

NED KELLY AWARD
BEST CRIME FICTION 2010

WYATT

GARRY DISHER

'Simply has to be read in one sitting.' *Australian*

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Wyatt was waiting to rob a man of \$75,000.

It was a Friday afternoon in spring, and he was parked near a split-level house in Mount Eliza, forty-five minutes around the bay from the city. The house belonged to a harbourmaster for the Port of Melbourne and offered water views but was an architectural nightmare—not that Wyatt cared, he'd always known that wealth and crassness went together. He was only interested in the money.

So far, he was down \$500, the brokerage fee he'd paid Eddie Oberin for the harbourmaster tip. The way Eddie explained it, the waterside unions were powerful, but so was this harbourmaster. It was in everyone's best interests for ships to moor, unload, load and depart as swiftly as possible, but some delays were unavoidable—a Filipino sailor breaking his neck in a fall, for example; a customs raid, or a strike. And some delays were of the harbourmaster's own making: three or four times a year he would quarantine a ship.

The guy's salary was pretty good, but he had expenses—gambling debts, child support and the cost of running two dwellings. An apartment near the docks, where he lived five days a week, and this split-level monstrosity in Mount Eliza. He'd paid a lot for his view of the bay, the repayments were killing him, and so from time to time he quarantined ships. Another term for it was extortion: give me seventy-five grand, Mr Ship Owner, and I'll give your ship a clean bill of health.

Time passed, Wyatt waited, and he thought about Eddie Oberin. Eddie had been a useful gunman and wheelman—a couple of credit union robberies, a payroll hit—but now he was mostly a fence and the kind of man who hears whispers and then sells or trades the things he hears. Five hundred bucks for a whisper in the right ear, thought Wyatt.

Just then a Lexus nosed out of the harbourmaster's steep driveway, a smooth, silvery car quite unlike the man himself, who was pale, sweaty and beer-fed, with small features crammed together at the centre of a large, balding head. Wyatt knew all that from having shadowed him for several days, and everything said the harbourmaster would be no threat. Unless he'd brought a hard man with him this afternoon, riding shotgun.

He hadn't. Wyatt turned the key in the ignition of a battered Holden utility with 'Pete the Painter' logoed on both doors and tailed the Lexus out of the street. Eddie Oberin had rented him the vehicle. There really was a painter named Pete, currently serving two years for burglary and unable to enjoy what Wyatt was enjoying: the bay waters smooth and shiny as ice, the distant towers of Melbourne like a dreamscape in the haze, the sun beating from the windshields of the vehicles toiling around the dips and folds of Mount Eliza, the opportunity to steal \$75,000.

Soon the harbourmaster was heading down Oliver's Hill to where Frankston lay flat and disappointed beside the bay. Frankston

was testament to the notion that you couldn't have too much commerce, but it was cheap, noisy, exhausted commerce, for this was an area of high unemployment and social distress. Wasted-looking junkies lurked around the station, overweight shoppers crowded the footpaths and sixteen-year-old mothers slopped along, snatching mouthfuls of cigarette smoke and urging their kids to drink Coke laced with downers to keep them docile. The fast-food joints did a roaring trade and little girls paid too much for plastic jewellery in the specialty shops.

And so Wyatt was surprised when the harbourmaster turned off the Nepean Highway into the shopping precinct. Perhaps he wanted a haircut or had run out of bread and milk, and wasn't here to collect an envelope containing \$75,000.

The Lexus turned and turned again, eventually pulling into an undercover car park beneath a cinema complex. Wyatt considered his unbending first rule: always have an escape route. He didn't want to drive into the car park. He didn't want to be boxed in by concrete pillars, people pushing shopping carts, delays at the boom gates. He parked Pete's utility in a fifteen-minute zone, wiped his prints off the wheel, gear knob and door handles, and entered the car park on foot.

