blue gums, with the Yarra rippling no more than fifty metres from the house. Lily bolted from the car and scampered up the steps to the verandah. Katherine opened the door and they hugged while Harry carried a cardboard box of supplies from the local IGA. When he reached
the top of the stairs he rearranged the box so it sat in the crease of his left elbow. He presented his right hand to Katherine. ‘I’m Harry, I work with Chris – how’s the head?’

Katherine shook Harry’s hand; after all he was the one who plucked Lily from the clutches of Nick. Lily checked Katherine’s head and saw her hair was knotted with dried blood. She led Katherine into the house for further inspection and motherly treatment. Harry clapped his hands together, rubbed them vigorously and set about lighting the fire. Lily turned on the tap. Rusty coloured water choked and sputtered from the nozzle. When it ran clear she filled the kettle and boiled the water. Katherine was in shock – nervy, glass-eyed, the sight of her mother was just what she needed. Lily wrapped her daughter in a blanket and held her hands while the kettle started to rattle and steam.

Harry went out to the verandah and rang Coyne, who was on the Western Ring Road. ‘We’re at the house.’

Coyne was upset – his voice lacked energy. ‘Wilson hanged himself last night.’

Silence. ‘That’s it then,’ said Harry.

Harry was right, it was all over for Wilson, but for Coyne there was unfinished business.

Coyne drove along the Geelong road, the You Yangs on his left, the city skyline across the bay – a hazy Legoland of high-rise apartments driven by an ideology that bigger is better. Wilson was a victim of that ideology. Thoughts flashed through Coyne’s mind. The City Connect was a road to kill for – More Mobility – More Freedom was a trite slogan for a bumper sticker and an easy sell to the electorate. For Wilson, freedom never came. Coyne called Marla and gave her the news. They arranged to meet at Carwyn Cellars.

Coyne was downcast when Marla arrived. He looked up from his glass. ‘I want a retrial. Wilson should have his name cleared, if not justice than at least the truth. I can’t believe I stitched him up.’

Marla chose her words. ‘It’s easy to beat yourself up in hindsight. You didn’t stitch him up; maybe you fanned the flames.’

Coyne rolled the ice in his glass and watched the way it disappeared – just melted away, an existential moment – which proffered the grim details of Wilson’s
suicide. ‘Ripped his shirt into lengths, tied them together, sat on the floor and looped the rope around the bed base. They found him at the end of his bed.’

Marla was a realist. ‘If someone wants to do it they’ll find a way.’

A re-trial would be inevitable once Katherine gave her testimony, but the wiles of the legal system didn’t guarantee those responsible for Morley’s death would be held accountable. Katherine would testify that Sammy Naylor murdered her brother; Lily would nail Nick for kidnap. As for Belle Pieters, it was a different story: she had counsel on tap and pinning Morley on her could be difficult – they’d paint Katherine as an unreliable witness, a person of poor character.

Coyne finished his drink, banged the glass on the table like it was a Magistrate’s gavel. ‘Wilson was set up, that needs to be fixed.’

Marla nodded in agreement and then looked at Coyne. ‘He hanged himself?’

‘I’ve thought about it, he was pretty cut up about his wife. You think he was murdered?’

‘Did have any enemies?’ asked Marla.

‘He got that fork in the back, but he didn’t want to talk.’

‘I’ll speak to some people at Barwon, maybe there’s more to it.’ Marla’s phone beeped. She picked up her mobile and looked at the screen. ‘It’s happening.’

Police cars blocked off access to and from the club. The Soggies gathered for the raid: flak jackets, balaclavas, helmets, M4 carbines, Heckler & Koch USPs, 12 gauge shotguns, flood lights, radio squall. Tear gas canisters smashed through the front window followed by a round of distraction grenades.

Sammy’s hands trembled as he loaded the Glock. Ashleigh and Debbie hid behind the bar they crouched down low, held each other and waited. Nick racked a sawn-off shotty and flung an Uzi over his shoulder. The VIP club was in darkness. Silence. Sammy came from the backroom and limped down the corridor with the Glock in hand. Nick moved to the front window, Uzi at the ready – he let fly. Bullets popped, clanked and sparked as they hit the armoured vehicle out front.

The police returned fire – bullets decimated the bar, showering Ashleigh and Debbie with glass and whisky. Debbie screamed and Ashleigh grabbed her by the arm and they scampered down the corridor to a bedroom. A man with thinning hair, in his
boxer shorts and socks, looked stunned – ‘What’s happening?’ he blurted. The girls huddled together in the corner. The man, desperate not to be caught, hid under the bed.

The police fired more tear gas, which quickly filled the club. Debbie and Ashleigh watched in fear as gas seeped under the door. It was hard to breathe. Debbie grabbed a blanket and covered their heads. Meanwhile Sammy fired at the chopper overhead. The ground response was swift. He took a beanbag round in the sternum, cracked rib – he dropped to the floor gasping for air. Nick kept shooting. Reload: fire again. He wrapped his face with a tea towel and ran upstairs to the second floor.

The line of fire was redirected at Nick. Bullets broke windows; glass showered down and a shard landed in Nick’s neck. He pulled it out and dark viscous blood pooled around the wound. He reloaded the shotty and fired again. More distraction grenades – all quiet. There was a sense that the silence might be broken at any time. Police remained on high alert, guns at the ready.

The door of the club opened – Sammy, Ashleigh, Debbie, Nick, the guy with the thinning hair and half a dozen other clients filed out with their hands clasped behind their heads – a parade of psychotic clowns. The air was toxic with tear gas fumes making their eyes water and throats dry. A tactical response vehicle raced them to the Melbourne West Police Precinct 9 where they were charged.

Belle’s apartment was an easier target. Baily and Garver knocked on the door. Belle had watched the raid on TV and wasn’t surprised to see the law. Garver was a bureaucrat and he followed the letter of the law. ‘Belle Pieters, we have a warrant for your arrest.’

‘Is this about the club?’ asked Belle.

Baily was Garver’s wingman. He stepped forward. ‘We need you to come with us Miss Pieters – regarding our investigation into the murder of Gary Morley.’

Belle smiled. ‘That’s old news, detective.’

Garver continued. ‘Miss Pieters, you are not obliged to say or do anything unless you wish to do so, but whatever you say or do may be used in evidence.’

‘Very well,’ said Belle, ‘do you mind if I call my lawyer?’

Garver thought about Belle’s blasé attitude – was she going to ask for a hot towel and a biscuit? ‘You can do that down at the station.’

Belle grabbed her mobile and jacket; Baily grabbed her by the elbow and steered her towards the lift.
Garver leaned across the table and spoke into the tape recorder. ‘This interview is being recorded. Interview: Belle Pieters. Time: 9.00 pm. Interview conducted by Detectives Baily and Garver. Present: Belle Pieters and legal counsel Karen Faris.’

Karen was a criminal lawyer and defended some of the city’s best. She’d hung out with some of the Lygon Street crew and had the nous to stay out of trouble – always close to the action but never part of it.

Baily opened the manila folder in front of him and leafed through his notes.

‘Nick Artukovic and Sammy Naylor – they work for you?’

Karen nodded that it was okay to answer. Belle said, ‘Yes.’

More questions from Baily. ‘Katherine Cheng, she work for you?’

‘Yes.’

‘What’s your connection with Dale Wilson?’

‘Read about him a while ago ... he killed Gary Morley.’

Silence. Baily pushed his chair back and stood up. He rubbed his chin, dropped his hand and gave Belle the thousand-yard stare. He didn’t take his eyes off her as he moved to her side of the table and bent down to her ear. He whispered. ‘I know what you did.’

Belle shifted uncomfortably in her chair and her eyes darted towards Karen.

‘This is intimidation,’ said Karen.

More silence and menace from Baily as he circled Belle and returned to his chair. He then pulled a plastic bag containing a mobile from his inside coat pocket. It was the burner phone, the one that Belle had used to call Wilson. ‘Recognise this?’

Karen spoke. ‘You don’t have to answer.’

‘The log has Wilson’s number on it,’ Baily said in an accusatory tone.

Belle was visibly upset on seeing the phone. Her eyes blinked, her mind raced – how the hell did they get that? She remembered the depot, the bullhorn drawing everyone outside.

Baily dangled the evidence like a fishhook. ‘We have a witness who will testify that you threw it in the bin after you called Wilson.’

Belle smiled, she exuded the confidence of the guilty. ‘I’ve never seen it before.’

Garver watched from the sidelines. He moved to the table and leaned into Belle’s personal space. ‘Did you intend to blackmail Gary Morley?’
Belle turned her head away from Garver’s hamburger breath. ‘Absolutely not.’
‘Did you arrange for his death?’
‘No.’
Karen interjected, leaning on the word – Detective. ‘DETECTIVE, do you realise who you’re talking to?’
Garver didn’t flinch.
After an hour of cat and mouse Baily wound up the session. ‘Miss Pieters, you’ll be charged as an accessory in the murder of Gary Morley.’ He clicked the recorder off, closed his manila folder and both he and Garver left the interview room.
Karen stood up. ‘Don’t worry we’ll have the bail hearing first thing in the morning.’
A uniformed officer entered the room and asked Belle to put her hands forward. She did and cuffs were locked around her wrists. She was led down a short corridor and into a processing room where she was asked to stand against the wall and face the camera. Click – ‘turn sideways’, CLICK – ‘open your mouth’ – DNA swab. The cuffs were taken off and Belle had her fingers pressed into ink and rolled onto her card:

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<th>Name:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Pieters, Belle</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marina Tower, 6 Pearl Road, Docklands</td>
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<td>Markings: scar over left eye</td>
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The following morning, reporters clustered out the front of the William Street Supreme Court. Belle was released on a surety of $450,000. She appeared on the steps and the camera flashes struck the walls of the entrance. She looked weary, no make-up and hungry – Belle refused to eat Hungry Jack’s; she was shepherded by Karen towards a waiting taxi as journalists feverishly barked their questions.
Harry stood on the verandah of the Warburton house and watched the parade on his iPhone.

SUPREME COURT

REPORTER #1
Is McAlpin a client?

REPORTER #2
Did you know Nick Artukovic worked for the Ustaše?

REPORTER #1
Are the girls at the VIP sex slaves?

REPORTER #3
How much are you pocketing from the City Connect deal?

Harry didn’t like what he saw. He could see a shit storm coming and his involvement with Belle caused a severe amount of sweat and angst as he considered the implications of what was unfolding before him.

Belle jumped into the taxi, away from the swarm of media hungry journos. Her phone rang – ID: Don McAlpin.

‘What the hell is going on?’ asked Don.

Belle was short with him. She’d been interrogated, humiliated and spent the night in a four-walled deprivation chamber. ‘It’s okay. I’ve got bail. Have you heard from Frank?’

Don had spoken to Frank earlier that day, specifically about Belle and how the bad press might affect the City Connect deal. Frank was keen to throw Belle under the bus. Don told her they should meet once the media died down, he didn’t want to be photographed with a criminal. ‘I’ll call soon, don’t worry, everything will be fine.’

Mist rolled into the valley. Baily and Garver arrived at the Warburton house late afternoon. Coyne, Lily and Katherine watched from the verandah as the detectives
climbed the steps to the house. Harry was down by the creek collecting wood for the fire. Garver was official in tone. ‘Pieters is out on bail. We want you to stay put. Nobody knows you’re here?’ Katherine felt intimidated by the cops, she nodded – No. Coyne told the Ds that Harry Breen owned the house, making the point that he could be trusted.

Garver presented two photos to Katherine. ‘Can you identify these persons?’ Katherine got the shivers looking at the pictures. ‘That’s Nick. He tried to throw me down the mineshaft,’ and pointing to the photo on the right, ‘this is Sammy, he killed my brother.’

Lily watched in silence – focussed – justice was being served.

Baily looked at Garver and both looked at Katherine, their star witness.

Garver said, ‘We’ve got enough to put these two away for life. Belle Pieters will contest your version of events and they’ll go you in court.’

Katherine didn’t care – she’d been on the run for nearly a year and the trail she’d left behind made her feel numb.

Harry returned to the house with an armful of firewood. All eyes went to the door as he entered. He stood like a stunned mullet as Baily and Garver sized him up. When he sensed scrutiny Harry had the ability to look guilty. His eyes darted left to right – a nervous nod and a forced smile didn’t instil confidence. He sat down while the detectives held their stare and Harry started to sweat. Coyne broke the tension – this is Harry. He pulled Lily out of the VIP club. Lily smiled – Harry was okay in her book.

Garver pulled out his notebook. ‘And you’re Harry …?’

‘Breen,’ stuttered Harry.

Garver wrote down the name, smiled disingenuously and snapped shut his notebook. Both he and Baily were keen to get back to Melbourne and start proceedings to put Nick and Sammy away for a long, long time. ‘We’ll be in touch.’

A kookaburra shrieked then another, and another, a cacophonous bird song at the end of the day. The fire crackled and popped. The shack was musty. Coyne stood by the door and took in the fresh mountain air while Katherine and Lily retired to the bedroom. Coyne shut the door and moved towards Harry. ‘You’re full of surprises.’

Harry tended to the fire. ‘Like what?’

Coyne sat down in the cloth-covered armchair next to the fire. ‘Like going to the VIP club and getting Lily. That took guts Harry. I’m impressed.’
Harry had been unusually quiet. He didn’t like the cops in his house and he knew his involvement with Belle would eventually come out. Coyne wasn’t interested in beating up on Harry – he had one request. ‘I want you to testify that Belle paid you to run the story.’

Harry turned away from the fire. ‘I can’t do that! How will I look if that came out?’

Coyne didn’t care how Harry looked. ‘Belle Pieters called Wilson and set him up. You want her to go free? Your testimony will support her involvement. She used us to make sure Wilson went down. We’re complicit.’

Harry was feeling very anxious. He took his jacket off and loosened his shirt collar. ‘We’ve done nothing wrong.’ Harry opened the door and took several deep breaths.

A charred log rolled onto the floor and embers sparked. Coyne shovelled the log back into the fire and without looking at Harry said, ‘You accepted a bribe.’

Harry rested his arm against the doorjamb. ‘It wasn’t like that.’

Coyne threw another log on the fire.

‘Let me think about it,’ said Harry.

Harry looked demoralized. The fire crackled. Coyne opened the Di Giorgio and took his glass onto the verandah.

Coyne sees Talia and says, ‘I don’t know why I persist.’

‘Because you can’t help yourself.’

‘What should I do?’

‘Do what you do best.’

‘Upset people, I can do that.’

‘You do more than that honey. You can’t pike because it’s too tough. Shit if that’s how it works I would have left you years ago.’

***

The following day Coyne interviewed Katherine. They sat on the verandah and Coyne activated the recorder. ‘When did you start working for Pieters?’

‘I worked for Belle for about a year. Belle wanted me to date Gary.’
‘Why?’
‘I needed the money. My dad was sick, mum worked as a cleaner. Belle paid well. It was a good offer. She wanted me to date Gary and take photos of us. She said she wanted a plan B if things didn’t work out.’ Katherine paused she seemed to drift away for a moment and then said, ‘I liked Gary.’

‘Who is Nick Artukovic and Sammy Naylor?’
‘They worked for Belle. Naylor murdered my brother.’

Katherine broke down and started to cry. Lily stood in the doorway her face was immutable. Katherine looked to see her mother’s composure and continued to answer questions.

‘Naylor killed Michael?’
‘He fired his gun through the door. It was meant for me. They don’t want me to talk about Gary.’

‘Who killed Gary Morley?’
‘I don’t know. But Belle set a trap.’
‘That’s the phone you gave me.’

Katherine nodded her head and wiped her eyes. Lily came out of the cabin and gave Katherine a cup of tea. She sat beside her daughter as Coyne continued to ask questions. By late afternoon Coyne left Warby with a sense that justice would be served.

Three months later Harry and Coyne arrived at the Magistrate’s court for the hearing against Sammy Naylor and Nick Artukovic. With Wilson dead Belle’s case was scheduled for a later date and word was that the prosecution would be hard-pressed to pin anything on her. On the other hand things didn’t look too good for Sammy and Nick. Harry had longer hair and looked uncomfortable in a blue suit that was a little too small for him. Coyne was keen and wide-eyed as he marched up the steps and entered the building.

Katherine sat in the dock and Sammy Naylor sat a few metres away, arms folded, head slightly tilted.

The prosecution moved towards Katherine. ‘Miss Cheng, do you recognise the plaintiff? The SC nodded in the direction of Sammy. Could you please tell the court what happened on the morning of January the twenty-second at the Rainbow Motel.’
‘I was alone in the motel when my brother arrived. I was happy to see him … he had a bag full of things.’

‘What things?’

‘Food and some clothes.’

‘Go on.’

‘He wanted to know why I was scared … what I was doing in Bendigo.’

‘And why were you scared Miss Cheng?’

‘Because Nick had tried to kill me at Ravenswood … I escaped but I knew he would come after me. There was a knock on the door and Michael …’

‘That’s your brother.’

‘Yeah, he told me to hide in the bathroom. Michael went to the door and then I heard gunshots and Michael fell backwards. I grabbed the knife then Sammy kicked the door. Michael was bleeding and when Sammy came in I stabbed him and then dragged Michael to the car … but he was dead when we got to the hospital. Sammy killed him.’

Katherine spoke in a sure calm voice and Sammy sat with cold dark eyes and his mouth set hard and tight.

Sammy pleaded not guilty but Katherine’s eyewitness account of him shooting her brother and attempting to shoot her was enough to convict him.

When it came time for Nick to be questioned Lily’s eyes followed him to the witness box. When the prosecution asked if she could identify the person that restrained her, Lily shot her arm forward like a gundog straight to Nick. Harry and Coyne sat in the chamber and watched with a steely resolve. Nick was sentenced for the kidnap of Lily Cheng. Coyne felt empty, he knew Nick and Sammy were involved in Morley’s death – the judgement was delivered and it was a hollow victory. Nick stared at Coyne and smiled.
Seagulls circled the steel and glass Docklands tower while Belle paced in the ritzy townhouse – anxious. She rang Don. ‘Have you spoken with Frank?’

‘How are you holding up?’

