



KILL SHOT

A WYATT THRILLER

GARRY DISHER

'Disher's writing is lean, cold and spare.'

Herald Sun

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for Chris and Pippa

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WYATT WAS BASED IN Sydney this year. All the documents to prove he was a citizen of New South Wales. On a grubby night in late March—humid, toxins in the air—he stood watching a two-storey house in Rushcutters Bay. Light from the cloud-streaked moon threw busy shapes over the street and flared briefly on the face of Wyatt's old Longines. He unstrapped it from his bony wrist, shoved it into a pocket. Now he was ready, a shadow among other shadows. A shadow you'd take for a bush, not a thief.

He had no need of a wristwatch anyway; his sense of time passing was acute. He waited now for thirty minutes. He didn't think the law was interested in Alan Hagger, even though the guy was bent. But still, he watched for a surveillance team—a van, a powerful sedan that hadn't been on this street on any of the other nights Wyatt had been here. Or a movement, a twitched curtain, a dim light in a window overlooking Hagger's house.

Nothing. And no sign of another man like Wyatt, either, with the same job in mind. But Wyatt always planned for the unexpected

variable—a rain storm; Hagger receiving a late-evening visitor; a junkie burglar setting off an alarm. Other things he couldn't plan for he hoped to absorb, accommodate or outrun.

About ten-thirty now and Hagger would be going to bed at eleven. The usual routine: take his elderly cat into the backyard and wait while it did its business. Lock up, set the alarm, teeth, bed. Wyatt moved. He knew how to wait, but in motion was calm and focused—with an edge that was not pleasure, exactly, but a cool, clear absorption. He wanted the money, of course. But he also wanted the thinking and the action.

He drew closer to Hagger's house, melting from shadow to shadow, his movements unhurried, unremarkable to a neighbour drawing curtains for the night. Then he was on Hagger's side path, slipping into the backyard and crouching beside the patio deck as he drew on a silk ski mask. He gazed the length of the garden, eyes unfocused but ready for movements he might need to face or ignore. He was familiar with the property. He'd been watching for several days, knowing that something trivial might prove to be crucial. He watched in layers, too—the broad picture, then the details. This job, like all the others he'd ever pulled, boiled down to ordinary tactics, not an overthought master plan. He waited. He felt compact.

He was merely a moon shadow to Hagger when the man emerged in summer pyjamas and a loose robe and placed the old cat on a garden bed. Hagger liked to relieve himself, too, and was watering the lemon tree when Wyatt slipped into the house.

Wyatt moved unobtrusively, knees bent slightly, breathing deep and even. To the staircase first, creeping, placing the flat of his hand against a plasterboard wall. Then another wall, a third wall, feeling for the transmissions that might indicate movement elsewhere in the house. There was nothing. Hagger lived alone. No one was visiting.

Plan for the best, expect the worst, note the exit points.

Then swiftly up the stairs, keeping to the edges where the treads were less likely to creak, until he was in Hagger's bedroom. Vast, lit softly by a bedside lamp. A king-size bed, a walk-in wardrobe, heavy curtains, a plain thick carpet, an ensuite bathroom. Of interest to Wyatt: several cabinets and chests of drawers. Some would contain Hagger's clothing, others his 'famed collection of Kellyana'—as the *Sydney Morning Herald* put it. A story that had been passed to Wyatt by a day-release prisoner named Sam Kramer. Most of Wyatt's recent jobs had been brokered by Kramer.

A quick check under the pillow and mattress and inside the bedside cupboards. No gun, knife, taser or alarm. Then he made sure the bathroom was empty and slipped into the walk-in robe. He waited. Hagger came up the stairs shortly after that, washed his hands, threw his gown on the chair beside the bed, climbed in and got settled, turned out the light.

Fifteen minutes later the man's breathing settled to a slow, laboured rhythm. Wyatt edged into the room and waited, assessing the dark void between himself and the bed. Ready to slip into and become absorbed by it. The handcuffs would stay in his pocket for now, the metal cushioned against any stray sound.

He reached the bed and paused to let his eyes adjust. Hagger was faintly illuminated by the bedside clock. Supine; bulbous nose aimed at the ceiling, arms outflung above the bedcovers. Wyatt had already noted the bedhead, a plain but usefully laddered arrangement of wooden slats and uprights. Now he clasped Hagger's right wrist gently, drew it across the soft, respiring chest, and manacled it to the bedpost behind the man's left shoulder. Hagger stirred. Went very still. Tried to rear up when Wyatt turned on the bedside light and the shadows fled, but was thwarted by his own arm. Discomfort, a twinge of pain that might be eased if he flipped onto his stomach—but then he'd have his back to

whatever trouble he was in. He subsided. Wyatt watched him work it out.

‘Who are you? What do you want?’

That was expected, too. Wyatt knew there’d be more rage, fear and embarrassment. He was prepared to wait until it had all drained away and he could get on with the job.

‘What do you want?’ Hagger said. ‘Money?’

Then, as if rethinking that: ‘My son’s due home any minute.’

Wyatt waited.

‘There’s an alarm sounding at the nearest police station this very second, so why don’t you run off back to whatever hole you crawled out of.’

A blusterer. You didn’t engage with them. It only worsened until they felt ridiculous. Then they’d go to some other extreme to counter that impression, and it would go on until someone got hurt. Wyatt waited.

Hagger’s heavy chest expanded for another outburst, and then it all went out of him. ‘Are you going to hurt me?’

Wyatt shook his head. No point in giving the man a voice to remember.

Hagger said, ‘The newspaper story?’

Wyatt nodded. It was a common mistake of collectors, the newly rich: boasting in the lifestyle sections. Wyatt crossed to the first cabinet in the room. Underwear, socks. Fresh and folded and, Wyatt was certain, ironed.