He found the Lexus in a far corner. The harbourmaster was locking the doors with a remote before pausing to glance around uncertainly. He was carrying a cheap vinyl briefcase. Was this the drop-off point? Wyatt hung back beside a pillar, where the weak light from outside and from a handful of overhead fluorescents barely penetrated. The air smelt of urine and trapped exhaust fumes. There was something sticky on the underside of his shoe. His hands felt grimy.

He waited. Waiting was a condition of Wyatt's life. He didn't fidget or get impatient but stayed composed and alert. He knew that nothing might come of the waiting. He continued to watch

the harbourmaster, ready for a sound or a smell or a shift in the quality of the air that meant he'd better run or fight. In particular, he was watching for certain signs in the people nearby: the way a man carried himself if he was armed, listening to an earpiece or staking out the car park; the clothing that didn't look right for the conditions or the season but was intended to conceal.

Suddenly the harbourmaster was on the move again. Wyatt held back as he tailed the man out of the car park and through heavy glass doors that led to the cinema foyer. The harbourmaster led him across the vast space and out onto the footpath. Here Frankston's extremes were most apparent: the glittery new multiplex on one side, a strip of miserable two-dollar shops, a butcher, a camera store and a chemist on the other. The harbourmaster crossed the road and went down into a short mall, where a busker tuned his guitar, racks of cheap dresses crowded the pavement, and exhausted shoppers sat hunched over coffee at a few outside tables.

Soon Wyatt knew how the payment would go down. Seated at an otherwise empty table was a man wearing a suit, an identical vinyl briefcase at his feet. He was young, disgusted-looking, and Wyatt guessed that he worked for the shipping company. The suit knew why he was there. He watched sourly as the harbourmaster nodded hello, put down his briefcase and pulled out an adjacent chair. No talking: the young man drained his coffee, grabbed the harbourmaster's briefcase and walked away.

That's when Wyatt moved. He was counting on swiftness and surprise. He wore a faded blue towelling hat, sunglasses, jeans and a roomy Hawaiian shirt worn over a white T-shirt. Clothing that distracted attention from his face. His features were attractive on the rare occasions he smiled or was lifted by some emotion; otherwise repressive, unimpressed, as if he understood everything. Knowing this, he always hid his face.

He slipped into the vacated chair and his slender fingers clamped over the harbourmaster's wrist.

The harbourmaster recoiled. 'Who the fuck are you?'

Wyatt murmured, 'Look at my belt.'

The man did and went white.

'It's real,' Wyatt said, and it was. A little .32 automatic.

'What do you want?'

'You know exactly what I want,' Wyatt said, increasing the pressure and leaning down for the briefcase. 'I want you to sit here quietly for five minutes and then go home.'

His voice was mild, soft, calming. That was the way he worked. Most situations demanded it. In most situations it was failsafe. He didn't want a panic, a scuffle.

The harbourmaster took in the hardness and long muscles of Wyatt's shoulders, arms and legs. 'Are you from the shipping company? I'll just detain your next ship, you stupid prick.'

'I'll be there to intercept that ransom, too,' Wyatt said expressionlessly.

The harbourmaster adjusted his impression of the man who was robbing him, seeing behind the dark glasses a relaxed, immobile face, the face of a man who might have been sitting alone in a room. He swallowed and said, 'Go your hardest, pal.'

'A wise decision,' Wyatt said.

He got to his feet, mildly irritated for saying too much, playing this out for too long. The little mall was thronging with the lunchtime crowd and he began to edge into it when a voice shouted, 'Police! On the ground! Both of you! Now!'