‘What’s his position?’

‘You can imagine this is all very distasteful. He suggests we convene once this blows over.’

‘That’s not good enough. I want a meeting.’

‘Frank is off to Portsea tomorrow, just a for a few days, let’s organise something when he gets back.’

Belle sensed she was getting shafted. ‘Call me.’

PIETERS TRUCK DEPOT SIX MONTHS EARLIER

Belle is on the phone to Frank Lester.

‘Can Don be trusted?’ asks Frank.

Belle says, ‘Leave Don to me – you’re sure about this? He’s high profile.’

‘Nothing personal – Morley is a liability,’ says Frank.

Nick and Sammy share the plaid two-seater couch. Belle ends the call and looks at both of them. ‘Tonight.’ Eyes dart between the three.

***

In the early hours of the morning Belle headed towards the Waterfront City Marina. It was less than a kilometre from her apartment. Dressed in black tracksuit pants and hoody, she walked along the promenade. The pre-dawn air was cold and Belle’s cheeks were red and flushed. She arrived at Lester’s yacht. Water lapped against the boats moored at the marina. They bobbed like corks – up and down as the waves lapped back and forth – the changing tide. The sun would be up soon, fishermen would cast their lines into the harbour – no time.

She climbed on board, lifted the engine cover. Growing up in a transport depot gave Belle hands on skills. She opened the toolbox and found a wrench and loosened the fuel line, then replaced the engine cover.
Belle watched the sun rise. The morning haze lifted – the water looked calm. Stillness. Frank Lester arrived at the marina and boarded the motor yacht. He started the engines and headed out of the bay down to Port Sea, home to the rich and famous – mansions, landscaped gardens and private jetties. This was the lifestyle that Frank Lester had come to know and love. As the yacht motored into Port Phillip Bay, fuel from the feed line leaked…

DRIP…

DRIP…

DRIP…

DRIP…

Frank stood at the helm – captain’s cap, sunglasses; he clicked the MP3 party favourites, *Summer Breeze*…

The fuel continued to DRIP…

Vapours built into a volatile cocktail of hydrocarbons swirling around the manifold – flash point and the yacht EXPLODED into the ether. Belle saw the flames in the distance and poured herself a drink.

City Connect was under way and the election date was about to be announced. Now everything was falling apart for Glenn and McAlpin. Belle and her ragbag team of psychopaths were news and Lester’s DNA was floating in Port Philip Bay.

Don marched into Richard Glenn’s office, visibly concerned about the turn of events. He dragged his fingers over his face and suggested they put out a press release,
something along the lines of – we deeply regret the loss of Francis Lester … a pillar of society … worked tirelessly for the benefit of the community.

Glenn said, ‘We need to state our position on the City Connect – business as usual – we’ll call the Collingwood underpass The Frank Lester Tunnel.’

McAlpin nodded, that’s a good idea. Underlying this terrible tragedy was the fact that he would not receive the promised funds and support from Frank, jeopardising the seat of Corio and a win for the government. They both realised the election just got a whole lot harder.

Darren Burke sat in his office and watched the six o’clock news. He was unmoved by Lester’s death.

NEWS PRESENTER
Police say there are no suspicious circumstances in the death of high profile developer, Frank Lester. Mr Lester was killed in a tragic boating accident and his death throws into doubt the development of the City Connect project. We cross live to the Police Media Centre for the latest news.

REPORTER
I’ve just spoken with the police media liaison officer, Marla Davis and she has confirmed that Frank Lester’s yacht exploded in Port Phillip Bay on Saturday morning as he was heading down to his holiday home in Portsea. Police say that a faulty fuel line was the most likely reason for the explosion.

NEWS PRESENTER
Lester was to head the development of the City Connect project. Has the government said anything about what they will do? What’s the situation now?
REPORTER
The City Connect has been dogged by rumours that the contract awarded to Lester and Pieters has been a sweet heart deal with the Glenn government. The government has been quiet on this front and said they will be releasing a statement regarding the future of the City Connect.

Glenn got on the phone to Darren Burke quick smart. If anything were to be salvaged from this debacle it was Burke’s ability to bring the TWU on side. Darren sat with his feet on the desk and the phone to his ear. He listened to Glenn talk about the tragedy and what a great bloke Frank was but how Darren was always his first choice … Darren let Glenn run his mouth and then agreed to take on the project – Darren couldn’t believe his luck.

Don raced over to Docklands, eager to speak with Belle. Poor Don, he didn’t really understand the nuances of the underworld even though he was a politician. He genuinely believed Wilson had killed Morley. With Belle on a charge as an accessory to murder, he had questions – he also had unpleasant news. He paced from the kitchen bench to the window – Belle reclined on the lounge.

‘Were you involved in Gary’s murder? Am I a patsy? What did you do?’ asked Don.

Belle was bemused. Are you that naïve? Don realised he was a pawn – get rid of Morley and put him in the job. He paced some more then considered the idea that the explosion was not an accident. ‘Frank?’

Belle was dismissive. ‘What about Frank?’

Don moved closer. ‘Did you have anything to do with that?

‘I’d be looking at Darren Burke, he’s been stewing over not getting the contract.’

Don knew Belle wasn’t going to like what he was about to say. ‘He’s just been given the deal.’

‘What!’ Belle believed the Lester group would continue with the City Connect. She was wrong. Her voice became aggro. ‘We have an agreement.’

Don was apologetic, but Richard Glenn would make a move that Belle Pieters was not a fit person to continue with the City Connect project. Belle waved her hand
across the kitchen bench clearing everything in its way: glasses, cups, fruit bowl – smash and crash. Don said there would be compensation, but under the circumstances her involvement in the project was not tenable. She picked up the potpourri at the end of the bench and threw it over Don – a symbolic gesture that he was on the nose.

Don made a dash up the steps of Parliament House as protestors wanted blood over the stuff-up of the City Connect. His credibility had taken a turn for the worse and he was keen to re-invent himself. His involvement with Belle was a liability and the best he could do was keep a straight face and weasel around any sticky questions that might come his way.

The chamber was like a nest of wriggling slippery vipers. ‘Order, order in the house,’ yelled the Speaker. The ruckus highlighted the pressure Glenn and McAlpin were under. Harcourt, Tindal and members of the Labor backbench howled and gestured as Glenn outlined the details for the election. First on the agenda was the City Connect. The contract with the Lester Group and Pieter’s Transport would be terminated.

The response was rapid. ‘What about the letter of comfort, Mr Speaker?’ asked Harcourt. ‘I was going to tear it up but you’ve beaten me to the post!’

‘How much is the government’s incompetency going to cost the Victorian taxpayer?’ yelled Tindal.

Glenn stood and with complete confidence and authority said. ‘Mr Speaker, I am very pleased to announce that the City Connect will be awarded to local contractor Darren Burke. This is responsible action and it is the right thing to do. In light of the tragic events surrounding Frank Lester’s death the government has been very quick to act and we must move forward for the sake of all Victorians.’ Glenn smiled, paused and
exuded the cunning of true statesman. Harcourt crossed his arms and chewed his lower lip as Glenn continued, ‘DB Constructions have been a fixture on the Melbourne skyline for many years and I am very confident in the delivery of one of the greatest infrastructure projects this state has ever seen!’

‘Hear, hear.’ Shouted the backbenches.

Tindal wanted to know about Belle Pieters, another thorn in the side of the government. ‘Mr Speaker, would the Minister for Infrastructure like to outline his involvement with a Miss Pieters, who has been charged as an accessory to the murder of Gary Morley – your predecessor Mr McAlpin.’

Don was quick to his feet. ‘I object. This is outrageous. I will not comment, as this case will be heard in the proper forum, which is a court of law.’ Don looked nervous and vulnerable. Little beads of sweat formed on his brow and a rash began to develop around his neck. After parliament had sat, Glenn and McAlpin reconvened in the Premier’s office.

Glenn was adamant that the Belle Pieters trial should start as soon as possible. The sooner it was over, the better. ‘What do you know about Pieters?’

Don paused – Richard waited.

‘You were right to cut her loose. I think she is guilty. I think she orchestrated Morley’s death.’

Glenn just stared thinking he wished he hadn’t heard what Don had just said.

Ashleigh’s apartment was in Port Melbourne in one of many high rise towers that now populated the once working class suburb. Ashleigh was working out in black and pink active wear, hair in a ponytail – Iggy Azalea hip-hop music booming, TV in the background – Judge Judy. Katherine knocked on the door. No answer. She knocked again – louder this time. Ashleigh heard but hell, she was doing her thing; she reluctantly turned off the music and answered the door. Her chirpy sweet face turned sour when she saw Katherine. ‘Hi Katy,’ she sounded strained and fake.

Katherine punched her in the mouth then pushed her back into the apartment. She demanded her money. ‘Hand it over.’
Ashleigh feigned innocence but it didn’t wash. Katherine picked up one of Ashleigh’s dumb-bells and threw it at the TV. Judge Judy was silenced. Katherine picked up the second dumb-bell and intimated that it was for Ashleigh.

‘Alright, no, no stop,’ said Ashleigh. She retrieved the handbag from the bottom of her wardrobe, and held it with both hands clutching the handle; arms outstretched she passed the money over.

Katherine snapped the latch and checked the contents. ‘You dobbed me in.’

‘No, I didn’t say anything,’ said Ashleigh, her protestation difficult to believe.

‘How did Nick know where I was?’

Ashleigh was jelly, no spine. Not even an impression of innocence. Her body caved in, she became smaller, shoulders slumped forward; blood seeped from her lower lip.

Katherine didn’t have a lot of sympathy; it would have been wasted on Ashleigh. Instead, she kept a cold stare right up to the point of turning and closing the door on her way out.

Forty thousand was money Katherine would give to Lily – she could go on a trip. She always wanted to go to Paris, now would be a good time. Katherine walked down the tree-lined street, past the coffee shop and bakery. She crossed the road and strolled into a small park, which had a piece of modern art, a bronze feather swirling skyward. She took a seat and rang Geoff.

‘It’s me.’

Geoff was in the garage working on the car. He remained silent. Katherine began to cry and through her sniffles and snorts she said, ‘I’m sorry.’

McAlpin went into election mode; a walkthrough the Geelong Westfield shopping centre only acerbated his cause. He’d raised the ire of locals by signing the City Connect deal. Where was the promised Bay West container port? Once again the satellite city of Geelong had been kicked in the guts: Target – closed, Ford – closed, Alcoa – closed – Qantas gone; and a whimsical Lord Mayor had seen fit to erect a million dollar floating Christmas tree to gee up the locals and make them forget they didn’t have a job. Don had a hard sell; he desperately needed a sweetener. He tried kissing a baby but it cried. He called the show off and was egged as the Ministerial car drove down Malop Street and out of town.
Back at Richard Glenn’s office, Don was livid. ‘We’ll lose Corio. I can only do so much. You should have seen them.’

‘I thought you were going to play the sympathy card,’ said Richard.

Don didn’t get a chance to play any cards – he was shouted down. ‘They’re not interested in Morley, they want jobs.’

Richard needed the seat of Corio he considered Don’s account of his campaign to date as a matter of serious concern: Chisholm, Deakin, Aston and Bruce would all benefit from the City Connect, but Corio? ‘I’ll talk to finance maybe we could put money into the Vitol refinery. Burke says there’s a market for locally made bitumen. We could buy it off them to build the City Connect. Give with one hand and redirect with another.’

‘How much?’

‘One hundred and fifty million dollars, we’d be able to recoup at least thirty per cent if we buy at cost.’

Don breathed a sigh of relief. ‘Good.’

‘Is the Belle Pieters trial date set?’ asked Richard. It was actually the Wilson re-trial but as far as Glenn’s position went Belle Pieters had the potential to bring down the government. Her involvement with McAlpin, Lester and the City Connect had brought a cloud over the project and her innocence was a game changer.

Pulsing drums and horn lines that suggested a sense of urgency heralded in *Point of View*. On the panel: The Minister for Infrastructure and the Arts, Don McAlpin; Investigative journalist, Chris Coyne; Corporate lawyer, Danielle Yeardly; and the leader of the Greens, Josh Tindal. The guests had a quick dusting by the make up artist and the program went to air.

Darren Burke lit a cigar and put his feet on the desk. Fiona entered carrying two glasses and a bottle of *Moët & Chandon*. She popped the cork and the champagne flowed.

‘To us.’

‘Darren raised his glass and said, ‘Who would have thought it’d turn out like this?’

‘Just goes to show darl.’
Fiona took a sip from her champagne glass. ‘Look at them so bloody self-satisfied.’

JACINTA
Mr McAlpin, what is happening with the proposed container port in Bay West?

DON
Thank you, Jacinta – Bay West is an exciting development and has great potential to bring jobs and infrastructure to the people of Geelong.

JOSH
It’s a red herring. Surveys have already shown that Bay West is too shallow to accommodate a container port.

DON
That’s not true.

Don’s remark was a bald-faced lie, carried off with the political acumen of a weasel and the gall of a Catholic Bishop at a Senate Inquiry. Darren turned to Fiona, ‘He’ll say anything.’

JACINTA
Chris Coyne, do you think Bay West is a red herring?

COYNE
Don, I read a planning document that you had requested and it confirmed Hastings as the optimum site for the port. You know it and I read it. I don’t know, I just I don’t know how you can sit there and say Bay West is the site for the container port.
JOSH
It has always been Hastings.

COYNE
Perhaps the Minister could address why he was seen in a real estate office in Hastings?

DON
I was doing my job. I was visiting a number of businesses in the area, listening to their concerns. Chris there are many stages that we go through when assessing important major infrastructure developments. You may have read a report and by the way, I don’t know where you got this information but nonetheless I can say now with absolute confidence that Bay West will be the priority site for the port.

JACINTA
Danielle, from a legal perspective how easy is it for the government to chop and change infrastructure developments such as the Hastings Container Port as well as the City Connect?

DANIELLE
Seems to be extremely easy and as Mr McAlpin has rightly pointed out, there are many stages and reviews that go towards making a final decision. It’s perfectly legal.

DON
If I may, part of our reasoning to develop Bay West has been the release of very substantial funds and the government is prepared to release a one hundred and fifty-million dollar investment in the Vitol oil refinery, which
DON (CONT’D)
will mean hundreds of jobs to the workers and families of Corio and surrounding areas.

COYNE
So the City Connect and Hastings are off the table?

DON
Nothing is off the table. City Connect is most definitely going ahead.

COYNE
Why not scrap City Connect and use existing rail links down to Bay West?

DON
Simple. We will be developing Bay West.

After the credits rolled and the studio lights dimmed, Coyne approached McAlpin. ‘I thought that went very well,’ said Don.

‘Will you be attending the Wilson trial?’

It was a leading question and Don replied, ‘I hadn’t planned to, I’m very busy at the moment.’

‘If Pieters is found guilty then how would that affect the City Connect?’

‘Her contract has been terminated so the answer to that question is, it won’t affect the project in any way. Burke has taken over the City Connect. I really do have to go.’

It was late when Magistrate Vince Colvito knocked on the door of the Premier’s office. ‘Vincent come in, I’ve been expecting you.’

Vince walked forward with hand outstretched. ‘I saw Don on Point of View. He was good and the investment in Geelong will be a real boost.’

‘Drink?’ Richard poured a glass of brandy and handed it to Vincent.
‘Cheers.’
Richard adopted a jovial yet considered manner in discussing matters with Vince. ‘Dragging this Wilson case through the courts isn’t helping anyone.’
Vince sat down in the leather club chair and sipped his brandy. ‘I agree.’
‘I can’t afford to have Belle Pieters involved in Morley’s death. It’s not a good look. Besides, Wilson hanged himself, surely that’s a sign of guilt.’
Vince listened and read between the lines. ‘This is just a show trial. Apparently there’s new evidence, but as far as I can see it’s circumstantial.’
‘Exactly. The sooner it goes away, the sooner we can get on with providing good government.’

The courtroom was packed with media – Vince Colvito entered from the side door, wigged and robed – he looked regal and authoritative. ‘All rise,’ cried the depositions clerk. The crown prosecutor, Justin Lewellyn, called Belle Pieters to the stand. After swearing the oath to ‘tell the truth and nothing but the truth’ proceedings began.
‘Miss Pieters what’s your connection with the recently deceased Dale Wilson?’
‘I’ve only seen what’s in the news.’
‘I see. You’ve read about him?’
‘I might have seen something on the television.’
‘Do you recall what the news item was about?’
‘The City Connect protest.’
‘Ah! The City Connect – the project that your company was involved with?’
Karen Faris interjected. ‘Objection. Mr Wilson has been in the news for some time now and the prosecution is leading the defendant.’
‘Objection over ruled. Continue counsel.’
Lewellyn held a plastic bag with the burner phone. ‘Do you recognise this phone Miss Pieters?’
Belle sat motionless, hostile eyes staring defiantly at Lewellyn. ‘Looks like any other phone.’
‘So you haven’t seen this before?’
‘No.’
‘Can you explain why your fingerprints are on this phone?’
‘I have several phones I suppose it’s one of mine.’
Lewellyn moved closer to Belle. ‘A call to Dale Wilson was made on this phone. Can you explain how a call to someone you don’t know is logged on your phone?’

‘Obviously someone else has used it. It wasn’t me.’

Lewellyn rubbed his chin, tugged on his ear and then returned to the prosecution table. He picked up several documents, bank statements, and held them high in the air.

‘Miss Pieters have you heard of Centurion Holdings?’

‘No.’

‘So you’re not aware of a figure of two hundred and fifty thousand dollars paid into this account over a period of twelve months?’

‘I have no idea what you are referring.’

Lewellyn placed his reading glasses on the bridge of his nose and perused the documents. ‘I believe the account was in the name of Marcus Agrippa.’

‘Do you know Mr Agrippa?’

‘No, I do not.’

‘Miss Pieters can you confirm that a Katherine Cheng worked for you at your nightclub, I believe it is called The VIP club?’

‘Yes. Katherine worked at the club as an escort. When I discovered she had an affair with Gary Morley I terminated her contract – that was completely against our rules. Miss Cheng acted of her own volition. I felt deeply betrayed by her actions. She displayed very poor character.’

