

Letters To My Late Wife

Part Four

Chapter Thirty-Seven

The pilot made his approach to Sydney from the north, following a line parallel with the coast and the white-capped waves rolling into the beaches that Scott had driven to in his younger days, searching for the best surf. He had a splendid spectacle of the approaching harbour from his window seat on the left side of the aircraft and felt a surge of nostalgia as the bridge and Opera House came into sight with the city skyline beyond them. The flight path was almost directly over the Lane Cove unit that he had rented when he brought his family to Australia from Hong Kong, before buying the house in Davidson.

He still regarded Sydney as his town. He had developed a love for it soon after he arrived there from New Zealand with 100 pounds in his pocket, landed a job on the Sydney Morning Herald and quickly became acquainted with the murkier aspects of the city, covering courts and speeding to crime scenes in a car tuned to the police radio band. He got to know the owners of nightclubs giving kickbacks to brewery employees for special beer deals and the operators of back-alley two-up schools paying off police. He knew the leading crooks and the crooked cops. It was the life to lead at 24. Then, 20 years later he had rediscovered Sydney with his wife and two sons. It was a bustling, more modern, business-oriented city, the harbour looking grander with the addition of the Opera House, the night-life brighter with the addition of more restaurants and theatres. When he flew back to Sydney after trips to Asia in those days, he always experienced a warm sense of coming home. But this time there was none of the pleasure that used to accompany his first sight of the city when returning from abroad. There was too much sadness in his heart.

He had lost a lovely grand-daughter and his son was facing a long jail sentence unless he could find proof that he was not guilty of the crime with which he had been charged in Singapore. There had been, however, one positive development which had slightly lightened his gloom. After he had made a personal plea to the High Court, assisted by Jegathesan, James had been granted conditional bail on humanitarian grounds so he could visit his dying daughter. Scott had been required to guarantee his son's return and pay the air fare and expenses of a parole officer appointed by the court to accompany him. The concession came barely in time. James had just two days with Sarah, sitting beside her bed during the day and sleeping on a cot next to her at night, before she died.

The end came more suddenly than anyone had expected and Scott was dismayed that he had not been able to make one more visit to the hospital before her life slipped away. As soon as he heard of Sarah's death from Father Reid, with whom he had left his Kuala Lumpur number, he advised his newspaper that he was returning to Australia for his grand-daughter's funeral and booked a flight to Sydney. Earlier Jegathesan had passed on to him from James the names of two people, a man and a woman, who were with his son and other advertising people at the dinner party in Singapore on the evening before his arrest. As soon as Scott had checked into his hotel after arriving in Sydney he called the male friend, Jeff Carr, an artist who worked for a studio that supplied graphics to Bennelong. They arranged to meet in a coffee shop on the corner of Bridge

Street and Pitt Street, near Carr's office.

As Scott entered the cafe, a man dressed casually in black trousers and a long-sleeved black shirt got up from a table and walked towards him with an outstretched hand. "Mr Scott? I'm Jeff Carr." The customers were predominantly young people who worked in the central business district, so Carr correctly assumed that a person much older than anyone else there had to be James's father. The artist, who was in his mid-twenties, had the healthy look of someone who exercised in a gym regularly or jogged. His firm grip when they shook hands bolstered this impression. As they walked back to his table, he asked a waitress to bring a coffee for his guest.

"Tea, please, if I may," Scott said.

"Sure," the girl said.

When they were seated, Carr said it was a pleasure to meet the father of James, who was admired by everyone who worked with him.

"I have to get back to my office in half an hour to show some work to a client. I hope that will be enough time for me to answer any questions you have."

"Yes, I won't keep you long."

"I was talking to Barney Marks at Bennelong this morning and he said James had been given temporary bail to visit his daughter. He also said she died early yesterday. It is all so shockingly tragic - James's arrest and then the death of his daughter."

"Yes, it's been a rough time. I'd be grateful if you could tell me what happened leading up to my son's arrest. I believe a number of the Australians who attended the convention, including James and yourself, all dined together on the final day."

"That's right. Last night in Singapore, work done, time to party. The choice of restaurant for dinner was almost automatic. Charlie Chan's Seafood Palace has been a popular dining place for Australians living in and visiting Singapore for many years so we opted to go there. Everyone was drinking pretty heavily, except for James who doesn't drink much, as you probably know. But the evening passed without any drama. There was a lot of kidding around and put downs of some of the less loved executives. But it was all good natured."

