



CHAPTER 4

THE GIRLS FROM PERTH

MELBOURNE'S GANGLAND WAR BURNS RED HOT," was the bold headline of the newspaper.

"Did you see that?" I asked Gupta, tapping him on the shoulder. We'd just walked out of the plane into the airport. He turned around.

"What?"

"What the man was reading."

"Who?"

"The man sitting in the waiting area."

Gupta stopped and turned around. "I'd say he's waiting in the sitting area."

"Did you see it?"

"Yes. I wanted to snatch it away from him and scarf it down before he could catch me."

"What? Maybe you saw a different headline."

"I saw his Cadbury bar."

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“Not him—reading, not eating. The guy next to him. I meant did you see the headline on the paper the guy sitting next to the guy eating the Cadbury bar was reading?”

“The guy eating the Cadbury bar isn’t reading. He’s eating.”

“That’s right. And the guy next to him is reading and not eating. So look at what he’s reading.”

“Why didn’t you say so?” He walked back and took a look. “The Western Australian. Hmm. Latest count—twenty dead. Melbourne of all places. Hmm.” The man glanced up at him. “Excuse me, sir.” Gupta looked at me and grimaced. “Maybe it’s for the best I came *here*,” he said as we walked on.

We exited the customs area—Gupta with just a big overstuffed backpack and me with my worn shoulder bag and trusty rolling suitcase/backpack combo. We got in line at a money exchange place. A young blond woman in front of us went up to a window.

“You’re staring at her. She’s making you breathe heavier,” I whispered in Gupta’s ear.

“Mmmmm,” he grunted approvingly.

“Have you already forgotten the one you were in love with five minutes ago?”

“She wouldn’t give me her phone number. I’ve been rejected. But you, you stud, you got that Malaysian woman’s number.”

“That’s because I wasn’t drooling over her. I have no second chakra intentions with her. Anyway, don’t let me cramp your style.”

“She’s German,” he whispered. “She went through customs in front of me. Ah, there she goes. Lost forever.”

He stepped up to the window. Another opened up and I went to it. In a few moments we’re done and ready to head out.

“Just a second,” I say.

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“Oh no,” Gupta said watching me scribbling in my notebook.

“Interesting.”

“What’s interesting?”

“Well, one thing is that the US, Singapore, and Australia all three have dollars.”

“Mildly interesting.”

“The Singapore dollar was worth 57 cents US, which is about $\frac{4}{7}$ ths of a US dollar and the Australian dollar 65 plus US cents—just a tad more than a penny short of $\frac{2}{3}$ rds of a US dollar.”

“Could you be more exact? I can’t take this sloppiness.”

“Good for you. I’ll go back and recalculate to finer fractions.”

“I take it back.”

“Now, to continue. The Singapore dollar is worth point 865 of the Australian dollar, which comes out to $\frac{55}{64}$ ths, which is... one 64th short of being $\frac{7}{8}$ ths.”

“Wait a minute. I thought you said yesterday the Singapore dollar was $\frac{9}{16}$ ths of the US dollar, not $\frac{4}{7}$ ths.”

“You remember! That’s right, but $\frac{4}{7}$ ths is only a 64th more and it’s easier to relate to...”

“Relate to a fraction?”

“Yeah. The exchange rate fluctuates and can be different in different places so you can play with small percentages to get the numerical relationships you desire.”

“Desire? Desire numerical relationships? Seek help.”

“I’ll try to think about sex more.”

“Please.”

Out the door to the lobby. A bunch of kids jumped up and down and cheered a guy entering in front of us. A woman kissed another on the cheek and squeezed her hand. An older man near us was drunkenly blubbering all over a younger woman dreading to depart through the door to cus-

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toms. Gupta rolled his eyes in disgust that expanded as the man started throwing up into a trash can.

“Jeez. Take it outside, fellow,” Gupta said softly toward me.

“That could be you in the future,” I said to him.

“That could be you in the present,” he said smiling cruelly.

We continued walking toward the exit.

“I see someone I know!” I said as Francine ran up, gave me a hug, and then pulled back, looked at me with a smile and said in Australian, “How you goin’?”