Katherine’s expression changed from impassive to angry. Belle put Katherine up for the job, now it played like Belle was hard done by.

Lewellyn paused and then said, ‘No more questions your honour.’

Karen Faris approached Belle. ‘Miss Pieters you have several girls who work at the VIP club?’

‘Yes.’

‘You treat them well?’

‘They’re like family.’

‘Would you say Katherine Cheng was self-serving in her targeting of Gary Morley?’

‘Yes. Her own interests got in the way of her professional duty.’

Lewellyn stood. ‘Objection.’
Colvito replied, ‘Objection sustained. Choose your words more carefully, Miss Faris.’

‘Thank you, no more questions.’

Lily, Harry and Coyne sat behind the prosecution and Coyne was feeling disillusioned. He could see where it was heading – Katherine’s character was being shredded. She sat on the prosecution bench, and behind her were Lily and Geoff.

Lewellyn called Katherine to the stand. Geoff placed his hand on Katherine’s shoulder and she turned her head in his direction for a moment and then stood.

Lewellyn shuffled a few pieces of paper and then asked, ‘Katherine you worked for Belle Pieters?’

Katherine spoke softly her head tilted slightly downwards ‘Yes.’

‘Did Belle Pieters pay you to have an affair with Gary Morley?’

‘Yes.’

Faris barked, ‘Objection! Miss Cheng was in the employ of Belle Pieters. Of course she was paid. She worked at the club. That doesn’t mean Belle Pieters manipulated or took advantage of Miss Cheng in any way.’

‘Objection sustained.’

Katherine had made a plea bargain with the State and was offered a suspended sentence if she nailed Pieters. Lewellyn asked the hard questions: how many times did she meet with Morley, where did her money come from, did she know who Marcus Agrippa was, did she report to Belle? She replied: Her relationship with Morley took place over the period of one year, her money was paid into her account, she didn’t know who Marcus Agrippa was, yes she did report to Belle and yes Belle set her up with Morley. That was the truth, but it was her word against Belle’s, and with Colvito on the bench things didn’t look good for Katherine. Anyone who didn’t know Belle would have thought she was Mother Teresa.

After Lewellyn had questioned Katherine, Karen Faris approached the stand. She held the phone by the corner of the plastic bag. ‘Miss Cheng it was you who supplied the phone to the police?’

‘Yes.’

‘How did the phone come to be in your possession?’

‘I took it out of the bin.’
‘Why did you do that?’
‘Because I didn’t trust Belle.’
‘So Belle Pieters made a call to Dale Wilson and said she was Morley’s secretary?’
‘Yes.’
‘How do we know it wasn’t you that made that call? I mean you have the phone.’
‘I didn’t.’
‘Did Gary ask you to arrange a meeting with Dale Wilson to discuss the City Connect?’
‘No.’
‘Did he suggest you pretend to be his secretary so he could have a discreet talk with Wilson at the Little River Hotel where you and Gary regularly met?’
‘No.’
‘Did you tell Wilson the time and place where this meeting was to occur?’
‘No that was Belle.’
‘You texted Gary and arranged to meet?’
‘Yes … but Belle…’
‘But you never went?’
‘No.’
‘So Gary Morley went to Little River expecting to see you but met Wilson instead?’
‘Yes.’
‘And when Wilson asked for more money Gary Morley refused. Wilson waited on the Little River Road and killed Gary Morley in a fit of drunken rage.’
‘I don’t know.’
‘Thank you no more questions.’
‘I’d like to call Gary Morley’s secretary Megan Mathers.’

Megan looked pale and tired. She sat in the witness box and cleared her throat.

   Faris was friendly in her dealings with Megan. ‘Thank you Megan this must be
difficult for you. Now you gave your original testimony in the trial of Dale Wilson
some two years ago is that correct?’
‘Yes.’
‘At that time you were Gary Morley’s secretary and I’m just looking at the transcript of that trial – you said that you never rang Dale Wilson.’
‘Is that correct?’
‘That’s correct.’
‘Thank you no more questions.’

After lunch the Lewellyn called for Harry Breen. Harry walked slowly to the witness box. He had sweat pooling around his shirt collar.

‘Harry, you’re the owner and editor of Northside Media?’
‘That’s correct.’
‘And how is that working for you?’
‘Independent media is always going to be difficult.’
‘You mean financially?’
‘I mean running a business, competing with social media, fake news that sort of thing.’

‘Northside Media ran a story on Dale Wilson. Is that correct?’
‘Yes. Chris Coyne was in charge of that.’
‘But you are the editor. Is it true that Belle Pieters paid you to run the Wilson story?’

Harry took a breath, Belle grinded her teeth and eyeballed Harry and he responded by averting his eyes. ‘That’s not exactly true. Belle Pieters has been very supportive of Northside and she has invested money from time to time, a silent partner you might say.’

‘So she didn’t pay you to run the Wilson story?’
‘No.’
‘But she was aware of the story?’
‘Yes.’

Faris stood and yelled, ‘Objection. The prosecution seems to suggest that Belle Pieters and Mr Breen plotted a media campaign against Dale Wilson, which is pure fiction. Northside Media merely stated the facts.’

Colvito looked at his watch. ‘Sustained. We’ll break for lunch and resume at 2.00 pm.’
After the first day of the trial, Karen Faris gave a short interview in the foyer. Jean had the camera set-up along with a dozen other media groups hungry for news of the day’s proceedings.

Karen oozed confidence and worked the media to her advantage. ‘We’re happy with today. It is painfully clear that my client is innocent of the charges.’

The following day Faris put Coyne on the stand. ‘You’re a journalist, is that correct?’

‘Yes.’

‘You followed the Wilson story and wrote this in response to Wilson’s appeal?’

Faris held a sheet of A4 and read. ‘Wilson loses appeal. Good riddance! Wilson is a murderer and he was caught.’

‘Yes, but it was before…’

‘Before what, Mr Coyne?’

‘Before I had all the facts.’

‘I see. So you thought he was guilty, now you think he was innocent? You changed your mind?’

‘When you factor in Katherine Cheng’s account and the hour and a half time difference between Wilson’s meeting …’

‘Thank you, this is all very interesting, but it is purely speculative. Gary Morley was running late for this so-called meeting and as for Katherine Cheng’s testimony, I think we have dealt with the veracity of her version of events. No more questions.’

Nick was taken from the remand centre to front in court once again. This time he was questioned over the murder of Dale Wilson. Lewellyn tugged on his ear as he approached the witness box. ‘Mr Artukovic you worked for Belle Pieters?’

‘Yes.’

‘And on the night of Gary Morley’s death where were you?’

‘I was at the workshop with Bob.’

‘Have you ever been to the Little River Hotel?’

‘I’ve been to a lot of hotels.’

‘Answer the question please.’

‘No.’
Lewellyn came on the attack and raised his voice. ‘We have surveillance footage of you and Mr Samuel Naylor on the Geelong freeway the day of Mr Morley’s murder. What do you say to that?’

‘We had to pick up some parts for Bob’s truck.’
‘Did you drug Dale Wilson?’
‘No.’
‘Did Belle Pieters order you to kill Gary Morley?’
‘No.’

Faris sat quietly with Belle by her side as Lewellyn questioned Nick. She stood.

‘This is all circumstantial your honour. There were a number of people on the Geelong freeway that day should we question them also?’

‘No more questions,’ said Lewellyn.

Coyne sat in the courtroom he stared at Nick and was met with a vicious knowing smile.

_Four locals sit at the bar of the Little River hotel. Wilson looks at his watch, orders a beer and sits outside. It’s dark. The sound of the cicadas breaks an otherwise peaceful summer’s night. He drinks his beer and waits… after ten minutes he feels groggy. He grabs the handrail to steady himself when Nick and Sammy appear on the verandah. They grab Wilson and drag him to the Ford pick-up. Wilson lies on his back staring at the trees flashing by as Nick drives. Sammy follows in the Toyota Hi-Lux. They park on the Little River Road and wait. The drugs have knocked Wilson for a six. As the sun disappears behind Flinders Peak the high beam of the Ford shines on Morley’s car. Morley looks into the rear-view mirror … the Ford accelerates and rams the car, causing it to skid across the white line and broadside into the gravel apron. Morley spins the steering wheel left, right, left as sweat runs down his face and pools around his neck. The Ford rams a second time and Morley’s car catapults forward. He stabs the brakes and the car flips on its side and slides into the scrub, metal screeching and sparks flying. The pick-up stops – stillness, except for the ominous idling of the engine. Morley opens the door and falls onto the ground. He gets to his feet – blinded by the headlights, doubled over with blood running from his temple, he limps to the side of the road. Gears crunch, brakes release and the pick-up rolls Morley in barbed wire and dust. Sammy takes a bottle of Johnny from the glove box and walks towards the pick-up._
They lift Wilson into the driver’s seat and pour whisky down his throat. Nick and Sammy leave in their Toyota Hi-Lux.

***

Coyne entered the case with high hopes. By the fifth day of the trial Belle was exonerated and Wilson was named as the culprit in the murder of Gary Morley. Faris had successfully made the argument that Katherine arranged the meeting between Morley and Wilson, at Morley’s request, and when Morley didn’t offer enough money Wilson got drunk and rammed Morley’s car. When Belle realised that Katherine was having a relationship with Morley she told Katherine to stop seeing him. The truth of the matter was Morley had no intention of meeting Wilson and when he arrived at the Little River Hotel and Katherine wasn’t there he decided to return to Melbourne. As he drove along the Little River Road, Nick and Sammy waited with Wilson passed out in the back of the ute.

Katherine’s willingness to testify against Belle meant she received a suspended sentence. Belle had ducked and weaved. She’d walked free. Her reputation had been damaged but in time people would forget. She redirected Faris’s legal powers to begin litigation against the government for terminating her contract for the City Connect. She’d come out on top. The human collateral lay wasted at her feet.

The city was in gridlock. Darren Burke honked the horn as the car inched eastwards up Bourke towards Parliament House. Veins protruded from his neck, knuckles whitened as he gripped the steering wheel. Darren had enough – he parked in a loading bay, got out of the car, slammed the door and walked.

Glenn smiled and held out his hand to greet the angry Burke. Darren grabbed his hand and squeezed tightly – alpha male grip. ‘I don’t like your chances.’

Glenn looked at Burke with a quizzical raise of an eyebrow. Burke was in an enviable position – both Glenn and Harcourt had offered him a deal. Whether the final tally favoured Glenn or Harcourt, he had work. As a unionist he was loath to declare his allegiance to Glenn, but he was the bigger fish.
Burke told Glenn. ‘The TWU is planning a rally at Trades Hall. You need to guarantee City Connect and Hastings – roads you hear?’

‘Once the election is over we can smooth out any problems the TWU might have. City Connect is a done deal, roads will be our priority, tell that to your mates.’

‘I hope you win, for all our sakes.’

Coyne took a backpack and his laptop to Warburton. He stopped by the Warburton IGA: biscuits, tin of beans, coffee and a loaf of bread. The sun was hot for a winter’s day. He opened the windows, plugged in his laptop and wrote the words: *A Road to Kill: The Murder of Gary Morley*. Coyne looked at his original story and shook his head at the way he’d demonised Wilson. He laid out his notes, news clippings, correspondence, and photos on the floor. He could at least write his version of events and his involvement in the Morley story. In his mind Belle sent Wilson and Morley up to Little River; Nick and Sammy killed Morley and pinned it on Wilson.

Coyne opened a bottle of Di Giorgio and went out onto the veranda. He heard a loud crack – the forest was dry, a large branch from a blue gum snapped and crashed. It wasn’t even August and temperatures had already broken records. Emissions were clouding the sky, fumes drifted from the city to the bush – the wheels of industry turned and churned like there was no tomorrow. How long would Warburton exist as a bush retreat? The suburban fringe edged further and further, fanning out from an already overcrowded city. Coyne went inside, sat on the cloth-covered armchair and looked down at the floor and he saw the headline:

![Image](YachtExplosion.jpg)

**YACHT EXPLODES – FRANK LESTER DEAD.**
Lester’s death didn’t make a lot of sense – an accident seemed plausible. It was the
timing that seemed wrong: how old was the boat? He opened the laptop and Googled –
Frank Lester: Lester Constructions, Lester and the City Connect Project, Lester’s new
ac quisition a luxury motor yacht: The Centurion.

He rang Marla. ‘I’ve found Marcus Agrippa.’

Marla had just sat down in one of those Chinese massage shops. The guy was
working on her shoulder as she spoke. ‘Agrippa? Centurion?’

‘Frank Lester’s yacht was called The Centurion. He paid Katherine. Can you get
me CCTV footage of the Docklands marina – the night before the explosion?’

Marla winced as the masseur hit a sore spot. ‘I’ll see what I can come up with.’

The following morning Coyne got onto the Lilydale bypass, connected to the M3 and
found himself stuck in traffic. Cars as far as the eye could see. He inched his way
through the Mullum Mullum then a slow run up to Hoddle – gridlock. It took two hours
to get to the Police Media Centre.

Marla was about to call when Coyne arrived. She was very hush, hush – it wasn’t her
job description to investigate crimes, but to dish out press releases that made the police
department look good. She was surprised to see Coyne. ‘I haven’t had time to look at
it,’ she said as she handed him a USB stick, ‘Forty eight hours up to the bang.’

Coyne met Harry at Northside. ‘I might have something.’ Coyne shoved the USB stick
into the computer and brought up black and white grained footage of the marina. Harry
looked perplexed. ‘What are we looking at?’

‘Lester’s yacht was called The Centurion. Belle and Frank Lester were behind
Morley’s death.’

Coyne ran the footage in fast forward mode.

Harry said, ‘Lester’s death was an accident.’

Coyne slowed the footage down. ‘Look, there.’

The footage showed a figure walking along the marina. Coyne enlarged the
figure and saw Belle step onto Lester’s yacht. ‘It wasn’t a faulty fuel line – Belle Pieters
killed Lester.’
Belle took the fast lane to Ravenhall, the Dame Phyllis Frost centre – 10 years for the manslaughter of Frank Lester. With only a week before the election Glenn and McAlpin were relieved that Belle was out of the way. A week was enough time to forget – at least that’s what the pollies hoped. The major networks televised the election night. Richard Glenn holed up at the Wentworth, Allen Harcourt hung out at his campaign office, McAlpin and Tindal appeared on Point of View with Jacinta Malcolm. The tally boded well for Glenn in the first few hours: Chisholm, Deakin, Aston and Bruce were secure; McAlpin lost the seat of Corio by a whopping 8 per cent; Harcourt cleaned up in Casey; Tindal came close in Batman. By 9.00 pm the government had been drubbed. The fallout from the government’s dogged push with the City Connect and the criminal aura surrounding Frank Lester and Belle Pieters had forced them into a political wasteland. The people had spoken while the media had held the government accountable for their actions: wasted money, corruption, incompetence, perfidy and self-interest. Allen Harcourt was elected Premier with a commitment to cancel the City Connect, invest in public transport and deliver more jobs.

EIGHT MONTHS LATER
Readings bookstore proudly displayed posters of their latest launch: A Road to Kill: The Murder of Gary Morley by Chris Coyne. Harry was all smiles – good for business. Marla, Jean even Detectives Baily and Garver attended. Coyne cleared his throat and said, ‘I want to dedicate this book to the loves of my life, Talia and our beautiful son William.’ He opened the novel and read:

‘Melbourne was a city of high-rise buildings; hipster cafes, inner city apartments surrounded by an increasing sprawl of brick veneer dreams. More people, more
infrastructure for one of the most liveable cities in the world. Developers were awash with money and money talked. The politicians listened and businessmen rubbed their sweaty palms in anticipation of the next deal…’

THE END
PART 3
REFLECTION
CHAPTER 4
WRITING THE SCREEN NOVEL

In this final chapter, I discuss the process of writing the screen novel based on the epistemological preliminaries and community of practice outlined in Part 1. As such, I provide an explication of the creative work through a reflection on the process and the actuality of writing the screen novel. This is followed by a comparison with the ‘show bible’ from the critically acclaimed television (TV) series *The Wire* (2002–2008) and so situate the screen novel in relation to traditionally required industry documents, thus highlighting how this research might function in a practical and relevant way. It should be emphasised that the screen novel is primarily a tool to assist the writer in developing a screen idea – one that could also find a general readership – and as an artefact provides a basis for the imagined screen work. I suggest the traditional industry development process is useful if we view the screenplay as a production document, but it can also have a clinical and obfuscating effect on the writer when attempting to navigate the creative confusion that is inevitable when developing a screen idea. For example, Parker notes that ‘screenwriting is the most industrialised form of dramatic writing we have yet invented’ (2006, p. 3). The screen novel is aimed at developing the story, not the industrial blueprint of the story. By ‘industrial’, Parker is referring not only to the accepted screenwriting formats that are requirements for industry but also to the logistics of production such as the cast size, stunts and the number of interior and exterior locations. These logistics are usually linked to budgetary concerns and, according to Parker, although mundane are important to the outcome of the dramatic work.

As stated, in an industry context the screenplay is commonly seen as a planning document that can be read by a range of industry people (see Maras 2009; Price 2010). The screen novel aims to approach the industrialisation of the screen idea from a different angle by placing the focus on the creative and authored elements such as story, character and theme while also acknowledging the requirements of industry and the eventual logistical parameters that influence industry practice. This is not to suggest that the screenplay is anathema to a creative document; rather, an acknowledgement that the screenplay has a technical imperative that requires specific attention to industry
guidelines in the way that it is written and presented. The screen novel thus attempts to bridge craft and creative expression in the development of a screen idea.

**Using techniques and resources available to the fiction writer**

Throughout the creative project I have applied the use of novelistic techniques such as prose with attention to active scene description, flow, narration, dialogue, and interior monologue as well as image to assist in writing the screen idea and create a foundation for industry development. In writing a screen idea for the crime TV drama *Coyne*, I have been confronted with the task of understanding how these novelistic techniques might be deployed for the purpose of creating a screen work. As noted throughout this research, the screen novel investigates the notion of the screenplay as both an object on the page and an object on the screen, and asks how prose might be used to create a text that serves both. For example, in the opening scene of *Coyne*, active scene description and the concept of ‘flow’ are used to embed concrete images and possible camera shots that assist the reader in visualising the story. This approach differs from the traditional screenplay as a prose rendition of the screen idea is intended to explore and expand on the story world, whereas industry paradigms encourage brevity and economy in the way an idea is written and presented (Corley and Megel 2014). Conversely, the screen novel differs from the ‘traditional’ novel in that the screen novelist is required to write with a screen work in mind and therefore deploy a visual language and a sense of how the ideas presented might manifest on the screen.