"Nobody else joined you? Those present were all advertising or marketing people?"

"Yes. Well, for a while there was this young Malay fellow. He's a regular there. Looking for customers. Sometimes he wears pants and a shirt. This time he was made up like a woman, wearing a long dress and jacket. We called him Judy - so we could do the Cary Grant thing. You know, 'Judy, Judy, Judy....' He hung around and someone gave him a beer. Everyone was clowning around with him. He danced about and sat on almost everyone's lap, including some of our more stuffy colleagues - even the obnoxious Maurice Meckleson, I recall. He normally takes a dim view of that sort of thing but, I guess, was too drunk to care."

“Do you know the Malay’s real name?”

“No.”

Was it Hassan? Scott wondered.

“Did you all leave the restaurant together?” he asked.

“No. After we had eaten, some of us decided to go on to the Kit Kat Room near Bugis Station, which is a gay hangout. I asked James if he wanted to come along but he said he was going to have an early night. That was the last I saw of him.”

Scott realised his old preconceptions had once again prompted him into a misjudgement. It would never have occurred to him that the macho-male looking Carr might be gay. But he gave no outward indication of his thinking.

“Did anyone appear to be taking a particular interest in the Malay boy, ‘Judy’?”

“I don’t think so. Before we left for the Kit Kat, he had wandered off and was talking to people at other tables in the restaurant.”

“Well, thank you very much for your information. Good luck with your client.”

“Thank you. Give me a call any time if there’s anything else you would like ask me about.”

“Okay. Thanks again.”

Scott sipped his tea after Carr had left, pondering what he had said. He was disappointed that the artist had not come up with anything specific that might help James but slightly cheered by the possibility that the Malay youth at the restaurant was Hassan. If so he needed to find out more about what happened at the dinner party. He decided to seek out the woman who had been named by James and see if she could add anything significant to the information supplied by Carr.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

May 15, 2000

My Dearest Siu Mei

We buried your grand-daughter today. It was a clear autumn afternoon, with the sun shining and only a few cotton-white clouds in the sky. She now lies in a cemetery called the Field of Mars, in Ryde, on Sydney’s North Shore. It seems an inappropriately-named resting place for a little girl. However, the section reserved for children among a cluster of trees was peaceful with nothing to

disturb her but the sound of chirping birds.

Earlier, we gathered in the chapel of her school, St. Mary's, in Drummoyne for a service. I could not stop the tears flowing from my eyes when I saw the small coffin decked with flowers. Many of Sarah's school friends were there with their parents, bringing home to all of us that it was a child who had died. It must have been harrowing for Erika and James, who sat together. James's escort was sensitive to the moment and stood discreetly at the rear of the chapel.

I read aloud a poem, which I had written for Sarah. This was not easy. I needed to pause several times to regain my composure. It was strange for me to stand in a pulpit and speak to a congregation. I have never been attracted to any formal religion. But on this occasion, I had a strong spiritual affinity with everyone who was there, regardless of their individual religious ties. We were joined together in our mourning for Sarah.

I could not help thinking that hardly any time seemed to have passed since we had gathered to mourn your death. I had wanted to speak at your funeral but knew that I would break down and wrote some words for Catherine to read to the friends who had come to say goodbye to you.

In the days following your death, I complained in a letter to my eldest sister that nobody had forewarned me of the impact of losing someone I loved. Life's ending was never seriously discussed at home or in school and was wrapped in hollow, sanctimonious clap-trap in churches. I was saddened by the death of my parents but because I had been away from home for many years and thought of them affectionately rather than lovingly, I felt a loss but only slight pain. They had been growing old and in the back of my mind I had adjusted to the fact that the years left to them were steadily becoming fewer. But I had never anticipated that you would be taken from me so abruptly and horrifically. It caused me severe pain and plunged me into a black hole of depression. Additionally, since no one had talked to me about death, I was unprepared for and confused by the waves of guilt, anger and frustration that swept over me.

Lily Ling, the doctor you chose because she was Chinese as well as skilled, explained the grieving process to me but it was some time before I could examine my emotional response with relative dispassion. I remind myself constantly that I am a creation of the universe which, as it sprang from non-existence to existence, spawned the basic particles of matter forming me and everything around me; and that these myriad elements, in their action and interaction, produce events and experiences of infinite variety, which translate into our disasters, attainments and opportunities. But even with this conviction to strengthen my resolve, I have learned there are times when reason cannot hold emotions in check. This was demonstrated to me once again at Sarah's funeral service.