‘There’s nothing here,’ Hagger said. ‘It’s all in a safe deposit box in the bank.’

No. An obsessive collector of anything related to the Kelly Gang would keep it all close by. If it wasn’t in the room—and why else were there so many cabinets?—it would be downstairs somewhere. But this was where Hagger could grab the most valuable items if the place ever caught fire.

‘I mean it about the alarm.’

Wyatt shrugged. He’d entered the house before it was set. It would go off when he left, but that was okay. This was the only way Wyatt had to get past a modern alarm, though. In the past he’d been able to disable most alarm systems, but technological advances had left him behind. These days he adapted to circumstances. Use a crowbar if he had to. Let a careless householder do the work for him.

A glass-fronted bookcase caught his eye and he pulled experimentally on one of the doors. A magnetised latch—it popped open. He reached in.

Hagger, straining to see, sagged again. ‘Please don’t take that. It’s very rare. I’d never be able to replace it.’

Wyatt checked: first edition. Original—if slightly scuffed—dust jacket. Worth a quarter of a million. He thought about it for a very long moment. But a *Gatsby* coming onto the market any time soon would attract attention. He put it back.

Reached in again and pulled out J. J. Keneally’s *The Inner History of the Kelly Gang* and G. Wilson Hall’s *The History of the Notorious Kelly Gang*. The latter was as priceless as the *Gatsby*, only four copies known to exist, but the next person to own it wasn’t likely to boast about it.

Hagger tried to prop himself on an elbow. ‘Not the Hall. Please, mate, not the Hall. I can tell you’re a reasonable man.’

Wyatt had never thought about it one way or the other. He ignored Hagger and crouched. Two plain wooden doors in the bottom half of the bookcase. He tugged. Locked. He took a slim pry bar from an inner pocket of his thin jacket and Hagger shrieked, ‘No! Please, that bookcase is worth seven and a half grand!’

A man who knows the cost of a beautiful item of furniture. But does he know its value? Wyatt stood, turned to Hagger with raised eyebrows.

‘Please. The key’s here in the bedside cupboard.’

Wyatt nodded, found the key, returned to the bookcase.

Behind the doors he found crammed shelves. Grunted in satisfaction to see, on the top shelf, a legal brief titled *The Queen v Edward Kelly*. He removed it, verified the number of pages—fifty-five—and that it related to the murder of Constable Thomas Lonigan at Stringybark Creek on 26 October 1878.

Worth up to fifty grand at auction.

On the bottom shelf, certain objects. A Bowie knife, an East India Company cavalry pistol and a .32 calibre pocket revolver. Sam Kramer had been clear: not the knife. The name carved into the handle was ‘S. Harte’, who was not Steve Hart. And notwithstanding the poor education of a backblocks kid in the 1870s, there was no proof the bushranger had ever owned it.

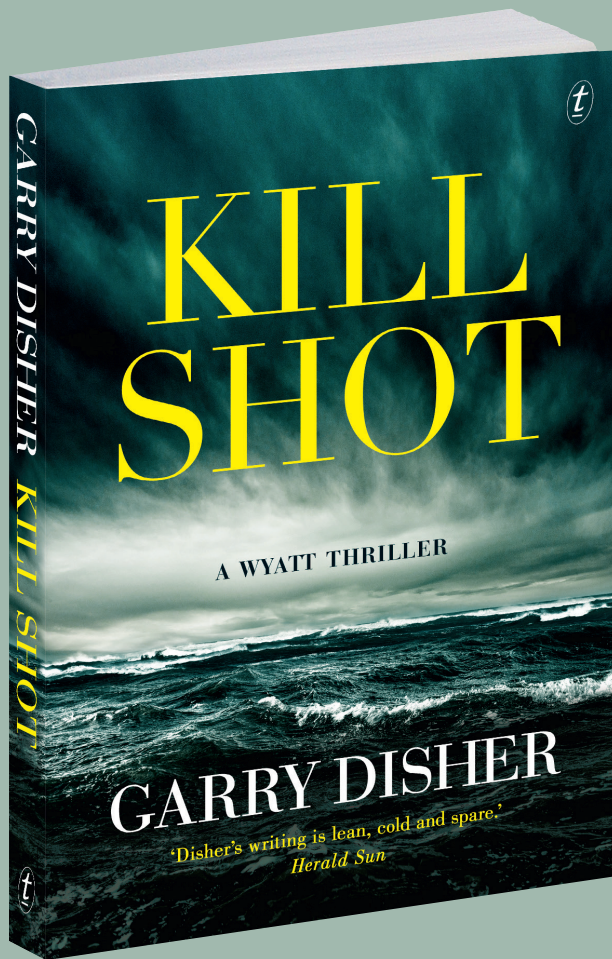
And not the revolver. Reputed to have been Joe Byrne’s—JB scratched along the barrel—and purportedly found under the floorboards of a house where Byrne grew up. But the pistol had been manufactured in 1884, four years after Byrne was shot dead.

The cavalry pistol was the real thing, according to Kramer. *1876/Dan Kelly* carved in the walnut handle.

Wyatt took a nylon drawstring bag from his pocket, unfolded it, carefully packed it with the legal brief, the two books and the pistol.

‘You prick,’ Hagger said. Resigned, sullen—but with enough greed and panic to hope Wyatt might relent.

Wyatt regarded him with cold interest. It was often like this, the layers of self-regard and caution peeling away until the true man or woman peeked out. He slipped back into the slumbering streets, which stirred as Hagger’s alarm began to wail. Wyatt had barely thought about Hagger while he’d been robbing him. Now his detachment was complete.



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