Buckham outlines the use of active setting to reveal ‘geography, climate, social context, time of the story’s events, foreshadowing of unfolding events, [and] architecture’ (2015, p. 1). In response, the opening scene of *Coyne* contains several of Buckham’s story elements such as time of the story’s events, exterior and interior location, lighting and stunt requirements while suggesting how the director and actor might consider the performance of the scene. The opening scene is an example of how a prose sequence can offer a range of information depending on the needs of the particular reader and their expectations (e.g., a producer, director, actor or general reader). In the following text specific outcomes that are the result of using active scene description have been italicised to highlight how detail and flow can guide the reader experience to imagine the scene as it unfolds.
The Little River Road cut across the Werribee plain just below the volcanic ridges of the You Yangs (wide shot provides geographical information). As the sun disappeared behind Flinders Peak (gives a sense of the time of day) the high beam of a Ford pick-up shone on the car in front, highlighting the bumper sticker ‘More Mobility – More Freedom’ (suggests the political tone of the story and social context). Morley looked into the rear-view mirror (identifies the main character in the scene and suggests a CU) ... the Ford accelerated and rammed the car (the car is established as an impersonal threat and references the title A Road to Kill), causing it to skid across the white line and broadside into the gravel apron (stunt driving and the use of the word ‘gravel’ suggests a change in audio and vision). Morley spun the steering wheel left, right, left as sweat ran down his face and pooled around his neck (CU and sense of danger and heightened dramatic effect). PANIC – his bulging eyes and shallow breathing a dead giveaway (show of emotion in CU). The Ford rammed a second time and Morley’s car catapulted forward. He stabbed the brakes – the car flipped on its side and slid into the scrub, metal screeching and sparks flying (stunt driving and action). The pick-up stopped – stillness, except for the ominous idling of the engine (change of pace). Morley opened the door and his short, full frame fell onto the ground (reveal character physicality). He got to his feet – blinded by the headlights, doubled over with blood running from his temple, he limped to the side of the road. The engine growled, low at first then HIGHER and HIGHER (repetition to build suspense). In a desperate attempt to escape, Morley climbed the fence but his trouser leg snared in the wire (emotional state). Gears crunched, brakes released and the pick-up rolled Morley in barbed wire and dust. In a final statement the truck reversed, tyres inked in blood, revealing the body – LACERATED, MANGLED, DEAD (foreshadowing).

(Coyne, p. 74)

Here, I have shifted from the industry mode of writing a screenplay in the present tense and written the story in third-person past tense. By writing technical information within a prose form, I aim to guide the reader to interpret and imagine the screen work via a close reading of the text as when reading a novel, thus making the form of the screen novel a workable crossover between screenplay language and novelistic writing.

Based on a Hollywood industry model (Trottier 2002; Riley 2009), I would not have written this opening scene as demonstrated. Upon reflection I would most likely have presented it as a montage, separated into shorter beats/lines/paragraphs, and it is difficult to assess whether the scene would have been written using similar images. The above extract demonstrates how the act of writing in a prose style can change the way a screenwriter might approach a scene. From an industry point of view I would have
adhered to screenplay format and written the scene description using economy and speed to capture the action. Furthermore, I believe a prose rendition of the scene reflects my authorial voice more than a screenplay style because my focus was to enliven the action through the text as opposed to simply writing a descriptive account of the action. Using prose also alerted me to the potential of writing a complete sequence in a visual style. A traditional industry approach to writing the opening scene might be to *action stack* the scene: ‘stacking short sentences that describe action’ (Trottier 2002, p. 71). Riley (2009) also supports the industry model of writing lean, economic action sequences. The screen novel is more about the exploration of ideas and anticipates a distillation of those ideas at a later stage of development.

As a practitioner I have found that screenplay writing can be fractured and foster moments or segments rather than more complex sequences. This is an interesting observation in relation to my own practice because the neutrality and efficiency that is often required in screenplay language was not present when writing the opening scene. I found the focus was on the page as opposed to my mind jumping forward to how it might be viewed on a screen. When approaching a screen idea from a conventional point of view, I tend to think of the camera as telling the story (as discussed in Ingelstrom’s notion of the ‘we formulation’ 2014, p. 40). Writing the screen novel focused my ideas onto the page and enhanced my sense of narrating the story and this has been a significant shift for me. The following section thus considers the narrative voice in the screen novel in relation to the multiple voices used in the screenplay as noted by Ingelstrom.

**Using the past tense**
When writing in a screenplay style, and by this I mean in traditional 12-point courier font with a slugline and centred dialogue, the screenwriter is encouraged to adhere to the industry protocol of writing in the present tense. To demonstrate the significant shift from the present tense to past tense in writing the screen novel, the following examples from *Coyne* compare a similar scene written in both tenses in order to highlight the differences in style and voice. The first example is written in traditional present tense screenplay style.
EXT. BACKYARD – DAY.
BLUE SKY
SFX DOG IN DISTRESS
The brindle Staffy is chained to the clothesline and wraps the chain around its neck. It squeals and yelps and gasps for breath, its tongue drips with saliva.

INT. BEDROOM – DAY.
Katherine pulls the pillow over her head to muffle the sound.

FLASHBACK – EXT. RAVENSWOOD – NIGHT.
Nick brings his hands to Katherine’s throat. She gags and chokes.

INT. BEDROOM – DAY.
Katherine holds the pillow over her head.

This sequence in screenplay format is broken into scenes, which I suggest disrupts the ease of reading at story stage. The slugline informs the reader of the location and time of day and speaks to the production needs of the work. I suggest that the word ‘flashback’ can take the reader out of the action by having to reframe the shift in time then the reader must reconnect the past event to Katherine’s present state of mind. There is a shift from the present tense to the flashback. The introduction of Katherine’s memory through flashback seems to go against the immediacy of the present tense.

Writing the scene in screenplay format is useful in identifying how the narrative voice impacts on the story. As I wrote the screen novel, I was hesitant about using production language such as flashback but nonetheless did use this word initially as a quick and economical way of recognising the shift in time. I thought using targeted screenplay language might reflect the dual nature of the screen novel. However, I have become more alert to the impact of production language and as noted can see how it might draw the reader away from the story. I revised the screen novel to omit language that brought the reader’s attention to the intended screen work. This did require rewriting the text to ‘integrate’ screenplay directives as demonstrated in the following text.
Another perfect day in WA. The serenity of the wide blue sky was interrupted by what sounded like a dog being choked to death. The brindle Staffy was chained to the clothesline and had wrapped itself around the pole, it squealed and yelped and gasped for breath, its tongue dripped with salvia. The sound triggered her memory of Nick with his hands around her throat. Katherine pulled the pillow over her head to muffle the sound and stop the memory.

(Coyne, p. 182)

The above text highlights this shift away from deploying the slugline ‘EXT. BACKYARD – DAY BLUE SKY’ to ‘Another perfect day in WA.’ The use of the word ‘flashback’ is omitted using third-person, past tense and the shift in time flows from Katherine burying her head under the pillow to the narrator guiding the reader to the fact that the sound of the dog yelping triggers her memory of Nick trying to strangle her. The role of the narrator in the above scene provides the storytelling tone that I am trying to evoke in the screen novel. In the example, the narrator moves between present tense and past tense with flexibility yet retains the sense of immediacy that the present tense affords. As highlighted the third-person, past tense also reflects the authorial voice that I wanted to capture in the screen novel. Using indirect speech, the narrator engages the reader with a third-person voice but with a first-person point of view, which I will discuss in more detail later in this chapter.

As the sequence continues, it is important that the reader is inside Katherine’s head. Katherine’s character is developed by her memory of Nick trying to strangle her. The past tense echoes earlier events in the story of which the reader is aware and consequently the character of Katherine evolves with a history. As the scene progresses, Katherine’s husband Geoff investigates the sound – he climbs over the fence and is cornered by the dog and he calls for help. The following text shows how prose writing can build on the character of Katherine by using pace to understand her point of view.

Katherine ran to the backyard. She climbed the fence, picked up the garden spade; imagining Nick she hit the dog across the head. It yelped and dropped on its belly. Geoff took the moment to escape. Katherine raised the spade over the dog, about to sever its head.

Geoff said, ‘No. Leave it.’
She looked at him with a blank stare.
‘Leave it. I’m okay.’

(Coyne, p. 182)
Katherine sees the dog as the embodiment of Nick and has no qualms about ending its life. She is drawn back to reality when Geoff tells her he is okay. In the beginning of this sequence, the yelping of the dog reminds Katherine of Nick’s hands around her throat. As she helps Geoff she moves deeper into a state of paranoia and she now raises the spade over the dog’s head. The narrator guides the reader using third-person, past tense and moves between thought and action in a continuous flow, which provides a more detailed account of the character than a screenplay might afford.

Because film is always in the present tense, the screenplay demands the present tense be used. As screenwriting describes exactly what is happening at any given moment, it adheres to the formula ‘What do I see (or hear) onscreen’ (McKee 1999, p. 396), which is logical if the screenplay is viewed as a technical document for the intended screen work. In contrast, the screen novel is a development text and in this context, freedom of expression and the flexibility to explore character, time, mood and pace offers an alternative creative expression to the traditional screenplay. As can be seen, the difference between the tense used in the screenplay and the screen novel is significant; continuing this thought on the relationship between the screenplay and the screen novel, the following section considers the screen novel format and the look on page.

The look on the page: screenplay format and the screen novel
The screen novel is intended to step away from the mere functionality of the screenplay, and instead aims the focus on the text at hand. By shifting our attention from format to poetic line, (Polonsky 1962) perhaps the reading experience can be immersive in ways that the screenplay is not. For example rhythm, syntax and cadence can be deployed through a less mechanical approach to writing the screenplay. Price notes that screenplay format ‘constantly reminds the reader of the industrial process that is its raison d’être (2010, p. 113). He continues his position by claiming that the screenplay format is not necessarily an alienating experience for the reader. This is a moot point, and I put forward that screenplay format signposts its industrial construct, and has the potential to distance not only the writer but also the reader from the story. The screen novel aims to speak to both the industry and a general reader, and for this purpose I have consciously omitted industry format in the screen novel. For example, I use Times New Roman font in the style of the novel. This is relevant in that screenplay font has a
long history of being written in the style of the American typewriter font courier 12-point (Millard 2010). It should also be noted that the screen novel utilises aspects of screenplay format by using the traditional model of the master scene screenplay, which differs from a shot based/numbered screenplay. According to Price, ‘In master scene format the writer omits shot numbers and instead breaks the story into individual scenes, each commencing with a ‘slugline’ giving indications of time and place’ (2010, p. 70). Similarly the screen novel breaks the story into scenes but differs in that it does not use sluglines but rather the idea of scenic moments so that the transition into screenplay format is possible. Therefore, a single space is used between dramatic moments whether they are a shift in time or place or narrative development and the scenes are written in a way that a change is evident.

The following text from *Coyne* highlights how changing the look on the page can change the way it is written.

Coyne met Marla at Carwyns. She had her head down looking at a screen, reading a news article.

Marla raised her eyes and said, ‘Glad I’m not a journalist.’ *She didn’t know the half of it*, Coyne thought. Still furious at Harry’s involvement with Belle Pieters, he was keen to see the bottom of a vodka slammer. He slumped forward, ran both hands over his face and brought them back to the table with a dull thump.

(*Coyne*, p. 149)

In this example the scene description includes Chris’s thoughts, which might be made visible through a close-up or the action of Chris slumping forward or simply left as an ambiguous moment. This perhaps indicates how the screen novel can function as a

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hybrid text. I want the reader to experience the story as both novel and screenplay in order to create an immersive text rather than an industry document. The point to note here is that writing in a novel style affected the way the scene was written and this also impacts on the way the scene is read. For example when Chris arrives at Carwyns, Marla greets him by saying she is glad she is not a journalist. Rather than format this exchange in screenplay style I used the novel format to write their exchange with the intention of creating a sense of flow and exploring Polonsky’s notion of a unified verbal structure. To write this scene in screenplay style the dialogue would be formatted according to industry standard as in the following example.

SCENE. INT. CARWYN’S BAR – NIGHT.

Marla is sitting at a table and she is looking down at a screen, reading a news article.

SURVEY SHOWS JOURNALISTS AND POLITICANS LEAST TRUSTED.

Chris arrives. Marla raises her eyes.

MARLA
Glad I’m not a journalist.

Chris nods in agreement, sits down, slumps forward, runs both hands over his face then brings them back to the table with a dull thump.

In this example the text is given in present tense according to screenplay standards. I removed text that did not cover ‘what we see and what we hear’. Conversely the text in the former prose style allows me to write with a larger palette of tools. For instance, Chris’s thoughts reveal extra information: his own views on the media, his need to have a drink, his agitation and frustration with Harry and Harry’s involvement with Belle. This is important because the prose text offers the screenwriter the freedom to express character ‘point of view’ (POV) in terms of feelings and thoughts as well as developing the authorial voice through the narrator’s close proximity to the story and characters. The screen novel employs a prose approach to continue the flow of the text and explore the scene in ways that otherwise would need to be explicated on screen through voiceover or expositional dialogue.
In the following excerpt from *Coyne*, the novelistic technique of interior monologue is used to highlight how the screen novel can easily move between thought and action. Thus we read the interior world of Chris and as a screen work we see Chris’s thoughts played out in flashback.

People mingled – flamingos on a lake but Coyne couldn’t think of anything but the image of the mystery girl grabbing Morley’s hand. His thought was broken by the unctuous manner and voice of Tony Natali.

*(Coyne, p. 81)*

This is an example of implying a camera shot using a prose style and continuing the pace of the narrative. Using active scene description can act as a prompt for the reader to imagine what Coyne is thinking – for example, *Coyne couldn’t think of anything but the image of the mystery girl grabbing Morley’s hand*. In this instance Coyne’s thoughts are clear to the reader – *he can’t think of anything but the image of the mystery girl grabbing Morley’s hand*. The use of the word FLASHBACK is not necessary.

The use of the screenplay format can provide an efficient form of communicating the necessary production needs of the script. There are various codes and words that allow the reader to see the narrative unfold and to picture the work on a screen, formatting elements such as; the slugline with interior/exterior information, time of day, scene numbers, and technical terms for transition, dissolve and V/O (see Final Draft, Celtx software) provide a quick and economical representation of the imagined screen work. Yet it is for this very reason that the screen novel offers an extended approach to developing a screen idea so that mood and tone are fully explored and presented in a story form rather than a screenplay form. The following text is an example of a DREAM SEQUENCE as it relates to the traditional screenplay layout.

**INT. COYNE’S APARTMENT – NIGHT.**

Coyne managed a few hours sleep – a mozzie tormented him throughout the night. He tossed and twisted and held the pillow over his head to stop the buzz and the bites – he fell asleep around dawn and it was then that the past came flooding back.

**DREAM SEQUENCE – EXT. MILLER STREET – NIGHT.**
Talia is wearing a purple sateen dress with a gold trim neckline. She is a little drunk and unsteady on her feet. ‘William, help your mother.’ She stretches her hand towards Will and they cross Miller Street. Coyne stops to tie his shoelace. He looks to see a motorcycle pull up beside them and the rider fire four shots – they drop to the ground like rag dolls.

END DREAM SEQUENCE.

INT. COYNE’S APARTMENT – DAY.

A Wattlebird SQUAWKS.

Coyne reluctantly opens his eyes and looks at the AMJA award sitting on the bedside table.

In the above sequence I have written DREAM SEQUENCE as Coyne tries to sleep. I suggest this positions the text as a technical directive aligning the sequence with a screen sensibility. I have also broken the sequence into INT and EXT scenes in keeping with traditional screenplay formatting style. The following text demonstrates a combination of the set-up and dream in a prose style of writing.

Coyne managed a few hours sleep – a mozzie tormented him throughout the night. He tossed and twisted and held the pillow over his head to stop the buzz and the bites – he fell asleep around dawn and it was then that the past came flooding back.

Talia is wearing a purple sateen dress with a gold trim neckline. She is a little drunk and unsteady on her feet. ‘William, help your mother.’ She stretches her hand towards Will and they cross Miller Street. Coyne stops to tie his shoelace. He looks to see a motorcycle pull up beside them and the rider fire four shots – they drop to the ground like rag dolls.

***

A Wattlebird squawked and Coyne reluctantly opened his eyes. The first thing he saw was the AMJA award sitting on the bedside table.

(Coyne, p. 84)

28 For an industry approach to formatting a dream sequence see Dr. Format Answers Your Questions (David Trottier 2002, p. 75).
The above dream is written in the present tense and italics have been used to denote the shift in time and place. Throughout the screen novel present tense is used for Coyne’s inner monologues regarding the murder of his partner, Talia and son, Will as I wanted to create a sense of Coyne’s POV. Present tense also marks a point of difference from the narrator-driven past tense storytelling voice that is deployed throughout the screen novel and delineates Coyne’s personal story strand from the main political story strand.

By writing ‘he fell asleep’ to introduce the dream and closing the sequence by the words ‘A wattlebird squawked and Coyne reluctantly opened his eyes’, it is clear how the dream begins and ends. Although both of the above examples state the action, I argue the first example with the technical directives of the screenplay has the potential to interrupt the story for both writer and reader.

The two examples reflect Coyne’s thoughts, so what is at stake here is the design aspect of the work and how the design might change the way a writer and reader would engage with the text. In the above examples I favour the approach that is without technical information, because we know it is night – ‘he fell asleep around dawn and it was then that the past came flooding back’. Coyne falls asleep and the dream sequence unfolds. Furthermore, the typographical device of the ‘dinkus’ is used to identify a shift in time and place. In this instance there is no need to write technical details as in a screenplay format because they can be made evident within the story. I suggest a conscious approach to format and the look on the page is pivotal to writing the screen novel as the textual mix of poetic and technical writing shifts the reader’s attention between a production document and a story document.