The anguish I was experiencing as a result of her death intensified when the extent to which James was suffering became clear to me. His grief was reflected in an email which Catherine received from him the day before she left London on a flight to Australia to attend the funeral. When we met at the church, she showed me a print-out of her brother's letter,

He wrote: "Sarah kept telling us she wanted to be in her bedroom surrounded by her possessions so we took her home from the hospital when she was close to death. By this time, she required

constant care as she couldn't do anything for herself.”

James said he had taken turns with Erika to sit or sleep beside Sarah's bed. She had trouble swallowing the fluids that were squirted into her mouth with a syringe and it was becoming harder to understand anything she was saying, although usually she was “talking to someone else anyway”.

“Her skin, which is stretched tight over her bones, with little muscle beneath it, has an ashen appearance apart from some pale red blotches,” he said. “She has large, dark half-circles under her eyes and is barely recognisable as the Sarah we know. The Dexamethasone has distorted her face so it is unusually large and round in contrast with her gaunt torso. Only the faint freckles on her cheeks serve to remind us of who she was.

“Last night, it finally struck me that we were watching someone die. And that someone was a child. Not just any child but ours. Today, as is the way in the Catholic church, we performed the last rites. It was very emotional. We are preparing for her death.”

I kept thinking of James's words as we drove to the cemetery and Sarah's coffin was carried to the plot reserved for her. In the past, if I saw the word grave, my mind conjured up an image of men in soil-encrusted clothes and heavy boots digging a rough hole in the ground with picks and shovels. But the trench into which the casket containing Sarah's body was lowered had been precisely excavated and shaped by a mechanical shovel to receive it without any waste of space. I was reminded of a children's game in which wooden blocks of different shapes are fitted into the appropriate slot.

When the coffin had been covered with earth, James and Erika said they wanted to be alone with their daughter for a few minutes. So, while our son and the wife he is leaving stood together holding hands beside Sarah's grave, the rest of us walked slowly down the path between the rows of graves towards the cemetery entrance. I was wishing you were there with me so we could find some strength together, when someone took my hand. It was Linda. I gave her a smile, thinking how much her eyes reminded me of you, and we made our way to where the cars were parked.

As I was saying goodbye to parents of children who had been Sarah's class mates, Erika joined us and whispered in my ear: “Now Siu Mei won't be lonely. She has a grand-daughter to keep her company. And Sarah has a granny to look after her.” While I cannot, like her, find solace in the concept of a literal heaven, my sense of the universal oneness, gives me the conviction that all of us remain linked in death as in life.

Following the funeral, James had to go directly from the cemetery to the airport with his minder to catch a flight to Singapore, where he was taken back to his cell in the Queenstown Remand Prison. Before I return to Kuala Lumpur I will try to find out more about that night in Singapore that culminated in his arrest and the charge against him.

All my love,

John

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Marilyn Courtney, a senior copy writer at Bennelong, was the kind of winsome young blonde that Scott would have been attracted to in the years before he went to Asia and became infatuated with a string of almond-eyed, raven-haired women from Japan, Korea and China. When he got back to his hotel after speaking to Jeff Carr he had called the agency and asked for her. She did not answer her phone and he left a message for her to ring him at his hotel. He was an hour away from checking out of his hotel and heading to the airport for his flight back to Kuala Lumpur when she returned his call. She said she had arrived back home late the previous night after a business trip to Melbourne and hoped it was not too late for them to meet because she really wanted to see the father of her good friend James. When he addressed her as Miss Courtney, she told him to call her Marilyn. They worked out that Scott would have time to stop by her unit since she lived in Kensington, a suburb close to the airport.

It was a Sunday morning and the street in which Marilyn lived was as quiet as a movie set without actors until, as if on queue from a hidden director, a man and a woman wearing identical track suits and jogging in step hove into sight from a side road. Then, as Scott's taxi pulled up beside number 12, a man burst through the front door of a house across the road, shouting to someone inside, "You can go to bloody hell!" A typical suburban Sunday, Scott murmured to himself sardonically.