There were three of them, two hyped-up young guys in suits, and the busker. Uniformed police were probably guarding each end of the mall. Wyatt ran at the detectives, windmilling with the briefcase, which struck an umbrella stanchion and flew open, tumbling a large, crammed envelope into the air. Wyatt caught it

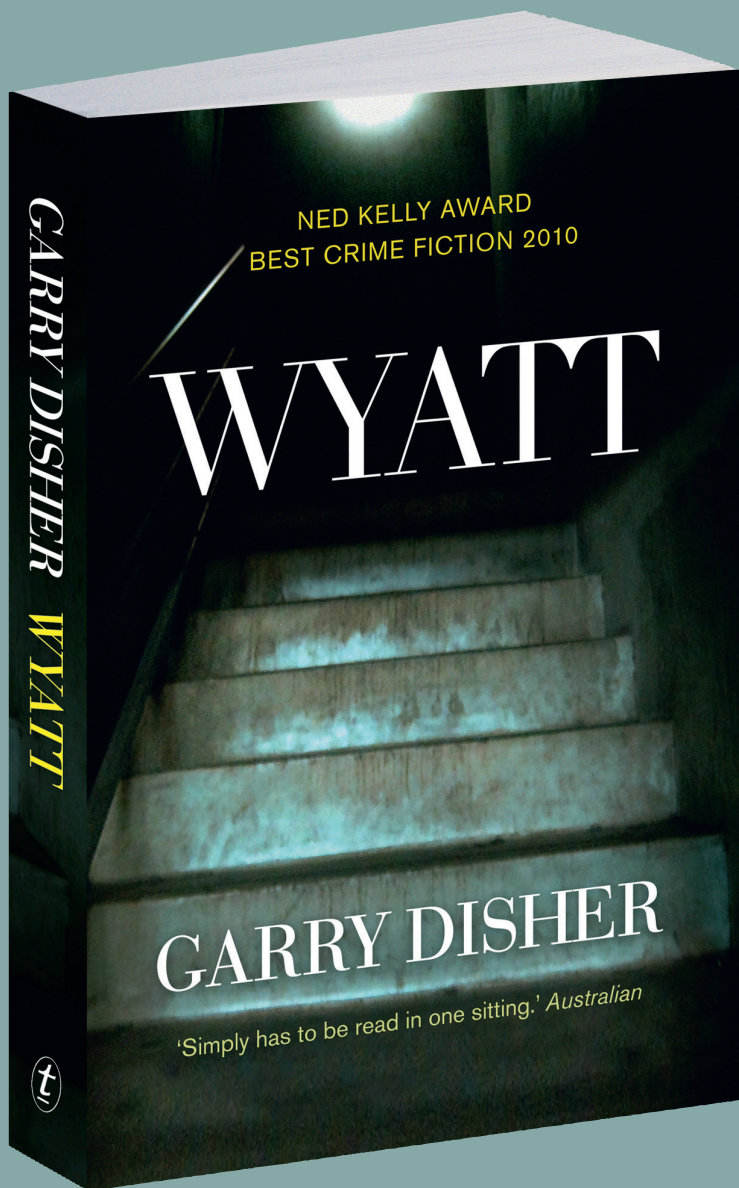
neatly, a small part of him wondering if in fact it held only paper scraps, the main part telling him to escape or die.

People were screaming or struck dumb, seeing the detectives with drawn .38s, the broken crockery and now racks of cheap clothing rolling along the footpath and into the street. A stoned-looking bikie whooped as Wyatt tipped over tables and chairs and ducked into a narrow space between racks of dresses and T-shirts in the adjoining shop.

It was dim inside, cramped, the air percussive. Wyatt didn't recognise the music. It wasn't music. It was loud, that's all, and supposed to attract customers. There were no customers, only one shop assistant avidly watching out of the main window and another snapping gum behind the cash register in the rear.

'Can I help you with anything?' she asked. She didn't think she could help the man, who was tall and prohibitive and gave off waves of coiled energy, but it was her job to ask. He passed her unhurriedly and her jaws continued to chomp.

Wyatt found himself in a short corridor, with a staff washroom on one side and a storeroom on the other. Peeling floor tiles, a broken-wheeled clothing rack, a bin of coat hangers and a wad of thick plastic shopping bags, deep purple, bearing the store logo. He crammed the harbourmaster's ransom money into one of the shopping bags and kept going, out into the alley.



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