However, I did find the screenplay format useful when I needed to identify a shift in time or place. In these cases I modified the screenplay slugline and wrote time and location details as in the following example.

**LITTLE RIVER TEN MONTHS EARLIER**

(Coyne, p. 183)

By using the idea of the screenplay slugline I was able to reposition the narrative as a flashback without having to use the word Flashback or any of the abbreviations such as INT. EXT. DAY/NIGHT. In this way the flashback is part of the narrative as opposed to the slugline, which stands outside of the narrative as in Ingelstrom’s notion of the extrafictional voice.
Furthermore, flashback scenes also use the present tense to suggest a closer character point of view than the narrator’s voice. This can be seen when Coyne has memories of his troubled past.

Darkness – intermittent flashes of light bounced off the wall. Coyne stretched out on the couch and stared at the ceiling.

_Talia kneels next to Coyne and gently strokes his forehead. She says, ‘I was thinking we should go to that restaurant, you know the Japanese Teriyaki place near the plaza. It’d be nice to try something new.’_

_(Coyne, p. 112)_

There are occasions in the screen novel where screenplay format is deployed to highlight a ‘second screen’ scene as an acknowledgement of the story being told in a diegetic way. For example in the following scene Harry is watching Coyne on the TV show _Point of View_. The character names are capitalised and the dialogue is centred on the page according to industry screenplay standard except the font – Times New Roman is retained as opposed to screenplay Courier font for the purpose of continuity within the screen novel.

JACINTA

Welcome to _Point of View_. On tonight’s program we discuss the politics of power as the Premier, Richard Glenn, pushes for the City Connect development against a backdrop of public protest and party politics. Chris Coyne, your story on the former Minister for Infrastructure Gary Morley exposed a dark background to the City Connect.

COYNE

My involvement began when Northside Media covered the Morley murder. We interviewed several key players and our investigations assisted police in charging Dale Wilson for the murder of Gary Morley – political assassination is dark.

JACINTA

With the upcoming election, the Greens are asking for the City Connect contract to be torn up. The Labor Party says they are investigating the legality of the letter of comfort. What do you think, Danielle?
DANIELLE

The compensation would be huge, but yes it would be possible. The area of sovereign risk is grey. But in short, to pull a contract worth so much would send a very strong signal that we’re not a reliable State to invest in.

(Coyne, p. 127)

In summary I maintain that the format of the traditional industry script is heavily weighted towards the look on the page. There is an acknowledged requirement to align a script with standardised screenplay format predominantly because the script is viewed as a production document, and the look on the page reflects a professional script that a range of industry professionals can work from as noted in the following text by Christopher Riley:

Overworked readers, studio executives, agents, and producers pick up a script, flip to the last page and fan toward the front, looking at nothing but the physical layout of the script on the page. The format. What they see forms their first impression of your dream script.

(Riley 2009, pp. xx–xxi)

There is a need to standardise the script as a production text, however from a creative writing perspective I contend that adhering to industry format in the early stages of development is unnecessary and as demonstrated the format and look on the page can influence the way a scene is written. For this reason the screen novel is positioned as a blank canvass, in a similar way to a treatment or scriptment, for the writer to explore a screen idea before it transitions into industry format. In this context image might also be deployed to explore and develop the writer’s intentions, which I discuss in detail in the following section.

Employing image in the screen novel

The images at the beginning of each episode of Coyne are deployed in tandem with the title to reflect the thematic concerns of each episode. I have also utilised images of Melbourne as a symbolic representation of a contemporary city and the exponential growth of a first-world metropolis in order to provide a sense of realism and photographs of the actual East West Link protest rally are used to support the political tone of the story. This was pursued because I wanted to use image in a way that might
assist the writer in developing the story and add to the narrative in an evocative manner, as opposed to text only.

When writing the screen novel I discovered that the use of image has a dual function in relation to (a) production, that is, location, props and set design and (b) the role of image as a visual story element. In relation to how image and text might assist in defining the dramatic world of the story I captured images of locations around Melbourne, the primary setting for the story. My intention in using image was to provide information that a director or producer might use to assess the dramatic world that the story inhabits. The following images of Docklands and Parliament House are examples of the image not contributing to the narrative but rather the production, as in location shots.

Figure 1 Docklands

Figure 2 Parliament House Melbourne
In Figures 1 and 2, the images did not move the story forward but they did offer a sense of place, particularly for anyone not familiar with Melbourne. In the above images I wanted to contrast the new developments at Docklands with the old world architecture of Parliament House, and thus support the underlying theme of development. Accordingly, how an image might be integrated into the text relies on the specificity of the image and text in question. For example, in Episode Four of *Coyne* I explored image using a section of the Ghost Train signage from Luna Park and focused specifically on the skull with a top hat to create a dark mood as in (Figure 3).

![Horror](image)

**HORROR**

In the above image my intention was to use the Ghost Train sign coupled with the word ‘Horror’ to enhance the mood and tone of the drama. However, in this case the image and correlating scene seemed to compete and did not add to either the narrative or production aspects, and for this reason I omitted the image and text in the final draft of the screen novel.

As highlighted, each situation of combining text and image needs to be assessed on the basis of how the interaction between the two can add to the narrative. In the following example the image functions in a similar manner as being discussed, in that the cityscape alludes to life in a modern city and the road theme again, which is quite prominent in this image.
The image of the road (Figure 4) leading into the city is a visual cue to the dramatic world of the story. The text then expands on the image in more detail.

The city was hot, dry and dusty. The wipers of a car streaked across the windscreens. A pedestrian held a handkerchief over her mouth. Sparrows pecked at an empty drink bottle and Melbourne baked in the longest and hottest summer since records began.

(Coyne, p. 75)

In the above scene description, the title sequence could open with an aerial shot of the city featuring freeways, traffic congestion, a pedestrian holding a handkerchief to their mouth, or a sparrow pecking at an empty drink bottle. In considering this text from a directorial point of view, the director may choose to accentuate the windscreen wipers of a car through a close up or the sound as it streaks across the dusty screen. Music might be added to evoke a sense of foreboding. The focus is on the city. Though these ideas are beyond the scope of the writer’s role, it is evident that image in the screen novel can suggest the mood and tone of a scene, and coupled with the relevant text might assist both reader and writer in the visualisation of the story. The images presented in the prose text act as a trigger for other creative agents to expand upon. In this instance a director is afforded their expertise in realising the scene through camera shot, lighting, music, framing and editing, as suggested by the writer.

The screen novel offers the writer the opportunity to embed screen elements within the prose text in order to evoke and imply a particular and intended mood and tone. These details might be formalised during the collaborative/execution stage of the screen production. As discussed the black and white low resolution suggests the noir
mood and tone of the drama. The image of the cityscape functions as a prompt for the reader, and as a visual cue the image is simply a beginning, the text then elaborates through active scene description. I found this image (Figure 4) a powerful reference point for the story as it grounded the location and supported the idea that the city was a character within the narrative.

![Figure 5 Cover of Coyne](image)

I subsequently used the image (Figure 5) above as the basis for the front cover of the screen novel and inserted a profile of protagonist Chris Coyne as a silhouette standing on the outskirts of town, suggesting a dark mood and tone. As the image evolved to be the basis for the cover of the screen novel I used high-contrast colour in a neo-noir tradition to enhance the dramatic effect.

A variation on the integration of image and text can be found in the example below (Figure 6). The map of Australia tracks Katherine’s journey. The map is a common image used in novels. It is a useful device in locating the dramatic world and gives the reader a sense of place.
This image acts as a summary of Katherine’s geographical journey and is intended to enhance the reader’s understanding of the distance she has endured to escape Nick. In terms of a produced work, this image would most likely not be included in the completed screen work. This is where the literary work differs from the traditional screenplay because Katherine’s journey might be realised on screen through a montage or specific moments during her travel.

In a similar way the use of the news headline as a graphic can be used to further the narrative and reinforce the story world. News headlines are presented in the form of a torn newspaper as well as screen-based platforms. I highlight the torn newspaper (Figure 7) because it is a visual trope referring to the journalistic world in which the story takes place.
The graphic of the torn newspaper with headline provides not only narrative information but also underlines the dramatic world of journalism that the protagonist Chris Coyne occupies. In Figure 7, the graphic echoes the public’s feelings about the Australian Media and Journalism Awards (AMJA) and cynicism for the event. Here, Coyne reflects the ‘existential anguish and despair’ of classic noir characters in their status as outside of normative social values (Silver 2006, p. 223). Coyne is committed to quality investigative journalism and Figure 7 highlights the mood and tone of public perception. The news graphic is used as a vehicle for the narrator’s voice and in the case of the image above the headline is an expository device as well as a way of commenting on Coyne’s psychological reality. Here, the narrator and Coyne share a close proximity because the concept of this story is that Coyne is in fact the narrator and Figure 7 reflects Coyne’s understanding of the negative perception of journalism. The key point I wish to make here is that the choice of image and text is from Coyne’s point of view. This is important in understanding the thematic line of the narrative because the story exists in terms of Coyne's worldview and his axiological position is made clear by the choices he makes in writing the ‘novel’ A Road to Kill. To continue this line of thought, I will now expand on how the interaction of image and word might assist the writer/reader to discover and understand theme.

Using image and text to explore theme

Parker claims theme, ‘underpins what the screenplay delivers in terms of human experience’ (2006, p. 76). I did not approach Coyne with a specific theme in mind but rather a general sense of a story to be told. As I wrote the screen novel I approached theme retrospectively by developing the plot first and through revision I uncovered themes and counter-themes that helped to strengthen the story and make all of its elements – plot, character, mood and tone – cohere into a single concern. Through the dynamic interaction of image and text the theme might be revealed in ways that are not usually utilised by the screenwriter.

In writing Coyne, using image as a visual metaphor allowed me to explore theme in a way that the text alone did not. It offered me a way to look for meaning through the relationship between text and image. By combining text and image, specifically the title of each episode and accompanying image, I found a framework with which to consider: what is this episode really about? I discovered that by
combining text and image, a new thought emerged either through contradiction, irony, obscurity, evocation or provocation – for me, this process was about igniting the imagination and as highlighted at the start of this chapter, reinforced the role of the screen novel in developing story, character and theme for an original screen idea. This highlights the importance of valuing the screen novel as a text that helps story development, not to merely represent an idea that others use for their development.

Using Gillian Rose’s (2012) three points to visual interpretation – technological, compositional and social – I used image to reflect the dramatic world, genre and theme within the work. In developing, Coyne the CDQ (central dramatic question)\(^{29}\) revolves around the protagonist Chris Coyne and his journey of finding the truth about the murder of politician Gary Morley. The CTQ (central thematic question) emerged as I distilled each episode through creating an image that reflected what I thought the episode was really about. This is the creative process of finding and discovering the story elements that exist within the work, or as Gibson (2010) notes, the implicit and explicit knowledge within practice-led research, posing the question: what does the work know?

Before I discuss Coyne as it relates to theme, I will recap the premise and overview to place in context the thematic aspects of the series. As a starting point I used the East West Link development in Melbourne to frame my story. In real life, the political climate surrounding this development generated cries of corruption and self-interest. It polarised the community and raised the ire of environmentalists and the Left. I extended the actual event by creating fictional characters in a dramatic narrative reflecting the media and community views on the subject. This process led me to plot a story of political corruption setting the framework to excavate and explore theme. Understanding theme as it relates to the emotional arc of the show has been important in identifying not only the theme of the overall series but also the thematic line through each individual episode. Using images as symbols to represent theme has been helpful in unearthing both the emotional and thematic subtext. In the following examples I have collocated the episode title and image as they relate to Coyne’s physical and emotional journey and so explore the theme of corruption. The theme is suggested by the interaction of text and image, although this is more likely to be of use for the writer

\(^{29}\) According to Batty ‘The CDQ is what drives the plot and the CTQ is what drives the emotion’ (2012, p. 125).
rather than the reader. Here, I mean there is an opportunity to create meaning, irony, suspense and tension with the intention of deepening the writer’s understanding of the text. Continuing the exploration of theme in the series, I realise the idea of corruption plays out over the six episodes as Coyne attempts to discover who killed Gary Morley. Over the series, I have attempted to present corruption on both a political level and personal level. For example, when the government lies to the electorate about the development of the Corio Bay Container Port. Their agenda is to continue with the City Connect and the Hastings Container Port. In the personal storyline, Coyne’s editor Harry Breen lies to Coyne and manipulates him from the outset by feeding him questionable information about Dale Wilson. This is a world of self-interest, deceit and greed and these themes are evident in the political, criminal and personal storylines, which allows me to explore the theme through a range of characters and situations. For example, the criminal storyline uses the themes of greed and corruption. In Episode Three, Katherine’s friend Ashleigh steals Katherine’s stash at the VIP club and tells Nick of her whereabouts. The theme of greed is a prime motivator for Ashleigh’s actions and the act of deception functions as a method to achieve her goal. In essence the series is structured around theme and the use of image to understand theme is an important aspect of the screen novel.

Using image and text the screen novel can manifest theme, mood and tone and thus give agency to the authorial voice as the work moves through its development stages. In relation to how the screen novel might be utilised by industry, I envisage a producer or director’s understanding of the CTQ, of not only the series, but also each episode could be enhanced and potentially acted upon through the collocation of image and text. Consequently, I have found the process of exploring theme through image extends the way an image might be used in the screen novel (as opposed to exposition or narrative development) as discussed above. From the writer’s point of view, exploring image in this manner has generated thought in unexpected ways and is a valuable tool that the screen novel can offer in not only presenting but also developing a screen idea. The images used for each episode have been deliberately obscure; perhaps not enough in some instances, perhaps too much in others. Pinney comments that an image might best be thought of in terms of ‘what it can do’ as opposed to what it is (cited in Rose 2012, p. 11). By presenting fragments of an image, I want to create interest for the reader; how that fragment is interpreted is guided by the title and
informed by the narrative – whether it aligns with the reader expectation is open. Gillian Rose (2012) suggests that the interpretation of an image can be guided by technological, compositional and social factors whereas the words used in each of the titles of Coyne must be read in relation to the images. In these titles I have created images that are ambiguous and I have tried to reflect a similar ambiguity in writing the title of each episode. This approach also relates to TV teasers and hooks, and might be deployed in a title sequence for the imagined episode. The process has been one of negotiating image and text, and these two elements juxtaposed create a new idea that I believe functions as a very interesting and exciting approach to traditional screenwriting practice. In the case of the screen novel, these factors are useful reference points for the writer to consider and explore. This approach has been significant in discovering themes and counter themes with depth and mood, and identifies how the screen novel can function as a productive and useful development tool. The following is a discussion of each episode and how the use of image and text assisted my understanding of the thematic concerns throughout the series.
The car that Morley drives has a bumper sticker denoting *More Mobility – More Freedom*. This is based on the Victorian Government’s marketing strategy for the East West Link project. By bringing together the slogan with the image of a futuristic body of a car, a tension occurs. In this instance using image and text has strengthened my understanding of the content and narrative drive in Episode One. The composition of the image has been modified so the body of the car is the focus and the look purposefully skeletal, indicating a futuristic dystopia. The social context of the image and text might be viewed through the burgeoning congestion of traffic and the politicisation of the car as a symbol for freedom. There is an irony of a car without wheels and the idea of mobility linked with freedom. Here the image reflects the hollow slogan and I wanted this to establish the theme of the series: Coyne versus the system.

In Figure 8, Episode One, I establish information regarding the theme of deception in that the image of a derelict car undermines the slogan. In Figure 9, Episode Two, it is my intention that the text and image allude to political conspiracy.
The heavy wooden door to the prestigious Melbourne Club poses a question when connected to the title: Who or what lies behind the door? ‘The Invisible Hand’ is an economic term invented by Adam Smith (Kennedy 2009), which highlights the role of government and business and suggests the invisible hand of market forces will assure everyone benefits in the long run. This theory is often referred to as ‘trickle-down’ economics and I argue is flawed because it is based on self-interest. As a genre series, Coyne is a political thriller that draws on the continuing debate about social inequality as noted by Demaio (2014) in his article ‘Social Inequality: is the elephant in the room strangling us all?’ Here Demaio makes the point that social and economic inequality in Australia is on the rise and the widening gap between rich and poor is a threat to social cohesion. Coyne draws on the tradition of post World War Two film noir movies in which social issues and bleak urban landscapes were the basis for the themes. Examples include Force of Evil (1948), Call Northside 777 (1948), The Naked City (1948) and The Asphalt Jungle (1950). According to Reid (2008), these types of films presented society as being wholly corrupt, and informed my decisions in writing Coyne as a neo noir-drama in order to highlight the corrosive forces of greed and power and a contemporary society in the grip of economic inequality. Episode Two therefore focuses these themes by specifically linking the political and business connections behind the development of the City Connect. Coyne begins to see cracks in the Morley story,
which advances his journey and his search for the truth. Remembering that the title suggests Coyne’s point of view, the image and text reveal his continuing mistrust of the system and its ability to plot and deceive.

Episode Two highlights the connection between business and politics. For example, Belle Pieters meets with the Minister for Infrastructure, Don McAlpin and the head of Lester constructions, Frank Lester. They meet at the Melbourne Club, a conservative stronghold for the captains of industry. As noted, the image of the door is the entrance to the Melbourne Club. When the three meet, they discuss their plans for development of the City Connect project. The following dialogue from Episode Two takes place in the dining room of the Melbourne Club.

Frank sat back in his chair. ‘I thought this was a meeting to discuss my involvement with the City Connect.’
‘It is, Frank,’ said Belle.
Don topped up his glass. ‘Don’t worry I’ll bring Richard around. A link down to Hastings will generate value capture – infrastructure means development, development means revenue. Leave it with me,’ said Don.