The units and cottages were uniformly red brick dwellings with tiled roofs and the street was bare of trees, unlike the wealthier suburbs north of the harbour. While Kensington had a neat and clean appearance and the small strips of lawn in front of the homes were tidy, Scott was prompted by the man's outburst to wonder gloomily how many of the people behind the curtained windows were living together in perpetual anger, suffering physical abuse or afflicted with a wretched loneliness.

Marilyn did not look as if she fitted into any of these categories. She greeted him with a radiant smile which dispelled some of his melancholy. As she took him into the small living room of her third-floor apartment, which was decorated with Japanese prints and art works from China and Indonesia, she told him James was one of the nicest men she had met.

"Pity he's gay," she said with a laugh. Then she added soberly: "Will they put him in jail?"

"They will unless we can prove he is innocent. Information obtained by a journalist friend of mine suggests that the youth in the case was paid a large sum of money, well above the going rate for a male prostitute, some time before he was found in the hotel room with James. We surmised that someone had given him the money together with the hotel room number either as a prank or to deliberately get James into trouble. The number and a time had been written on a piece of paper which the youth gave the police."

"Jesus. Who would do that?"

“I don’t know. I hoped you might be able to think of someone.”

Marilyn shook her head. “All I can remember about that night is that when the time came to split the bill there was a lot of embarrassment at the Bennelong table because some of the guys and girls didn’t have enough money for their share. They had been out shopping, spent all their Sing dollars and left their Australian money in the hotel’s safe. The waiter, not suprisingly, wasn’t prepared to take half a dozen credit cards for a single bill. James stepped into the breach and settled the full amount with his credit card. He pulled out the bank notes in his wallet first but only had a small amount of Australian money and less than 200 Sing dollars. With all our drinking, the bill was more than 500 and something in local dollars. I guess James felt obligated to pay as an agency executive but he wasn’t the only one present. Maurice Meckleson, the director of marketing, should have at least contributed something but he was his usual shitty self and let James pick up the tab without saying a word.

“I remember thinking what a bastard Meckleson was because I knew he had a wallet full of money. Another girl, Jenny, and I drove with him to the restaurant. He could hardly not come up with the taxi fare, since he had invited us to join him, and we were certainly not about to pay for the ride. He took the 12-dollar fare from a thick wad of notes totalling at least several hundred dollars, maybe a thousand or more. I remember thinking he was pretty dumb to carry so much money with him at night to an area where pickpockets were usually active. However, he was probably planning to go shopping before dinner but found himself without enough time. While we were waiting for the taxi, he complained that the managing director of Bugis Advertising had kept him at a meeting for an hour and a half after the day’s proceedings had ended. And his mind was certainly on shopping on our way to the restaurant. Our cab had one of those new Mr Taxi terminals, with information about movies, where to shop and eat and so on, and he insisted on hogging the shopping channel, although we wanted to check on what movies were showing. He was looking for the best bargains in top-class DVD players, recorders and other stuff and finally found a couple of places to check out at Sim Lim Square, on Rochor Canal Road, just as we were arriving at the restaurant. Having denied us the chance to check on the films, he then demanded we find him a card or something so he could write down the shop names and we had to sit in the taxi until Jenny handed him a leaf from a small note pad in her handbag. And not a ‘thank you’ from him. But that’s our Maurice.”

After thinking for a moment, Scott said: “If we assume James was set up, it’s unlikely the person involved was a stranger. That means it had to be an advertising colleague. Someone who knew his room number. Was everyone in the same hotel?”

“All the Bennelong gang were in the Regal. Other convention delegates were spread around in other hotels.”

“Often a receptionist will tell a guest his room number as he hands him his key card. It would be easy for anyone to overhear this.”

“That wouldn’t have been necessary,” Marilyn said. “We were given a chart with everyone’s room number on it so we could find people if we needed to discuss something happening at the convention.”

“So anybody could have directed the youth to James’s room. However, only Meckleson had enough money to make a large payment to him, which we have deduced was 500 Singapore dollars.”

Scott paused to review his analysis.

“Jeff said a Malay youth dressed as a woman, whom he called Judy, was present at the dinner for part of the time. Do you remember him?”

“Yes,” Marilyn replied. “I’ve seen him at the restaurant on a previous visit to Singapore.”

“Do you know his name?”

“It’s Hassan.”

Scott beamed. “How do you know?” he asked.

“He said he didn’t like the name Judy. I asked him for his real name and he told me.”

