

TWO BARRELS OF CLASSIC WYATT

THE WYATT BUTTERFLY



GARRY DISHER

‘Wicked and wonderful.’ Sydney Morning Herald

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Carlyle Street, Double Bay, 7 a.m. on a Tuesday morning, the air clean and cool. Behind closed doors in the big houses set back far from the street, people were beginning to stir, brewing coffee or standing dazed under showers. Wyatt imagined the smell of the coffee, the sound of the water gurgling in the pipes.

But not at 29 Carlyle Street. According to Jardine's briefing notes, the house would be empty for the next few days. It was the home of Cassandra Wintergreen, MP, Labor member for the seat of Broughton, currently in Dili on a fact-finding mission. 'Champagne Marxist and ALP head-kicker from way back,' Jardine had scrawled in his covering note. That meant nothing to Wyatt. He'd never voted. If he read the newspapers at all it was with an eye for a possible heist, not news about political tussles. His only interest in Wintergreen lay in the fact that she had \$50,000 in a floor safe in her bedroom: a kickback, according to Jardine, from a grateful developer who'd asked her to intervene in a planning dispute regarding access to a strip of shops he was

building in her electorate.

Wyatt continued his surveillance. Whenever he staked out a place he noticed everything, no matter how trivial, knowing that something insignificant one day can be crucial the next; noticing in stages, first the general picture, then the finer details; noticing routes out, and obstacles like a rubbish bin or a crack in a footpath that could bring an escape undone.

There were two gateways in the long street frontage, indicating a driveway that curved up to the front door then back down to the street. Shrubs and small trees screened the front of the house from the footpath and from the houses on either side. It all spelt money and conviction.

Conviction. Wyatt had grown up in narrow back streets. His mother had never spoken about his father and Wyatt had no memories of the man. Wyatt had earned himself broad convictions on those narrow streets. Later he'd read books, and looked and listened and acted, refining his convictions.

Jardine's floor plans revealed a hallway at number 29, two large front rooms on either side of it, and a range of other rooms at the back and on the upper level. Jardine had marked three possible hitches for Wyatt's attention. One, the house was patrolled by HomeSecure once a day, usually around midnight; two, the alarm system was wired to the local cop shop; three, he'd not been able to supply the cancel codes for the alarm system but the combination for Wintergreen's safe was her birth date: 27-03-48. Jardine built his jobs on information supplied by claims assessors in insurance companies, the tradesmen who installed security systems, surveillance reports and bugged conversations collected by bent private detectives. A word dropped here and there by real estate agents, chauffeurs, taxi drivers, bank clerks, casino croupiers, clubland boasters.

Wyatt watched for another five minutes. It was the variable

in any situation that kept him on his toes. Without the habit of permanent vigilance he knew that he'd lose the edge, and that might mean a final bullet or blade or at the least steel bands manacling his wrists. There was always the unexpected change in layout or routine, the traffic jam, the flat battery, the empty safe. But these were things you could never fully prepare for, so you hoped they'd never happen. If they did, you tried to absorb them as you encountered them and hoped they wouldn't trip you up. The innocent bystander was often the worst that could happen. Man, woman or child, they were unpredictable. Would they panic? Stand dumbly in the line of fire? Try to be a hero? Wyatt hated it if they got hurt or killed—not because he cared personally but because it upset people, particularly the police.

Satisfied that the house was empty, Wyatt crossed the street to number 29, a brisk shoe-leather snap to his footsteps. Dressed in a dark, double-breasted coat over a collar and tie, swinging a black briefcase, he might have been the first businessman up that morning. Soon cars would be backing out of driveways, white exhaust gases drifting in the air, but for the moment Wyatt was the only figure abroad on the long, prosperous streets of Double Bay.

He paused at the driveway. A rolled-up newspaper was lying in the gutter nearby. Wyatt had dropped it there unseen in the dark hours of the morning, but anyone watching from a nearby window now would have seen him bend down, pick up the newspaper and stand there for a while, looking indecisively up the driveway at the house as if he were asking himself whether or not he should take the paper in or leave it there where it could be damaged or stolen. They would have seen him decide. They would have seen him set off up the driveway, a kindly passerby, banging the paper against his knee.

The front windows could not be seen from the street or the

houses on either side. Wyatt swung the briefcase, smashing the sitting room window. At once the blue light above the front door began to flash and Wyatt knew that bells would be ringing at the local police station. He had a few minutes. He wouldn't rush it.

The newspaper was tightly rolled in shrink-wrapped plastic. It had the stiffness and density of a small branch. Wyatt dropped it under the window and walked unhurriedly back down the driveway and onto the footpath again.

In the next street he took off the coat and tie, revealing a navy blue reversible jacket. There was a cap in the pocket. He put that on and immediately looked as though he belonged to the little Mazda parked near the corner. Dark, slanting letters on each side spelled out 'Rapido Couriers' and he'd stolen it from a service depot the night before. Couriers were as common now as milk vans in the old days, so he wasn't expecting questions and he wasn't expecting anyone to be looking for the car in Double Bay. He climbed in and settled back to wait, a street directory propped on the steering wheel—an old ploy, one that worked.