(Coyne, p. 106)

The intention of this episode title and image is to pose the question: What goes on behind closed doors? Rhetorically the question is a reminder that often the things that affect us are the invisible deals done behind closed doors. The dialogue that takes place in the Melbourne Club answers that question. In the context of the drama, deals are made and these deals are driven by self-interest. Furthermore, Don McAlpin raises the enticing concept of ‘value capture’; again an economic imperative that drives their relationship and that relationship leads to deception. By building a road to Hastings, real estate along that road increases in value. The deceit is evident – the public position is that the City Connect will ease congestion. In fact the City Connect will mostly benefit government and business but ultimately not everyone – the invisible hand at work.

Episode Two begins with the meeting at the Melbourne Club. With a stronger understanding of the theme as it relates to business and government, I reviewed the final scene in the episode in relation to earlier events, which allowed me to bookend the dramatic arc of the episode, strengthening the work and, for an industry reader, an acknowledgement of dramatic conventions (see Parker 2006; Yorke 2013).
DON AND FRANK SHOOK HANDS AS CAMERAS CLICKED. DON WAS HANDED A SILVER SPADE AND HE CEREMONIOUSLY PLUNGED IT INTO THE EARTH – MORE PHOTOS. PROTESTORS STOOD IN THE BACKGROUND, YELLING ‘TRAINS NOT TOLLS’. (Coyne, p. 130)

In analysing Episode Two, the scene at the Melbourne Club clarified the relationship between government and business. The scene at the end of this episode concludes with the plunging of the silver spade heralding the success of their collusion. In this way the theme is explored and manifested through plot. Using image and text to condense what had been written allowed me to excavate the thematic line and revisit the narrative with more awareness of how the drama was unfolding.

Episode Three  
Fight or Flight

In Episode Three we find Katherine on the run after Nick tried to throw her down the mineshaft. Katherine hitches a ride to Bendigo and takes refuge in a run down motel. The scene encapsulates her physical and emotional situation – fight or flight. Her decision is to run and, by the end of the episode, Nick has tracked her down and now she must fight. Through negotiating the interaction between image and text, the screen novel has been useful in better understanding the structure of this episode. Episode Three focuses on Katherine, the one person who Coyne identifies as being able to assist him. I used several images and titles in coming to terms with what the CTQ might be in this episode. As the motel scene featured the knife I tried images of a knife blade, but
the knife in itself did not represent the dramatic arc or the theme of the episode. As the episode concludes, Katherine uses a blowtorch on Nick in order to escape. The creative decision to use the image of a blowtorch flame for this episode came about by playing with the composition of the image. The following image (Fig. 11) is the original chef’s blowtorch.

Figure 11 Original gas flame

![Original gas flame](image1)

Figure 12 Modified gas flame

![Modified gas flame](image2)

As can be seen in the figures above, I cropped the main body of the original blowtorch and then distorted the image and added a noise filter to accentuate and blur the flame. By deconstructing the original image, I wanted to create a dark sinister mood with a film noir style. The final image is deliberately obscure but I suggest is evocative of a present danger. As Episode Three is focused on Katherine’s escape from Nick, the idea of fight or flight came to mind. By viewing image and title objectively, these two
elements created a metaphor for the episode and although the image is not clear initially, it is made clear in the narrative when Katherine defends herself with the blowtorch against Nick. I have used the image to create ambiguity and intrigue. The flame has forward motion; the text refers to the danger not far behind. It is this forward motion that informs the emotional arc of Episode Three.

Fight or flight is a reference to both Katherine and Coyne in the sense that both are challenged; in Katherine’s case to survive, while Coyne must ignore or face up to his part in having Wilson jailed. The following scene appears in Episode Three just after Katherine’s brother Michael Cheng has been murdered. Marla and Coyne visit the crime scene. Coyne is confronted by the reality of murder and his involvement in the Wilson story leads him into further danger. He is challenged, echoing the sense of fight or flight.

Coyne gagged from the smoky remains, the odour of melted plastics and synthetic fibre filled the air. He stood and looked at the crime scene – walls scorched by intense heat; ceiling caved in; melted electric jug; carpet black and burnt; windows cracked; the bed a pile soot and ash. Coyne was shaken from his reverie by the sound of a camera going click, click, click and the flash alerting him to the reality of murder.

(Coyne, p. 137)

Coyne’s decision to fight and continue to find the truth about who killed Gary Morley is pivotal in his story arc. Both Katherine and Coyne are dealing with the ramifications of corruption, the main theme of the series. Coyne was set up to do a false story and he nailed Wilson inadvertently; now he is in search of the truth. Katherine deceived Gary Morley and is now a target because of her deception. Fight or flight drives this episode and I came to this realisation through the act of creating a single image with a title to understand and consolidate the story and the focus of the episode.
The Ingmar Bergman film *The Hour of the Wolf* (1968) informed the title and image of Episode Four. In this episode, 3.00 am is the ‘hour of the wolf’ and nightmares abound. Coyne cannot sleep. He slumps onto the couch and takes a swig from a bottle of red, clicks on the TV, and watches Wolfmother sing, *Violence of the Sun*. In writing this opening scene I wanted to make visible both Coyne’s and Wilson’s inner monologue. I therefore needed to create a visual metaphor to reveal their mental activity, so I situated Coyne in his lounge room, drunk and watching TV when Wilson appears on the screen. The image of Dale Wilson as a demonic singer is a visual representation of Coyne’s feeling of guilt. In this episode I wanted to connect both Coyne’s and Wilson’s inner worlds, their dark side. In this context I used image and text explicitly to link Coyne and Wilson’s emotional and psychological world to uncover thematic lines such as guilt and culpability in the case of Coyne and innocence regarding Wilson’s involvement in the murder of Gary Morley. By doing so I developed a greater understanding of these characters’ motivation and plot development more fully.

In the psychological novel, direct interior monologue would demonstrate the character’s thoughts through a first-person account of their mental state. Indirect interior monologue and omniscient description are other forms to reveal an altered state of being (Winston 1973). It is the latter that I deploy in this episode. Through the use of the TV and the notion of 3.00 am as a nightmarish time the struggle of the two characters is revealed. Coyne’s complicity in the jailing of Wilson and the impact this
has on him and Wilson’s claim of innocence underpins this episode. Thus, I suggest this title and image relate to the effect of Morley’s murder on both Coyne and Wilson. Using the title and image to link a point in time where Coyne’s and Wilson’s mental states collide, has consolidated my understanding of the relationship between these two characters not just through plot but also through the emotional and psychological space that they inhabit.

**Episode Five**  
**The Dead Don’t Lie**

![Figure 14 Knotted rope](image)

In Episode Five, Coyne is getting closer to the truth of who killed Gary Morley. Coyne plots the timeline of Morley’s meeting with Wilson and realises there is a 90-minute time difference in the supposed arranged meeting. Katherine also contacts Coyne and the pieces of the puzzle become clear. ‘The Dead Don’t Lie’ is a reference to the fact that Wilson did not kill Morley. In writing this episode I wanted to create empathy for Wilson and Coyne. Structurally this episode resolves the issue of trying to free Wilson and thus propels Coyne into the final episode where Coyne’s search for truth is heightened. Coyne is devastated when he discovers Wilson hanged himself, as can be seen towards the end of Episode Five:
Coyne drove along the Geelong freeway, past the industrial sculptures, textured sound walls and the You Yangs, the scene of Morley’s murder. He was on a high knowing Wilson had a shot at being released. He turned on the radio…

Coyne rolled his shoulders back against the seat, stretched his arms out and pushed against the steering wheel. Since the award night he had a gut feeling something wasn’t right and now he was confident that the truth would out and his debt to Wilson cleared.

On arrival Coyne was informed that Dale Wilson had hanged himself. Coyne went weak at the knees. He stared blankly at the prison officer. ‘Hanged himself? How? When?’ There weren’t any answers that could change what had happened and Coyne fell into a stupor as he returned to the car – the shock turned to anger. He kicked the car door and slammed his fists on the roof. (Coyne, pp. 198–199)

The image of knotted rags is intended to signify Wilson’s suicide. The lack of a frame of reference of the photograph is intended to give the impression that the rags are floating in space. Here, I want to give a sense of motion and, in the case of Wilson, a sense of the fragility of life. Coyne has the brutal realisation that actions can have tragic consequences. There is a shift in the narrative: Wilson is dead, but Coyne still needs to pursue the truth. This pursuit functions as a counter theme and reinforces the controlling idea of corruption. In this episode I wanted to build a sense of story climax. As the penultimate episode the series structure then echoes the show bible by offering the industry reader a sense of the dramatic arc of the series. It is my intention that the title of Episode Five, ‘The Dead Don’t Lie’, might evoke a feeling that Wilson’s death is not the end of the story and hopefully articulates Coyne’s ongoing commitment to discovering the truth of who killed Gary Morley. In this episode I wanted to re-interpret the theme in a different context (see Parker Chapter 5 ‘From Stories to Themes’, 2006). Coyne’s reaction to Wilson’s suicide reinforces the idea of injustice and this emotional event is intended to heighten the drama and Coyne’s resolve. The desire for justice is linked with the theme of corruption and Wilson’s death drives Coyne’s personal resolution to find the truth. Here I am attempting to connect the narrative plot and the thematic concerns of the series.
Episode Six
The Body Politic

Figure 15 Crash Test Dummy

In the final episode of this series, the State election is underway. The title, ‘The Body Politic’ bookends with the title of Episode One, ‘More Mobility – More Freedom’. The use of political language and a crash-test dummy echoes the murder of politician Gary Morley, and highlights the series arc where the emptiness of the Episode One slogan is now under scrutiny by the body politic. The greed of business and government suggested in Episode One has resulted in a final statement where the corruption is exposed.

The intention of using the image of the crash-test dummy with the title ‘The Body Politic’ is to suggest that the electorate has been treated with contempt and a lack of humanity. Although the above image is not traditionally in the style of a crime genre piece I decided to use a reverse/negative as is used in Episode One, to create a sinister mood. Theme in this context is revealed through a stylistic and associational image and I have not adhered to the crime genre style for this reason. I see the image of the crash-test dummy with the text, ‘The Body Politic’ as a metaphor for the corporatisation of the political system. The motif of car/road is strengthened with the crash-test dummy image and the soulless politics of greed. Here is a further example of how text and image might hopefully appeal to the visual aesthetic of a director. The City Connect contract has been signed ahead of the election and now the electorate will cast the deciding vote. The murder of Morley is also alluded to in the title ‘The Body Politic’ and now the political system as a corporate entity has the ability to serve justice.
In this section, I have outlined the use of image and text to communicate the thematic line through each of the six episodes in *Coyne*. From the writer’s point of view I have found the use of image as a visual metaphor to be a useful tool in writing the screen novel. In contrast the reader experience is open to interpretation and I maintain the writer can only imply how an image might be received. The images used at the beginning of each episode are designed to evoke a mood and suggest a thematic development. From a writer’s point of view I have found the use of image in concert with text to be very effective in posing a question and generating a possible solution. By approaching each episode with a key image and juxtaposing it with an appropriate title I have been able to explore narrative development and theme in a way that a traditional screenplay approach might not and also present the result of these explorations in a visual way that amplifies the text. Building on these elements I now turn to character development, a pivotal aspect of the screen novel.

**Developing character**

Lajos Egri discusses character in terms of what he calls ‘The Bone Structure’ (2004, p. 33). He elucidates on this structure by suggesting that character might be vivisected in order to fully understand why a character acts in a particular way. He breaks ‘character’ into three dimensions: physiological, sociological and psychological. Egri’s tri-dimensional paradigm is useful for analysing character because it seeks to answer what makes a character do what they do. When writing character profiles for a traditional screen document I have always found these difficult because they inevitably become a skeletal portrayal of the character, which does not always enable me to connect the character with the narrative.

The idea of formulating a checklist for a character profile is common: Nicholas Corder uses a similar list to Egri in his book *Creating Convincing Characters* (2014). Aronson (2000) discusses character in terms of their role and function, identifying the relationships between individuals, the dominant character, the outsider or the traitor within. Horton (1999) approaches character through their gender, race and ethnicity, voices and character tendencies. Conversely, the screen novel allows the writer to explore the story and then extract scenarios and actions that the character has endured or
experienced and build character from within the narrative. From a screenwriting point of view, this suggests a reverse approach to Corder, Aronson and Horton, favouring instead the development of character through the act of writing.

The screen novel is a creative vehicle that is driven by the journey of discovery, and character is revealed within the structure. It is through writing the screen novel that I have a clear understanding of the physiology, sociology and psychology of the characters and their function, and it is the act of writing that distances the screen novel from traditional screen development documents, which I discuss later in this chapter. It should be noted that many screenwriters do this work as well, however the screen novel sees it as inherent to the form rather than as background development that is not presented except in the form of outlines and plot details.

A problem I have experienced previously is that the profile of a character as built from a character paradigm might not necessarily be evident within the narrative. The screen novel helped me to overcome this problem by writing character using a descriptive style and by isolating the scenes where the character of Coyne is represented through action, which I demonstrate in the section, ‘The screen novel as a source document for industry’. Understanding a character is a deeper and more complex task than simply writing out a list of physical traits. Egri’s tri-dimensional paradigm is useful in separating physiological, sociological and psychological aspects of a character but it seems to me that this profiling is difficult to create without some reference and context. I refer to McKee’s (1999) observation that characterisation is the sum of observable qualities and true character is defined by the choices a character makes. Following this line of thought the screen novel provides a comprehensive account of the characters’ actions and the choices made. When writing Coyne, I deliberately avoided the traditional industry approach to developing character as noted by Corder, Aronson and Horton. For example, I did not have any sense of the age or look of Chris Coyne, in fact his age varied from mid-20s to mid-50s and his demeanour changed from caring to cranky. Chris Coyne evolved out of the story and this is where the screen novel has been advantageous as a method to developing character. To reiterate, writing a traditional screenplay also offers the writer the ability to return to the story and in a similar way to the screen novel construct character from the text. However, in the

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30 For an example of a character paradigm, see Kitty Bucholtz (2011) on the ‘Character Diamond’: ‘The four points of the diamond are for recording a) the flaw that masks the character’s biggest fear, b) the biggest inner fear, c) the biggest need, and d) the plan the character develops to meet their need.’
context of industry summary documents and traditional approaches to character development, my experience has been this is a front-end process (before the story has been written) whereas the screen novel does not prescribe, anticipate or concretise anything, be it character or plot before the process of writing has begun.

**The screen novel as a source document for industry**

In this section, I posit that the screen novel can be written so that summary information might be extracted for the purposes of pitching the screen idea. Using the show bible from *The Wire* as a development template, I demonstrate that the screen novel can be written so that summary information might be obtained for the purposes of pitching the idea. Therefore, this comparison is an exercise in testing the screen novel to assess the viability of writing a self-contained text and a text intended for the imagined screen work. By creating a cover that includes a logline, short synopsis, targeted use of artwork; and by writing scene descriptions in an active descriptive mode using concrete images; and being specific about character description and character action, the screen novel might provide an alternative text to the current pitch document and show bible. To clarify, the following tables outline the comparative differences between traditional industry development documents and the proposed screen novel.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SHOW BIBLE/PITCH DOCUMENTS</th>
<th>SCREEN NOVEL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Genre, premise and theme</td>
<td>Written on front and back cover</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synopsis</td>
<td>Short synopsis on back cover</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treatment</td>
<td>Screen novel text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview, setting, episode beats and character profiles</td>
<td>Embedded within screen novel text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Style</td>
<td>Use of images and descriptive writing suggesting style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pilot episode</td>
<td>Episode one</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideas for further episodes</td>
<td>Screen novel includes episodes two to six</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Market/audience</td>
<td>Screen novel suggests potential market: crime genre audience</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 Comparative table of development documents and the screen novel
Table 2 Comparative table of the screenplay and the screen novel

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SCREENPLAY</th>
<th>SCREEN NOVEL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Industry reader</td>
<td>Industry and general reader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numbered scenes</td>
<td>Written in dramatic units separated with single spacing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 point Courier</td>
<td>Flexible type size in Times New Roman font</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Double spacing</td>
<td>Single spacing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centred dialogue</td>
<td>Novel layout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scene heading (slugline): Time and location</td>
<td>Implicit within text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scene heading: Brief succinct scene description</td>
<td>Extended detailed scene description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implied camera: ‘We see’</td>
<td>Narrator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written in present tense</td>
<td>Written in past tense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write only what is seen and heard</td>
<td>Use of interior monologue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voiceover</td>
<td>Narrator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flashback/Flash-forward</td>
<td>Italicised text/present tense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second screen scenes</td>
<td>Screenplay format</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The compromise in using the screen novel as opposed to industry-style pitch documents might be seen in terms of time. It takes a writer time and therefore money, as in lost income; or money that might be paid to develop the idea by a production company or similar to explore the nuances of the screen idea using a prose method. It also takes time for a producer to read an extended document such as the screen novel, which might be viewed as a limitation. For this reason, the following section demonstrates how summary documents can be mined from the screen novel in the event that an assessment is required in a short format. In this way the screen novel functions as a source from which industry-based documents can be created.

In the bible for *The Wire*, David Simon outlines the show’s overview, setting, character and episode beats for Season One. I follow these key categories and demonstrate how the screen novel reflects similar information. It is worth noting that show bibles are notoriously difficult to access because production companies and creative agents tend to view them as confidential business documents. I accessed *The Wire* (2002–2008) through the support of my university and acknowledge that it is a
unique quality TV series produced by HBO that was never intended for broadcast TV. However, the show bible for *The Wire* is in the style of traditional show bibles. It is succinct and presents the idea in a digestible form. The point to note here is that it does not read like a novel but a pitch document and is therefore useful as a comparison for the screen novel. Using the development document for *The Wire* as a template, the following sections for Season One: overview, setting, character profiles and episode beats will now be discussed.