“That’s fantastic! Hassan is the name of the youth found in James’s hotel room. Assuming Meckleson is our man, he must have come up with his plan to get James into trouble on the spur of the moment. When Hassan showed up he saw a perfect opportunity. Like everyone, he knew the youth was a male prostitute. He probably wrote the note when he went to the toilet, wrapped it around 500 dollars and put it in Hassan’s pocket when the youth sat on his knee.

“However, it’s an extraordinary thing to do. If James’s plight was deliberately engineered by Meckleson, why in the world would he act in such a malicious fashion. Is he a serial prankster? Did he have a grudge against James? It seems so improbable.”

“Perhaps not so unlikely,” Marilyn said. “There was long-existing trouble between him and James. The atmosphere between them at one client conference that I attended was so tense that I asked James later if there had been an argument between them over something. He told me Meckleson was a racist who, on the first occasion James submitted ad copy for his approval rejected it, saying that with his cultural background he didn’t understand the requirements of an Australian company. James survived and prospered by dealing directly with the chief executive, Barney Marks, most of the time, with the excuse that Meckleson was busy. But Meckleson later put in a bad report that ruined his chances for promotion. Ultimately, Barney found out that Meckleson had lied in his report and James was given his job.”

“Of course. Now I remember James called Meckleson a racist when I met him in Singapore about a year and a half ago,” Scott said. “But surely he wouldn’t let his racist disposition lead him to fabricate a serious criminal charge against James.”

“Racism makes people do strange things,” Marilyn remarked. “And, come to think of it, he has profited from James arrest.”

“Really?”

“Yes. He asked for and got his old job back. Barney said it was only temporary but if James is found guilty it will be permanent. Meanwhile, he’s heading off to Singapore to do a South-East Asian tour with his Bugis counterpart to drum up more business for the partnership.”

Scott examined the situation for a moment. “I need to establish for sure if he was responsible for sending Hassan to James’s room and, if so, find some way to prove it. I’d be grateful if you would talk to Jeff Carr and see if the two of you can remember anything else that might help.”

“I’ll be happy to do that.”

He gave her his Kuala Lumpur telephone number and e-mail address. As she walked out with him to the waiting taxi, she said: “I don’t know anyone who doesn’t have the highest regard for your son, except that skunk Meckleson. We’ll do anything we can for him.”

“Thank you,” he said, getting into the taxi. As it moved away she blew him a kiss and he waved his hand. Remembering her comment about James, he thought: Pity I’m not younger.

Chapter Forty

May 17, 2000

My Dearest Siu Mei,

At least one aspect of James’s old personality has not been affected by the upheaval in his life. He may have delivered a devastating emotional blow to his wife, embittered his in-laws and caused me severe distress, but he seems to have retained his ability to charm much of the rest of the human race. Almost everyone among his fellow workers, it appears, loves him. So I have a lot of support in my efforts to clear him of the crime he has been charged with in Singapore.

It has been like that since he was a small boy. All your women friends wanted to cuddle our Jamie and spoil him with presents. Then, of course, we, too, could find no fault with our son. Today, I still find it hard to forgive him for all the pain he has caused but the compassion aroused in me by his apparently unjustified imprisonment and the sorrowful loss of Sarah is steadily undermining my resistance to extending him absolution. And I have come to the realisation that he must have gone through an extremely difficult struggle on the way to achieving the dramatic, personal transformation that we now see.

Meanwhile, I will concentrate my energy on trying to get James out of this mess in Singapore. I am increasingly certain that he has been wrongly accused but I am less confident of proving this before a court in Singapore, where the law is sterner and more rigid than in Australia. As an independent observer of the court processes in South-East Asia during my life as a journalist, I

have often been disturbed by the harshness of judgements and penalties imposed on people convicted of committing relatively minor offences or of transgressions seen as a challenge to authoritarian governments. Now I am personally involved, these concerns loom powerfully in my mind. As I contemplate the uncertainty of James's fate, I keep coming back with trepidation to the severe sentences passed on Anwar Ibrahim - in his first trial for a minor infraction of the law applying to the abuse of ministerial powers and in the second for the commission of sodomy after a hearing replete with inconsistencies.