“Good yeah,” I answered appropriately. “And you mate?”

“Good yeah. I see you haven’t forgotten what I taught ya.”

“I studied my notes,” I said.

“It’s good to see you.”

“Yeah. You too. And how’s your mom?”

She looked down. “She’s not doing so well. I been stayin’ at home with her and dad for a week. It’s hard. You’ll meet them soon.”

“Oh,” I sighed. “I’m sorry.”

I introduced Francine to Gupta quickly and explained he’s looking for some young woman who’s to meet him. We look around. Not there. We walk. Smack dab in front of the exit is a yellow Porsche convertible with “GUPPY!” written in dripping shaving cream on the side.

“That’s her,” said Francine.

“Why do you think so?” I said.

“Guppy for Gupta.”

A young woman behind the wheel was waving. She *is* good looking—a fiery redhead with a gleam of fun and trouble in her eye you don’t have to be close up to catch.

“You’re Guppy and you must be Davo,” she said.

“You got it,” Gupta said. “And this is Melinda, Francine. Francine, Melinda. Francine’s here to pick up David.”

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“How was your flight?” she asked, as Gupta put his backpack in her trunk.

“It was alright,” he said.

“You must both be tired,” she said.

“It’s good to have arrived,” I said. “But I like flying.”

“I like flying about fifty percent of the time,” said Gupta.

“Fifty percent?” I said.

“Yeah. Half the getting there is fun.”

I groaned.

“You ready for more fun?” Melinda said.

“Sure,” Gupta said.

“Where you going?” she asked Francine.

“Dwellingup.”

“In a hurry?”

“Not really.”

“Then follow us Frannie.”

Francine looked at me. I nodded. “Righto Mindy,” she answered. They didn’t waste any time getting into the diminutives.

Francine had to open the rider’s door of her car from the inside. I was delighted to see my dear ole buddy again, all chipper and bright with that nose turning up a bit, dressed in faded jeans and a black furry coat that minded me of the weather. I’d left the oven summer of the American Southwest and muggy tropical Singapore for winter in the Southern Hemisphere. Perth is near the ocean and it wasn’t so cold, similar to a Sonoma County winter day where I live. Good thing because the heater didn’t work and it was rather open-air, there being a window stuck down in the door on the driver’s side. I put my bags in the trunk and closed it after fetching a sweater. She threw some of the clutter from the front passenger seat and floor in back with the clutter there. That clunky, dented, rusty old Honda looked as if it had been broken down and sitting in the parking lot for years. But ma-

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gically it started okay and backed up and so I relaxed as she headed to the exit where Melinda and Gupta were waiting.

Francine managed to keep up with the peppy Porsche as we zoomed along a country road.

“Oh, on the wrong side again,” I said.

“Oh how clever,” she said, “never heard that one before. Scare you?”

“It jolts me at first.”

“You’ve been over here on the left a bit?”

“Sure. This morning in Singapore, Japan for four years, a few other places briefly. Remember? I was in England.”

“Sure. You’re an old hand at it.”

”I’ve missed it.”

“Finally back where you belong.”

“At home when I get nostalgic for driving on the left, I just look in the rear view mirror and pretend I’m there.”

“You feel superior?” Francine asked.

“I’ve tried to figure out if there’s an advantage one way or the other but I can’t see what it would matter.”

“I’ve heard that the left side is better if you have to fight cause it leaves your right mitt on the side of the threat that’s comin’ at ya.”

“So righties,” I said, “which are nine out of ten people, can pull their sword and defend better?”

“Yep. But fewer than nine out of ten people carry swords these days,” she pointed out.

“I read that archaeological excavations of Roman divided roads revealed they were for right side use—except in

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Britain. Weird huh? And then Napoleon went right so the Brits *had* to keep left. You drive on the left here because you were part of the British Empire.”

“Don’t tell anyone here it’s because of the wenchin’ Poms.”

“Oh yeah—Poms. Now why’s that again?”

“They’re ruddy—from bein’ in the sun or getting’ pissed all the time—their noses get red and bumpy like pomegranates.”