**The overview**

In the overview of *The Wire*, Simon introduces the concept of his series: ‘*The Wire* is a drama that offers multiple meanings and arguments’ (2000, p. 2). He outlines the premise for the show by writing it is ‘more than a cop show’ and sells the concept by claiming that it breaks new ground. *The Wire* did in fact break new ground: according to Brett Martin ‘*The Wire* was almost pre modern in its expansive view outward, its Balzician ambition to catalog every corner of its world’ (2013, p. 112). Continuing the overview, Simon discusses the style as being one of ‘hyper-realism’ based on actual casework and concludes by suggesting the series is more like a Greek tragedy, an indictment on a narcotics-fuelled city and a dysfunctional police department struggling to maintain order. David Simon had a background in journalism and I find his reportage style very useful for my own project. His overview provides the premise and tone for the series and there is a strong sense of selling the idea, which from a screen industry point of view is extremely important because pitch documents are often used in bidding for finance for a project (Grace 2014; Redvall 2013).

In comparison, the cover of *Coyne* provides the type of summary detail that is provided in Simon’s overview: information such as the style, theme and premise. The decisions made in writing the cover material have been informed by how the information might be perceived from an industry point of view; that is, does it sell the idea and does it give the necessary information to interest an investor? As the following text from the work demonstrates, the cover of *Coyne* aims to consolidate the information that could be used in an industry overview document.
The city was a network of roads, freeways and trains linked in a web of imperfect order. This was a first-world metropolis, bursting at the seams – a city driven by self-interest and run by *Fat Cats*.

Chris Coyne, 47 is a hard drinking, troubled investigative jurno who is conned into covering a story, which leads to an innocent man being jailed.

When Coyne wins the first prize at the Australian Media Awards for his story *A Road to Kill: The Murder of Gary Morley* the team at Northside Media are ecstatic. But not for long – Coyne suspects he’s made a terrible mistake.

Morley was the Minister for Infrastructure about to sign off on the City Connect when Wilson ran him down on a country road... or so the story goes. Did Wilson kill Morley? Who wanted Morley dead?

In his search for the truth Coyne unravels a story he thought was watertight and discovers a world of corruption at the highest level.

*(Coyne, pp. 67–68)*

If the purpose of the overview is to give a précis of the project then the cover/jacket of a novel has a similar objective. For this reason, I position the cover of the screen novel as that part of the form that carries the necessary overview information. The cover of the screen novel is how the screen idea might be written in lieu of a traditional industry overview. In the above example, the genre of political thriller is evident, so too the thematic concern of deceit and corruption. Furthermore, I expand on the screen idea by stating that the setting is ‘a first-world city run by *Fat Cats*’. The motif of the road is apparent and the murder of Gary Morley, the Minister for Infrastructure, highlights the level of self-interest and desperation that people will go to in order to bolster their wealth. The city becomes a site of crime. This introduction to the story world is
followed by a short synopsis containing the lead protagonist Chris Coyne and contains the central dramatic question: who killed Gary Morley, and why?

Thus the title of *Coyne* with allusions to its protagonist is in the tradition of the crime dramas such as *Bosch* (2014–), *Luther* (2010–2015), *Sherlock* (2010–2014) and *Lewis* (2006–2010). In this way the use of the central character, *Coyne*, in the title acknowledges the franchise possibilities of the screen idea. As discussed by Douglas, ‘Some typical franchises include detective, legal, medical, western, sci-fi, and family (2005, p. 28). Although Chris Coyne is an investigative journalist, his role in the narrative is essentially that of a detective and exists within the crime genre, specifically the detective model as noted by Douglas. It is also worth noting that there is an ongoing trend towards ensemble casts in TV drama; however, the above list of single-character dramas highlights the continuing interest in these character-driven formats. Douglas suggests the idea of a franchise is flexible in contemporary TV: ‘Decades ago, audiences expected the franchises to deliver predictable storytelling where any problem could be resolved within the hour’ (2005, p. 28). Contemporary TV plots are not usually resolved within the hour but over a season, sometimes multiple seasons. By positioning Chris Coyne as an investigative journalist new stories could be generated because the character of a journalist is a useful framing device. In the context of the title, featuring Chris Coyne as the central character tells the reader that further series might be possible with this drama. The specific story of this series, ‘A Road To Kill’, establishes the crime genre and the motif of a journey that is eventually resolved.

**Setting**

Continuing with the show bible for *The Wire*, Simon writes about the setting. This section is relatively short: five brief paragraphs. This informed the writing of the screen novel in terms of being more expansive and consciously exploring details regarding setting for the purposes of creating an industry-style show bible. Perhaps the brevity of the setting is due to the extensive body of work that Simon had generated before *The Wire*. This is evidenced in his earlier works such as the novel *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets* (1991), which was made into a TV series; *Homicide: Life on the Street* (1993–99); his novel co-written with Ed Burns, *The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner-City Neighbourhood* (1997), also a TV series; and *The Corner* (2000). All of these works centred on the city of Baltimore, and anyone familiar with Simon’s canon would be well aware of the setting that Simon envisaged for *The Wire*. In its series bible
he provides a summary, outlining the climate and the city: ‘Winters are cold, summers hot … we are in a remnant of old America as it struggles to make itself into part of the new’. Here Simon is locating us not only in place but also hinting at the values and ideologies of the setting. He continues by stating the specific social aspects of Baltimore, although he does not specifically name the city other than to say it is an ‘Eastern rust-belt city … poor, under-educated and struggling with a huge heroin and cocaine problem. The architecture is of the red-brick and Formstone federal-style rowhouses and townhomes’ (2000, p. 5).

In Simon’s description of setting, I found a literary sensibility in the way values and ideologies are discussed. This layer of understanding as it relates to the broader concerns of a dysfunctional city is directly relevant to Coyne and the political corruption he uncovers in his quest for truth. Consequently, I considered how I might embed similar information in the screen novel. The following text has been extracted from Coyne to underline how summary information has been included in the body of the text, keeping in mind this information could then be reformatted for the purposes of a more recognisable industry development document. In the following examples I have used bold text to highlight the specific references to setting in Episode One of Coyne.

The city was a network of roads, freeways, and trains linked by a web of imperfect order. **This was a first-world metropolis, bursting at the seams** – a city driven by self-interest and run by *Fat Cats*.

*(Coyne back cover, p. 69)*

Melbourne was a city of **high-rise buildings, hipster cafes, inner-city apartments surrounded by an increasing sprawl of brick-veneer dreams.**

*(Coyne, p. 73)*

**The city was hot, dry and dusty.**

*(Coyne, p. 75)*

Northside Media – independent online news site located in an **old reno’d leather factory in High Street, a part of Preston that had been a dead zone for years. Now it’d come to life with the Excelsior Apartments across the road, a hair salon and a soy candle shop on the corner.**

*(Coyne, p. 75)*

As night fell, flames from the five concrete pillars in front of **Crown Casino** shot into the air like some ancient Zoroastrian fire temple.

*(Coyne, p. 77)*
From the quiet suburban streets of Preston to the inner city vibe of Docklands with steel and glass rising skyward, the city was changing rapidly.

(Coyne, p. 84)

Coyne took the Western Ring Road. It was adorned by industrial sculptures and architectural textures – multi-lane freeways with crossovers and lane changes.

(Coyne, p. 89)

The Chandler Bridge was a notorious bottleneck; traffic had ground to a halt, drivers stared at their mobiles and looked like they were going to explode. Frustration, anger – the daily grind. Once he was over the bridge, a right turn onto the boulevard and around to the boathouse – serene parklands and the slow meandering of the murky brown Yarra.

(Coyne, p. 93)

The historical boathouse had been repainted and up-scaled. What was once a shed for kayaks and canoes was now a fancy cupcake and coffee oasis.

(Coyne, p. 93)

I wrote the above text and embedded key points relating to setting with a view to writing a similar brief on setting as shown in the example of The Wire. In terms of the screen novel functioning as a stand-alone text, it was my choice to use active scene description (active setting) as highlighted by Buckham, who suggests that writing with ‘active setting’ can deepen the reader experience and draw the reader into the story (see Part 1, p. 51). In this way active scene description in the screen novel requires a detailed and engaging approach to writing the setting. Therefore, a decision was made to write visually and provide clear details and images that could be mined for the purpose of creating a summary document. For example, if we isolate the bold text in the above example, the setting of a first-world city as a fictional world is well defined. It is a first-world metropolis bursting at the seams. The climate is hot, dry and dusty. The reference to the casino underlines the parallel theme of money, alongside the primary themes of deceit and corruption. The reference to the suburbs of Melbourne and the development of Docklands reinforces the idea that the city is in transition. When Coyne drives along the Western Ring Road he observes the industrial sculptures along the way, a by-product of a first-world city. The Chandler Bridge bottleneck in close proximity to the parklands suggests urban encroachment; the river is murky, again linking the city as imploding on itself through pollution, rampant development and reliance on trucks and
cars. By embedding scene description in the screen novel, the setting and theme can be seeded throughout the text as in a novel. Because it is ‘in action’ and playing out the mood, tone and context can enrich the setting as opposed to a factual listing of the setting as seen in development documents. I thus submit a prose approach offers a thicker representation of the dramatic world than a summary document might provide, allowing the reader – general or industry – to feel, smell and even taste the world.

Character profiles

In developing character profiles, my training and experience has always led me to draft characters as though they are pawns in a chess game, and once those characters are in my arsenal I deploy them as necessary. Character profiles by their very nature are a distillation of the character and are standard industry practice in development proposals. So, how might character be revealed in the screen novel and transferred into a summary profile for the needs of a more traditional development document? Using Simon’s The Wire and Egri’s tri-dimensional paradigm, I want to isolate the type of information that can be included in the screen novel.

Looking at The Wire’s character profiles, Simon lists the characters under the principal locations and occupations: The Stationhouse, The Courthouse and The Street. It is interesting to note that Simon has linked his characters closely to setting because I believe the specific locations are central to the narrative structure of the series. The Wire is a battle of institutions: the police department, the rule of law and the street gangs. By grouping the characters in this way Simon is commenting on broader themes of social dysfunction and political corruption. In writing Coyne I have found it useful to apply a similar approach to writing the characters, although not through setting but through occupation (see cast list Coyne, p. 70). In the cast list from Coyne characters have been grouped into three categories: Media, Politics and Business. These categories reflect the main storylines within the series, and structuring the characters in this way allows me to intertwine them within the plot to create a complex narrative.

Continuing with The Wire the lead protagonist is McCardle (revised in the show to McNulty), who is the first character listed under the Stationhouse heading. The character profile is as follows.
MCARDLE – Irish homicide detective, 35–45, very good at his job, arrogant but with just enough charm to carry it. His offhand comments to a city judge began our journey. In the end, his unyielding commitment to police work as a personal enterprise will bring him and others [sic]. Divorced, iconoclastic and indifferent to the caprices of authority, he unmakes what remains of his police career even as he builds the case.

(Simon 2000, p. 7)

This character profile is in the tradition of an industry development document in that it is brief and outlines key features of the character. It also reflects Egri’s approach to character, which as noted is an analysis of bone structure through a character’s physiological, sociological and psychological traits. I will now deconstruct the character of McCardle using Egri’s tri-dimensional categories:

**Physiology**

**Sociology**

**Psychology**

In Simon’s account of McCardle, the character profile is a good example of brevity and targeted information, and has a clear link to the writing style of Dashiell Hammett, which I will demonstrate shortly. This minimal description is also a pulp crime style – which takes its cues from crime news reporting. Simon worked as a crime writer for the *Baltimore Sun* before becoming a novelist and TV producer, which has clearly influenced his writing style. What Simon has also included in the character profile is action. Where Egri has created the tri-dimensional categories as a way to understand why a character acts in a particular way, Simon has used action to flesh out the
character.

For example, McCardle has made an offhand comment to the judge, he is iconoclastic and indifferent to the rule of authority, and he unmakes what is left of his police career. This approach to defining character through action is supported by McKee who follows the idea that ‘true character is revealed in the choices a human being makes under pressure’ (1999, p. 101). I suggest a combination of character traits and actions extracted from the screen novel would allow the screenwriter to create a dynamic character profile in the style of an industry document, one that distils all their core elements into a few paragraphs.

The following text from Coyne depicts a series of character descriptions of the protagonist, Chris Coyne. The material is from Episode One of the screen novel and I have highlighted the salient points in bold, which I then offer in the style of a traditional industry format in order to demonstrate how the screen novel can function as a resource for the purposes of creating industry summary documents.

At 47, Coyne was still **passionate** about journalism and amidst an industry that seemed to be imploding he knew the value and power of a good story.  
*(Coyne p. 75)*

**A photo of his partner, Talia, and their young son, Will,** sat next to his computer.  
*(Coyne p. 75)*

Chris Coyne  
@northsidemedia

Wilson loses appeal. Good riddance! Wilson is a murderer and he was caught.  
8.45 AM - Dec 16  
*(Coyne, p. 76)*

It was late and while Harry and Jean continued to party at Crown, **Coyne had other things on his mind. He stepped into the office, clicked on the down lights and pulled out a cardboard box stuffed with folders and documents. He retrieved the folder ROADKILL and sat at his computer.**  
*(Coyne, p. 83)*

Harry was getting tetchy, hot and sweaty, he took several deep breaths. ‘The trouble with you is **you don’t know when to give up.**’  
*(Coyne, p. 87)*
Using Egri’s tri-dimensional paradigm the physiological, sociological and psychological character traits can be used to build a profile of my protagonist Chris Coyne.

**Protagonist: CHRIS COYNE**

**Physiology**


**Sociology**


**Psychology**


If we now consider the character traits above to write an industry-style character profile, we can see how the screen novel might function.

COYNE – Australian, 47, experienced and troubled journo. When we meet Coyne he still passionate about journalism and is driven by his sense of justice. He has a dark past – his partner, Talia, and young son, Will, were murdered while he covered a story. Consumed by guilt he throws himself into work. His tenacity and investigative skills can get him into more trouble than not. He doesn’t know when to give up.

In this example I have drawn on the screen novel to expand on the character of Coyne. What is of interest in this process is that the details exist within the narrative. In the past my approach has been to consider the key characters and their roles in relation to each other. For example: protagonist; antagonist; buddy character; love interest, which I would list in terms of primary and secondary characters. This approach might then proceed with more detail such as strengths, weaknesses, main goal and so on, which has the benefit of providing an industry reader with a quick overview of the cast.
Furthermore, as *Coyne* is a six-part TV drama, the development material for this type of project often requires a pilot episode with outlines for subsequent episodes. This can be seen in the Danish film and TV system in the ‘The Manual for a TV Concept’ as noted by Redvall (2013, pp. 204–206). I submit the outlines can simply be a projection of how the drama will unfold and character arcs can be just as broad. The screen novel is a document that traces the story and characters from beginning to end in the style of the novel. As a development document, the screen novel thus offers a tangible approach to understanding character. The screen novel is also a strategic work in the way that it is written for the screen and necessary information such as character profiles can be extracted for the purpose of delivering industry-ready documents.

**Episode beats**

According to Grace, ‘the style of a storyline document is often pared down and journalistic in style’ (2014, p. 81). There are multiple documents that can be used to pitch and summarise a screen idea and for this reason I promote the screen novel as a simple and direct method to shape and discover the structure and plot of a story. Douglas highlights the variances of these terms: ‘outline, step outline, beat outline, beat sheet and treatment [but] they all amount to figuring out the order of events’ (2005, p. 135). This is a common approach to screen idea development and index cards are often used to tent-pole ideas with approximately 28 scenes per hour of drama being the standard in the American system (Douglas, 2005).³¹

In the show bible for *The Wire*, Episode One is written as a storyline document. Simon breaks his story into 26 scenes or dramatic units and gives the reader a sense of the main action (2000, pp. 11–19). The following text from *The Wire* is an example of a story outline with numbered scenes highlighting the key dramatic points in the episode.

1. Baltimore Circuit Court, Pt 23: A jury trial is in progress, a drug-involved homicide case. Judge Glifford-Watkins, black, middle-aged, vaguely wearied, presiding as a young prosecutor struggles to keep witnesses from backing up on their grand jury testimony …

³¹ To clarify: a scene according to Douglas is: ‘the smallest dramatic building block, usually a step of the action, or a beat, with complete dramatic structure, (2005, p. 230).
2. State’s attorney office, Violent Crimes Unit. We follow the Irishman into the office. He greets the secretaries, moving toward the rear offices as if he owns the place. He sees another cop, also white, on the phone, his feet up on the prosecutor’s desk…

3. Baltimore Circuit Court, Pt 23. Jury foreman rises, pronounces the defendant not guilty on all counts. High-fives from the crew in the second-row…

4. Courthouse hallway. The Irishman leaves the courtroom only to be approached by the clerk: Judge Watkins wants to see him…

(Simon 2000, pp. 11–12)

The story beats begin with a location followed by the action; some of the units contain sample dialogue. Starting each unit with the location is useful because it acknowledges the slugline in a traditional screenplay, therefore setting the foundation for a screenplay format. The process of transferring the text from the screen novel to a series bible for TV (or pitch style of document for film) is relatively simple, although in extracting content from the screen novel some details were missed. This highlights the screen novel as a resource for development and differs to the show bible for The Wire to the extent that the screen novel has been written as a complete stand-alone text as opposed to a show bible summary. For example, I have used the first three pages of the screen novel to describe the information provided in the four dramatic units below and information regarding the setting, character, mood and tone is more detailed than an industry-style beat sheet. The following is an example of how the screen novel might parallel the outline style of The Wire with story beats extracted from the first episode of Coyne:

1. Little River Road. A car drives along a country road. We see a bumper sticker: More Mobility–More Freedom. The Minister for Infrastructure Gary Morley is at the wheel. The lights of a Ford shine in the rear-view mirror. The Ford rams Morley off the road. He gets out of his car and the Ford accelerates ramming Morley in barbed wire and dust.  

(Coyne, p. 74)
2. Northside Office, Preston. Coyne arrives for work. He turns the TV on and watches the morning news: Dale Wilson loses appeal. Coyne’s boss Harry Breen comes downstairs and makes a coffee. Jorno Jean Sayer enters pushing her bike. Coyne Tweets – ‘Wilson loses appeal. Good riddance! Wilson is a murderer and he was caught.’

(Coyne, pp. 75–76)

3. Office of Don McAlpin, Parliament House. Don turns his back on the TV. He looks out over the Treasury Gardens pleased with his new position as Minister for Infrastructure. His secretary Megan Mathers asks if he needs anything for the Australian Media and Journalism Award night.