At the time, I was appalled at how a man could be removed from society at the height of his political career and confined to a cell for a long period of time for such relatively minor offences. But my reaction was impersonal. During Anwar's trials I had been struck by the similarity of the situation in which his father and I had found ourselves - both of us having to contend with the seemingly incredible assertions that sons who had married and presented us with grandchildren were homosexuals. However, I never imagined then that my son, too, would be arrested on a sodomy charge and face a criminal hearing in an Asian court. Following Anwar's convictions, I sympathised with his father for having to suffer the added anguish - on top of the accusations of homosexuality - of seeing his son sentenced to long terms of imprisonment, little knowing that less than two years later I would be contemplating the awful possibility of James undergoing the same fate.

Many Australians have discovered too late that punishment for crimes is significantly more severe in Asia than in their homeland. Thai jails are filled with foreigners serving life sentences for drug offences, a high proportion of whom come from Australia. The differences in attitudes towards crime and punishment have created periodic cultural clashes between Canberra and governments in Asia. Relations between Australia and Malaysia soured over the death sentence imposed on two Australians, Kevin Barlow and Brian Chambers, who were hanged in 1986 for drug trafficking. Australian Prime Minister Bob Hawke angered his Malaysian counterpart by describing the execution of prisoners as "barbaric".

Conditions in jails in Asia are notoriously bleak. Prisoners in some countries are confined in bare cells with only a mat to sleep on and a bucket for faeces and urine. In many prisons they are fed on food a dog would reject. Bangkok's main jail is notorious for the rampant hepatitis and other diseases among inmates. But it is by no means the worst in Asia. I remember my trepidation in my early years in Indonesia when an officer of the military police warned me, after one of my articles had displeased the government, that I could end up in Tanjong Priok prison. It was a place in those days where people could be locked up and forgotten. Fortunately, the threat to throw me into that infamous hell-hole was never carried out.

Even Malaysia, for all its modern, high-rise buildings, industrial development and pretensions to leadership in South-East Asia, treats prisoners dismally. The standard cell in its jails is small and unfurnished. Initially, inmates are given only two blankets to place on the cement floor as bedding. At the end of three months, if their jail sentences exceeded this period, they are issued with a thin mattress. According to an opposition politician jailed in 1998 for remarks that would have been regarded as fair comment in most Western societies, it was no more effective as a buffer between the rock-hard surface and his spine than a coat of paint.

Singapore's jails are less austere in amenities but just as forbidding in the institutional coldness towards prisoners and the same establishment conviction that criminals should be punished severely. Forgiveness is not a characteristic of the authorities of the island republic. Government policies and practices are redolent of an Old Testament belief system although the Chinese majority is Confucian and Buddhist in its ideological origins. I tend to hold on an emotional level that the death sentence may be appropriate for certain shocking crimes but I find it appalling that a human can be lashed with a cane - often until his skin breaks and blood flows - as an official penalty under a country's crimes act. It is an uncivilized punishment which might be expected from Dark Age despots but not from a twentieth century government.

I hope, as my son goes to trial, I can find the same fortitude displayed by Anwar's father and wife during the course of his arrest, prosecution and conviction.

All my love,

John

Chapter Forty-One

As Scott stood in the kitchen of his apartment waiting for the water to boil so he could make himself a cup of tea, he stared in exasperation at the dust settling on his balcony . It came from a work site across the road, where bulldozers had knocked down a complex of old wooden government buildings and tractors mounted with power drills were now digging out the cement foundations. Trucks hauling away the debris were stirring up bared soil which had dried rapidly in the blazing sun after being turned into a lake of mud by a tropical downpour a day earlier. When the demolition job was finished and construction of the proposed new high-rise offices began, he could expect to have his peace disrupted for at least another two years. And the completed project would see a sharp increase in government servants and traffic in the area. It was another reason to move on.

The government's increasing paranoia towards the foreign media and the threat of a sedition charge hanging over his head had prompted him to start thinking about leaving Malaysia. Now the radical change that was taking place in this formerly quiet corner of Kuala Lumpur was providing another reason for him to consider whether the time had come for him to end his stay in the country. As he glanced around the cluttered apartment, where filing cabinets, piles of newspapers and reference books were taking up space in the living room as well as the area that served as his office, he mentally groaned at the prospect of having to pack up and ship everything off to Australia. But as two power drills simultaneously began hammering at solid blocks of concrete with a hideous clamour, the tedious task of moving from one country to another yet again looked less taxing than enduring construction chaos for two more years. At that moment, he decided that he would quit his job and return to Sydney.

As he sipped his tea, soothed by his abrupt decision and the prospect of settling back in Australia,

the telephone rang.