He fine-tuned the police-band radio on the seat next to him in time to hear the call go out. He heard the dispatcher spell the address slowly and give street references.

'Neighbour call it in?' a voice wanted to know.

'Negative. The alarm system at the premises is wired to the station.'

'A falling leaf,' the patrol-car cop predicted. 'Dew. Electrical fault. What do you bet me?'

Another voice cut in: 'Get to it, you two.'

It was as though the patrol-car cop had snapped to attention. Wyatt heard the man say, 'Right away, sarge, over and out,' and a minute later he saw the patrol car pass, lights flashing behind him on Carlyle Street.

The toothache didn't creep into his consciousness, it arrived

in full, lancing savagery. Nerves twitched and Wyatt felt his left eye flutter. He couldn't bear to move his head. It was the worst attack yet, arriving unannounced, arriving when the job demanded his full attention. He tapped the teeth on his upper left jaw, searching for the bad one as though finding it would give him some comfort. It was there, all right.

He snapped two paracetamol tablets out of a foil strip and washed them down with a bottle of apple juice. Then he took out a tiny jar of clove oil, shook a drop on his finger, rubbed it into his jaw and gently over the tooth. He'd been doing this for five days now. He didn't know if the painkillers or the clove oil did much good. They didn't make things worse, so that was something in their favour.

Wyatt blocked out the pain and concentrated on the radio. It was good to be working alone, the appeal of the planning and the execution—and, if he cared to admit it, of the anticipated and actual danger. He thought for a moment about these jobs Jardine was blueprinting for him. In one instance, three months earlier, a millionaire had hired them to get back the silverware collection he'd lost to his ex-wife in the divorce settlement. In another, a finance company had paid to have a bankrupt property developer who owed them two million dollars relieved of two undeclared Nolans and a Renoir.

The radio crackled. The patrol car came on the line: 'False alarm.'

'Explain, please,' the dispatcher said.

The voice might have been writing a formal report. 'Constable Wright and I approached the premises. We observed that a front window had been broken. On closer examination, we discovered a rolled-up newspaper lying on the ground under the window. Constable Wright obtained entry to the premises through the broken window. The premises are furnished but empty and

intact. We await further instructions.'

The sergeant came on the line. 'Knock off the fancy talk. You reckon the paper boy got a bit vigorous?'

'Looks like it, sarge.'

'Okay, go back in, turn off the alarm, and shoot over to the highway. There's been a pile-up.'

'Right, sarge.'

'Meanwhile I'll give the security firm a bell and get them over to seal the window.'

'Right, sarge.'

Wyatt continued to wait. When he saw the patrol car leave along Carlyle Street, he reversed into an alleyway, got out, and pasted HomeSecure transfers over the Rapido name. Finally he pulled on overalls stencilled with the name HomeSecure and drove around to number 29, spinning into the driveway with a convincing show of urgency. Pulling up at the front door, he got out, cleared the remaining shards of glass from the window frame with his gloved hand and climbed over the sill and into the house.

He made straight for the main bedroom. It was a curiously flattened room: a futon bed base and mattress at ankle height, low chest of drawers, squat cane chair in one corner, built-in closet, no pictures on the walls. Only curtains existed above waist level and they admitted the blurry light of early morning onto the bed. It was also an asexual room, as though Wintergreen spent all of her passion brokering deals somewhere else, for her profit or for the profit of those who might one day help advance her career.

The safe was under a heavy Nepalese rug at the foot of the bed. Wyatt lifted the floorboard panel, keyed in the combination, heard a hum as the electronic lock disengaged.

He opened the door and looked in on a cavity the size of a

small television set. There were papers and files stacked in there, but not the fifty grand that Jardine had promised. Wyatt emptied the safe and knocked against the sides and base with his knuckles. He snorted. The bottom was false.

Wyatt pushed experimentally at the corners. The base lock was a simple push-pull spring-loaded catch. He swung it open.

The fifty thousand was there all right, bundled in twenties, fifties and hundreds. Wyatt stacked them into slits in the lining of his overalls. Twenty-five for Jardine, twenty-five for himself.

He paused. There was something else down there in the darkness, a small, soft, black velvet bag. Wyatt reached down, pulled it out.

The object that tumbled into his palm gleamed softly in the light of his torch. It was a butterfly, 1930s Deco style, with an eight-centimetre wingspan. The body consisted of 2-carat diamonds set in gold. The wings were also gold, set with flowing rows of baguette diamonds in channels alternating with rows of round diamonds. He turned it over. A thin line stamped in the gold read Tiffany & Co.

Wyatt added the butterfly to the fifty thousand dollars. Jardine would know someone who'd know what to do with it—sell it overseas as it was or melt the gold setting and sell the stones separately. A local buyer was out: the larger stones could be identified and traced too easily—they'd be on record somewhere, able to be matched to an X-ray or a photograph.

He was out of the house and easing down the driveway five minutes after he'd gone in. He paused for a moment at the gate, then eased the Mazda onto the street. There were more people about now: children walking to bus stops, men and women heading to work in glossy foreign cars. They looked scrubbed clean and well fed, that's all Wyatt knew or cared about them.

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