(Coyne, pp. 76–77)

4. As night fell, flames from the five concrete pillars in front of Crown Casino shot into the air like some ancient Zoroastrian fire temple.

(Coyne, p. 77)

The screen novel provides extra detail by the sheer act of writing the story as a self-contained text. Industry-style story beats are the type of summary that I might have written if I approached the story from a traditional industry point of view whereas the screen novel enabled me to write the story and extract the key dramatic beats from the text. The industry beat sheet is a summary document not only for the writer to ‘break the story’, that is to break it into dramatic units, but also for industry readers to assess the idea in a digestible form. The series bible in the case of TV and pitch documents for film are also used as a selling document and I put forward that the screen novel could be just as effective not only as a selling document but also as a creative tool to explore and expand the screen idea. This is particularly relevant in writing a multi-episode series where the screen novel provided me with the series arc as opposed to development documents where the pilot episode and possible ideas for further episodes are the usual requirement, in which series arcs might be thought out but not able to be presented in as much detail as in the screen novel.
Summary

This chapter has focused on how the tools and resources available to the fiction writer might assist the screenwriter in developing a screen idea. By writing a scene in the style of a novel, that is prose, I discovered an approach to screenwriting that enabled a level of detail that I would not have necessarily explored using the traditional industry approach to screenwriting as outlined by numerous how-to manuals (Douglas 2005; Epstein 2006; Grace 2014). Writing the screen novel from a novelistic point of view and writing in a visually expressive way, I found a shared space between the novel and the screenplay. In other words, the screen novel might function as both a stand-alone text and a text for the imagined screen work. The process of writing the screen novel has been a negotiation between these two forms.

Accordingly, a key aspect of writing the screen novel is to write technical directives in a prose form with the intention of enriching the writing and reading experience through focussing on the story to be told. It should be noted that for some, such as the experienced industry reader, the screenplay would be preferred. However from my personal experience, I have found reading the screenplay has a distancing effect from the story, as the reader is made aware of the technical aspects of the work due to the screenplay format. Conversely, the screen novel has been written to evoke and imply technical requirements and focus on the story. With an emphasis on story, the screen novel is written in third-person past tense and deploys active scene description, interior monologue and narration to evoke mood and tone. Writing the screen novel from a third-person past-tense point of view highlights one of the differences between the screen novel and the screenplay, as the tense required for the screenplay is the present tense. In this regard, I outlined the differences between using the past tense and the present tense in writing the screen novel and noted how tense changed the mood and tone of the text.

The approach I have taken in the screen novel differs to traditional screen industry protocols. Therefore to demonstrate how the screen novel might offer a practical and relevant text, I compared the show bible for The Wire with the screen novel to assess the viability of creating a show bible for Coyne. Apart from providing a complete series screen idea, what this process revealed was that the screen novel can be written to enable the extraction of information such as overview, setting, character and episode beats for the creation of a show bible for TV or pitch documents for film.
Writing the screen novel requires a negotiation between the screenplay form and the novel form. As highlighted in Chapter One, Dashiell Hammett’s *The Maltese Falcon* exemplifies how writing prose using concrete images and visually expressive language can facilitate a transition into screenplay format. However, the screen novel also explores interior monologue and free indirect speech to relay thoughts and feelings – elements that are not deployed in *The Maltese Falcon*. Thus the screen novelist should consider how these narrative elements might be made visible through screen directives such as voiceover, flashback, flashforward or dream sequence. Here we have an instance of writing on the page and writing on the screen as a future event. For example, in the case of *Coyne* I wrote a prologue to introduce the narrative voice as that of its protagonist. Although the story is written in third-person past tense, the prologue establishes a first-person account of the story and the prologue might be manifested on the screen in a voiceover/montage or a flashback.

Writing *Coyne* has highlighted the need to address the production requirements of the screenplay to situate the screen novel as a work intended for the screen while simultaneously functioning as a stand-alone object. These two ways of viewing the screen novel is an integral aspect of this research and situates the screen novel as not a screenplay nor a novel but something in-between. The hybrid nature of the screen novel is in the materiality of the artefact and its function as a development process. This development process sees the screen novel as focusing on the story to be told and the transference to screenplay format as a continuum of the process.
CONCLUSION

In Part 1 of this PhD I discussed *screenwriting* as an act of writing ‘on the page’ as opposed to *screen writing*, which refers to writing ‘on the screen’ (Maras 2009, p. vii). These approaches are evident in the screen production system that has traditionally separated the stages of conception and execution (Staiger 1979). The creative artefact at the centre of this PhD, the *screen novel* is situated in the conception stage and therefore represents a development process with which to explore a screen idea before it moves into the production stage. Using creative practice research I asked how a screen idea might be written through the use of novelistic techniques while retaining some of the craft requirements of the screenplay. By novelistic, I referred to the use of prose writing specifically the essential elements of syntactical structure, active scene description, point of view, narration, interior monologue, tense, mood and tone and also image using photographs and graphics in the tradition of the illustrated novel.

During my research I discovered earlier prose attempts at reimagining the screenplay in the form of the film novel (Packard 2011) and the literary scenario (Belodubrovskaya 2016). As highlighted, these attempts were not fully successful as they fell outside the screen production system or simply did not address its needs. The screen novel acknowledges these historical antecedents by integrating production needs within the prose text. Therefore, this research explores the potential for deploying a novelistic approach to the screen idea and expands on the film novel and literary scenario through the acknowledgement of screen production needs.

While I framed my research in the stage of conception, as opposed to the stage of execution, it should be noted that these stages are not fixed and, with the porous nature of contemporary screen production, it can be difficult to pin down where conception starts and execution ends. This is partly because new technologies can mean greater freedom to develop an idea, for example the use of portable video cameras and home editing software can blur the lines of writing and production. As such the research is positioned from a screenwriter’s perspective and makes a distinction between conception and execution, and views the act of writing the screen novel as a precursor to the traditional production stages. On this basis the research is relevant to the screenwriter who works either in a structured collaborative environment (*the professional creative*) or the individual freelancer (*the contracted artist*), as well as academics, students and teachers of screenwriting; and importantly, the how-to genre,
which according to Conor (2014) can shape and influence screenwriting paradigms. As discussed, this research is located in the emerging field of screenwriting practice studies, albeit from a creative writing perspective, and investigates how the techniques available to the fiction writer might assist in the development and presentation of a screen idea. However, the hybrid nature of the screen novel meant that writing a stand-alone text object and an object intended for the screen required an understanding of both forms and practices.

Writing a single artefact that attempts to serve two outcomes raises a key issue regarding the screen novel. Is the screen novel in danger of being neither a novel nor a screenplay? The answer to this question lies partly in the ability of the writer to facilitate both outcomes. The screen novel is a liminal object. It is by definition neither a screenplay nor a novel. As a precursor to a fully drafted screenplay, Coyne has been more successful. For example, the flashbacks that Coyne experiences particularly his family being murdered offers storyline ideas that could be explored before the current series begins. Thus the screen novel as a development tool for the imagined screen work is its strength. As a stand-alone object it should be viewed as a type of novel, one that offers a screen idea in a textual form.

To highlight the dual nature of the screen novel, I referred to several writers whose works reflect the interaction between novels and screen – in particular, Dashiell Hammett, Cormac McCarthy, David Simon and Quentin Tarantino. These writers have displayed the ability to interact with novel and screenplay form. It should be noted that I cite these writers’ works as requiring minimal adaptation in their screen realisation. For example Packard (2011) notes Hammett’s *Maltese Falcon* (1931) as the first film novel and John Huston’s successful screen version was a direct transcript of the novel. As a novelist, McCarthy has written works intended for the screen and I noted his novel *No Country For Old Men* (2005), which was realised as a film by the Coen brothers, demonstrating how a prose style can be used to write a screen idea. Likewise David Simon wrote the novel *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets* (1991), which NBC subsequently made into the TV series *Homicide: Life on the Street* (1993–1999). The works of these writers highlight the potential of the screen novel as an object that brings the novel and the screenplay together.

In addition independent filmmaker Quentin Tarantino approaches his screenplays from a prose point of view and as such can be read by the general reader as
well as the industry professional. It is worth noting that some screenplays are published but usually are a transcript of the completed film. Early drafts of original screenplays are sometimes available from specialist film archives and film repositories such as The Blacklist, Simply Scripts or Movie Scripts and Screenplays; but even Tarantino’s published screenplays are transcripts of the completed film. For example, *Pulp Fiction* (1996) was released by Faber & Faber in the style of the photo-novel and uses photographs from the film. So here we can see an example of the novelisation of *Pulp Fiction* as a memento of the screen work as opposed to a development text for the proposed screen work. In this context I put forward that the screen novel makes the original idea accessible to a range of readers through publication and thus has the potential to broaden the readership beyond industry. By writing the screen idea as a screen novel, it becomes a stand-alone work and therefore has the capacity to be published as a work of fiction.

In this research I have also positioned the screen novel in the context of the screenplay as being a work becoming something else. In other words, the screenplay has long been perceived as being a ‘blueprint’ and a document that speaks to a wide range of readers involved in the production process. The production process leads to what Steven Maras notes is the ‘vanishing screenplay’ – as the revising and redrafting of the screenplay is a necessary part of the script-to-screen journey (2009, p. 48). By linking the screen novel with the tradition of published novels and stage plays the screen novel represents the author’s original vision before it moves through the stages of production as identified by Janet Stagier (1976).

As stated in Part 1 the screen idea is represented not only through the screenplay, which is a central development document, but also through summary texts such as the logline, synopsis, outline, treatment, character profiles and, for serial TV, ideas for further episodes (McKee, 1999; Douglas, 2005; Grace, 2014). The screen novel attempts to embrace all these elements. Thus I posit that a novelistic rendition of the screen idea in its early stage represents the author’s original vision. Why does this matter? From a creative process point of view the developmental journey is informative and educational, particularly in the context of screenwriting practice studies. The screen novel attempts to acknowledge the original work by positioning the text as a stand-alone document before it moves through the production system. This effectively separates the original idea from the completed screen work, thus offering an overview
of the script-to-screen process. Through analysing the decisions made by all creative agents involved in this process, I maintain students of screenwriting might be afforded a greater understanding of how a screen idea can flourish and manifest as a screen work.

A question that arose during this research was, what makes the screen novel different from any other novel and as such does the screen novel require adaptation? This question should be answered with the understanding that I have attempted to write the screen novel as much like a novel as possible while considering the needs of the proposed screen work. In Part 1, I argued that the screen novel should be viewed as an act of un-adaptation in that it is written with the screen work in mind. The process can be likened to the drafts of a screenplay and the screen novel must undergo a transfer from a novelistic form into a screenplay format. To this end, I wrote scenes for *Coyne* that used the screenplay convention of scenic description to lay the ground for the transfer into screenplay format.

Here we can see the negotiation of novel and screenplay. The screen element of a scene heading is extended in the novel form using what Buckman (2015) calls ‘active setting’. I have called this approach ‘active scene description’, bringing together novel and screenplay terms. Using active scene description allowed me to write detailed action scenes as well as the thoughts and feelings of characters; elements with which I would not usually engage with in a traditional screenplay because the industry understanding is to only write what is seen and heard. The idea of active scene description suggests a dynamic approach to the *mise-en-scène* and aligns with the needs of the screenplay in creating a visual language, but also extends the range of detail that a writer might wish to investigate. For instance, writing using active scene description can include the slugline information in a screenplay so location and time of day can be embedded in each scene throughout the screen novel when needed. Details within the scene heading that might be passed over in the traditional screenplay can be written in the screen novel and, from a creative writing perspective, I suggest this level of detail might encourage the writer to explore story, plot, mood, tone and pace in a more comprehensive way. Other technical directives evident in the traditional screenplay are shifts in time, such as flashback or flash-forward, however in the screen novel temporal shifts are written in italics rather than screenplay language and the reader is guided by the omniscient voice of the narrator.
The significance of this research goes beyond my own practice and learning, although it should be noted that this has been considerable. During this research I have become more attuned to the specific nature of both the screenplay and the novel and I have found positive outcomes in exploring the screen idea through the act of writing in a detailed and comprehensive prose style. The screen novel contributes to the broader community of screenwriting studies and continues the debate regarding the ontology of the screenplay and the way a screen idea might be developed. The screen novel highlights the potential of the screenplay to be reimagined in the conception stage of screen idea development. New technologies are also changing the role of the screenwriter, for example the individual screenwriter does not necessarily have to pitch and sell their idea to a production house (Conor 2014). With the availability of cheap digital technologies, many creative agents are simply making and distributing their work, albeit low-fi and indie-orientated but nonetheless have the potential to create outstanding work. Here, I refer to the upsurge in locally made web series (see Swinburne and Fabb 2016) and the changing habits of viewers. It is in this climate that the screen novel poses a viable working document and process that offers the producer/writer the flexibility to explore and develop their unique voice and style. This point echoes Polonsky’s (1962) call for a more poetic approach to screenwriting (see ‘unified verbal’ structure), to give voice and nuance to the text. Conversely, for a screenwriter working within an industry environment, the screen novel offers an unconventional way of developing the screen idea. Accordingly, the screen novel is situated as a foundation text to an industry-style document if required. However, the broader implications of this research lie in the how-to genre. As Conor (2014) observes, industry gatekeepers refer to screenwriting manuals to assess original ideas and it is here that the screen novel offers an alternative to writing and presenting a screen idea; one that follows in a tradition of literary approaches to the screenplay and addresses the ongoing debate about the materiality of the screenplay and screen idea development (see Millard 2011; Baker 2013; Nash 2014).

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32 ‘According to the Accenture 2017 Digital Consumer Survey, 23 per cent of consumers prefer watching TV shows on the device they were originally designed for – down 55 per cent from last year. The survey revealed that consumers increasingly prefer to watch TV shows on devices such as laptop and desktop personal computers (42 per cent, up from 32 per cent in 2016) and smartphones (13 per cent, up from 10 per cent in 2016)’ (B&T 2017, Study: Laptops & desktops overtake TVs as preferred devices for watching TV shows).
By considering a non-industry approach to screenwriting as demonstrated in this research, the screen novel makes a constructive contribution to the academy, industry and independent filmmakers who wish to write in a way that reflects their unique creative style. The implications of this research are two-fold. First, the screen novel continues the debate surrounding the role of the screenplay and the screenwriter in the academy and also within the industry (Millard 2011, 2010, 2006; Baker 2013; Conor 2014). From the early iterations of the screenplay as a literary object, to contemporary ideas about the provenance of the screenplay and new ways of developing a screen idea, the screen novel is an innovative approach to screen idea development. Therefore this research brings together aspects of literary theory and screenwriting practice to reveal an alternative approach to screen idea development and extends our understanding of how a screenplay might be written and presented. Second, this research has the potential to be reconfigured as a guide for creative writers in the fields of both screenwriting and novel writing.

The screen novel challenges existing orthodoxies in how to develop and write a screen idea and the broader implications are that the screen novel has the potential to be embraced by individual screenwriters, novelists, the screen industry and the how-to market. The screen novel also offers possible publishing outcomes because it is written as a self-contained object and removes the initial writing of the screen idea from the production system, thus making it a potentially accessible and valuable text object for industry, academic study and general readership.

In the context of screen industry requirements, the screen novel has limitations in that the time to explore a novelistic approach to the screen idea is most likely to be greater than the time it takes to write and develop existing summary documents. Therefore, the practical implementation of the ideas presented in this research need to be considered in terms of current development methods and entrenched ideas of screenwriting practice. In Chapter Two, I identified the ‘scriptment’ as a development document that could include image as a way to develop and market the screen idea. This is interesting as it demonstrates flexibility by Screen Australia, the national funding body, to accept alternative development documents and highlights a shift away from traditional industry paradigms.

However, the authorial status of a screen work has traditionally favoured the notion of directorial authorship, as in Alexandre Astruc’s ‘La Camera-Stylo’ [Camera-
Pen]. The screen novel aims to reposition the role and efforts of the screenwriter as the originator of the screen idea. This is not to suggest or ignore the value of the production system and the collective effort required to bring a story to the screen. In fact, acknowledging this continuum has informed this research in such a way that has prompted me to write the screen novel as a workable document for screen production, as demonstrated in Chapter Four.

Recommendations for further research might be viewed in terms of exploring the combination of screenplay and the novel. Because the focus of this research has been the exploration of novelistic techniques in the development of a screen idea and, as a consequence, I have not fully engaged with the screenplay other than as a point of reference for the screen novel. As such screenplay structure is an area that has not been fully investigated and structural elements such as a clearly defined three-act structure, the inciting incident, plot-point twists, point of no return, climax and resolution (McKee 1999; Parker 2006; Yorke 2013) have not been discussed in this research. Therefore, as an area for further investigation, it is worth asking how screenwriting structure might be used in the writing of a screen novel. In addition, further research might also be explored through a qualitative research model whereby relevant agents such as publishers, writers and producers are interviewed based on their response to the screen novel. Feedback of this kind would be invaluable in understanding how the screen novel might function as both a developmental text and also a marketing tool.

Finally, I situate the screen novel as a type of novel intended to be both a text object and an object for the screen. I suggest its relevance and practical application to screen industry might be realised through acknowledging the needs of the screenplay while rendering the screen idea as a novel, thus providing a non-industry approach to screen idea development. The screen novel separates the stage of conception from the stage of execution and the implication of this is that the writer’s original screen idea stands as a self-contained work before the execution stage is acted upon. As highlighted this situates the screen idea in its original state thus making it available as a publishable text for marketing or study. Because the screen novel is intended to step outside of conventional models of novel writing and screen development perhaps self-publishing the screen novel as a novel and a potential screen work might provide market differentiation in this expanding area.
However, the primary function of the screen novel is its novelistic approach to screen development. Deploying novelistic techniques to develop a screen idea offers a screenwriter an alternative to conventional screenwriting practice. Through the use of narration, interior monologue, active scenic description, dialogue, photographs and graphics the screen novel is a development tool and a source document for summary texts, marketing strategies and screenplay drafting. The screen novel is not formatted as a screenplay but alludes to the screen telling of a story. In this way the screen novel provides a broad palette of tools from which to investigate a screen idea.
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