“Pissed is drunk,” I remembered. “What a weird thing to say.”

“Schindlered.”

“What?”

“Schindler’s List—rhymes with pissed. Remember?”

“It’s all coming back to me.”

Francine had to concentrate for a while to follow Mindy’s navigations onto a new road. We cruised along.

“So here I am in Australia,” I said looking out the window at the green and yellow countryside, excited to be in a place altogether new.

“Yes, here you are in Australia. Take a good look. You’ve never seen anything like this before.”

“I know. Never.” It may be just more planet earth. It could look similar to where I live, but it’s elsewhere, a place with its own name, and today I’m seeing the birth of a new world. “Look there—Australian sheep. Australian trees. An Australian road sign.”

“And there’s some Australian flowers poppin’ up,” Francine adds, “and an Ozzie Ostrich and Emu farm.”

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“Ostriches and Emus,” I repeated tilting my head quizzically. I asked if Ostriches were from Australia. Nope, they’re from Africa. Right. Right. I know that. We have them in the US too. But there they were with Emus and it seemed like they should come from Australia as well. She agreed and suggested maybe they were originally intended for Australia and their delivery was misdirected.

“When am I gonna see kangaroos?”

“You may see some but they’re not so easy to find around here.”

“Well, that’s okay,” I said. “There are Australian clouds above—following us into the Australian future.”

“Coming from the Australian past.”

I looked at her. “And there’s Aussie Frannie.”

She glanced over at me. “And there’s Yank Davo.”

We follow Mindy into an area called Sequoia Park. Sequoias? In Australia? Yep—there they were—not giant but they were redwoods. Maybe received in return for some of the Eucalyptus trees. Not a fair exchange. We pull up beside Mindy at a place called The Maze.

“Maze? Maze! Great. I love mazes,” I said. “You know this place Francine?”

“Always wanted to come,” Francine said getting out of her car.

Even though it’s a convertible, Mindy’s car reeked of pot smoke. She got out barefoot and went running into the trees. She’s an energetic puppy. Gupta made a face to me like he’s stoned out of his gourd. Francine teased him for his bloodshot eyes. He offered us a hit on Mindy’s pipe. Francine politely declined, so me too—with effort. Mindy came running back calling out she couldn’t wait. She rested a camera on the hood of her car and got us together in front of it till we heard a click.

There was a giant maze there alright, made of logs, but there were five other smaller ones—three hedge mazes, a stone maze, and one that’s a paved path. We took

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the big log one first. Francine bought some water in case we got really lost. Mindy brought her digital camera along.

“My treat,” said Gupta going up to the window. “How long do you think this will take me to go through?” he asked the woman there.

“Most people come out in forty-five minutes or so,” she said.

Gupta synchronized his watch with her, told us he’d find us in a while. Then he was off into the entrance. We looked at each other somewhat puzzled and went in. We were wandering around inside a while later when he came up to us.

“Made it in 19 minutes,” he said. “I’ve got to keep going. I’m trying another route. You can follow me or I’ll find you again in a while.” And he was off again. A while later he came up to us. “Yeah—you’re almost at the exit,” he said. “The second time I did it in 18 minutes. I just came back in through the exit cause I heard you over here. Want me to let you find it?”

“Whoa! He’s the maze wizard!” I said. “Yes, let us find it—I think it’s over this way.”

We made it out about ten minutes later.

Eating wallaby pie at a picnic table outside, we quizzed Gupta. Had he been there before? Of course not. Did he know about it? No. Did he see some map? No. Is it the same as a maze somewhere else? No. Was he an Olympic maze champ? No. He said he had a system that worked for any maze whereby he’d go through the whole thing without repeating his steps. Actually, two systems. Two? He didn’t read it anywhere. Figured it out himself. And he wouldn’t tell us. Sadist.

We sat there a while and relaxed. Gupta yawned and then put his head on the table. I stretched out on the grass.

“You boys take a nap,” said Mindy. “We’ll go look around for a sec.” The women were off and we boys were out. But not for long.

“Any interesting dreams?” Francine asked.

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“I dreamed,” I said looking up in a daze, “that we were all in Mindy’s Porsche and left it in the middle of the road and flew off like superheroes and then we realized we’d forgotten it but we couldn’t fly anymore and so we had to walk back to get it and when we got there, there was an enormous traffic jam because everyone was waiting patiently for us to come move it, and they all waved at us smiling as we drove off into the sky.”

“How about you?” Mindy looked at Gupta.

“I dreamed everything was upside down,” he said rubbing his eyes.

We went through the smaller mazes. Most enjoyable. Gupta would sprint through them and come up to us from behind.

We visited the Maze zoo, which had kangaroos, wallabies, koalas, wombats, dingoes, and a funny little marsupial called a quokka that was just as cute as the koalas. They had Western Australia’s official mammal—the striped numbat, which eats up to 15,000 termites a day. There was a large flightless bird with a blue neck—the Double-wattled Cas-sowary that looked like a cross between an emu and a wild turkey. There were reptiles. A cobra had its hood opened.

“Naja-naja kaouthia,” said Gupta.

“What?” I said.

“Naja-naja kaouthia,” he repeated. “That’s scientific for Asian Cobra.”

“What a name,” I said.

“That’s why I remembered it.”

“Look at the Frilled Lizard,” said Francine.

“Oh yeah,” said Gupta.

We crowded around. It looked like a little dinosaur, like a raptor—reddish brown, bright yellow inside its mouth and the frill was like a cloak that it wore.

We spent a while with a cute Kookaburra bird that Mindy said sounded like a crazy person laughing.

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There were emus of course but, “No ostriches delivered to the right place for a change,” I said as if disappointed.

“What?” said Gupta.

“I’m not going to tell you anything till you tell me what your maze secret is,” I said.

“Just follow me and you’ll see pretty quick,” he said. “I thought maybe you’d figure it out by now.”

We all followed him back into the big log maze. Somewhere around what must have been the center Francine said she knew and Mindy said she thought she knew too. It was so obvious I should have thought of it. He just honed in on the same direction all the way. That explained the two systems—going right or going left. He said when he confronts a new maze he goes through it turning right every time he can. Then he goes back through it turning left every time. He said if you always go the same way, you keep moving through it without repeating yourself.

Mindy challenged him, saying it seemed one could end up going in circles that way but he said nope, it was an infallible system and he challenged her to draw a maze that didn’t conform to his rules. I pulled out my little notebook and a pen and so she tried. I watched and it became clear he was right.

He said most mazes have a middle and usually he gets a sense from the first two passes which way is shorter for each half—right or left. If there’s time, he keeps going through it till he figures which side trips can be eliminated so finally he can come to the most direct route through the whole maze.

“That’s when I get into trouble though,” he said. “When I deviate from always going the same direction because I think I’ve learned something, I might be mistaking one place for another and then I get lost—sometimes finding myself walking out the entrance. I hardly ever have enough time to figure out a whole maze.”

“Doesn’t that ruin it for you?” asked Mindy.

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“No—it just turns it into exercise, a nice walk—and like I said—when I get into the details of trying to figure out the shortest route I can get lost.”

“But not for long because you can always just start going the same way at every juncture and then you’ll cruise through,” I said.

“Right. But I love going through a maze without thinking—just walking along and enjoying it.”

“It turns it into a meditation walk—like a labyrinth,” I said. “They’re cool too. A lot of churches have them.”

“There is a way to bring the lost and confused type fun back into play,” Gupta said.

“That being?” Mindy looked up at him.

“Hide and seek.”

“Cool,” I said. “Who hides?”

“A battle of the sexes,” suggested Francine.

“Now you boys give Frannie and me a head start and then try to find us,” Mindy said. And then it was maze hide and seek in which Gupta’s method was useless and we’d all get lost and would stumble on each other screaming.

“Here’s another thing that mazes are good for.” We heard Mindy’s voice coming from around a turn and then there she was with her skirt up giving us a full moon.

“Nice ying-yang,” said Frannie. Mindy had a tattoo just above her right buttocks.

“Nice butt too,” I commented. “I’m grateful. Thank you.”

Gupta was speechless and Mindy turned a summer-sault.