“I have forgiven you for making those terrible jokes about your son being charged with sodomy. But it demonstrated for me how different we are. You can joke about something like that while I take those kind of matters very seriously. You once said you would like to marry a Malay girl and I thought that might be me. But I’m not sure that you could ever be a good Muslim. So I have given up any ideas I might have had that we would be married.”

The words tumbled out of Siti as if they were part of a conversation that had been going on before he picked up the receiver.

“You had ideas that we might be married?” he asked, genuinely surprised. Their banter about whether he would wed a Muslim had always seemed more like a game to him than an earnest discussion between them of whether they might become husband and wife.

“No longer. You have made me think about myself. I am not a good Muslim. That is what is wrong with my life. I pray five times a day but I don’t cover my head. My mother has been sending the sermons of Tok Guru to me. He is a true Islamist - unlike the leaders of UMNO. I have decided to go back to Kelantan, wear a tudung and dress modestly and devote myself to Allah.”

“You are just unhappy because you don’t like your job. Did you ask Mohamed Ali to help you find another position?”

“Yes. He said it might be difficult because I had changed jobs so many times. But that’s not the reason I am going back to Kelantan. This government is corrupt. I’ve decided to give my support to Nik Aziz and PAS.”

“Good God. How can you support a party that wants to cut off the hands of thieves, stone adulterous women and reduce the female half of the population to an inferior status?” Scott asked.

“The hudud may offend your Western mind but these are the teachings of Allah.”

“You didn’t use to think this way.”

Siti did not answer immediately. After a moment, she said: “Sometimes I am very lonely. Sometimes I don’t know what I believe - or what I am. I tell myself I am a Malay and a Muslim. That is my true identity. But I have allowed myself to be drawn to Western ways. This is why I sometimes feel so lost. Now I have decided to return to my real self, to commit myself fully to Malay values and to Islam. Already I am more at ease with myself having made this commitment. I think we all need to find out precisely who we are. Then we can live more contented lives.”

Scott had never heard Siti speak so seriously. He was reminded of his son’s turbulent search for his real self. But for James it was focused on his sexuality while in Siti’s case it had led her to examine her commitment to her culture and religion.

He felt strangely sad that Siti had ceased to be the frivolous person he had known but was also in a way thankful that he would no longer be subject to the frustration of her flirtatious visits.

“So I’m not going to see you again?” he asked.

“You will soon forget me,” she said, with the old teasing tone to her voice, as if they had been lovers. “But I may write to you. Goodbye, John.”

“Goodbye Siti.” He knew instantly he would miss her but before he could say anything more the line was dead.

When he let himself think dispassionately about Siti - especially her beliefs and her religion - he knew he could never have married her. But the abrupt end to their relationship left him feeling bereft. He had fantasised that she might become his partner as an antidote to his loneliness. However, it was always a hazy concept and, if he had given it realistic consideration, he could not expect her to agree to any arrangement short of his conversion and marriage. Now, Siti had made a decision to change her life and was, at least for now, satisfied with her choice. He was envious of her apparent contentment.

Scott, for his part, was still struggling to find a state of satisfaction following the ending of the part of his life that had been centered on his wife. For more than ten years he had been mentally stalled in the past, failing to make any significant progress towards a new individuality in tune with the new existence he was leading. As this conclusion took hold, it triggered a realisation that so much of the emptiness inside him was due to his reluctance to relinquish his status as the bereaving husband. He now saw that he had to move on not just from Malaysia and Singapore, which had provided a distraction from his grieving, but also from his absorption with the death of his wife.

The answer, perhaps, he mused, was to find a new partner to help him further develop his new life. The idea unnerved him but it stayed in his mind and he knew he must continue to examine it.

Chapter Forty-Two

May 19, 2000

My Dearest Siu Mei,

Soon there will be another radical change in my life as I move back to Australia after ten years in South-East Asia. No doubt I will find it traumatic. The older I get, the more reluctant I am to suffer shifts in my daily routine. However, while I prefer uniformity and stability in my existence, I know too well that I cannot expect things to remain the same. And I have experienced so many jolts in the past few years that I am no longer surprised by finding myself challenged by new, unusual situations. At the same time, I think I am becoming a little more understanding of James’s odyssey as I discover he is not alone in seeking a new meaning in his life. This process seems even

to be extending to the obdurate man you married. So much has changed for me that I find myself taking stock of John Scott.

I went through a process of self-introspection following your death, confronting my failure to treat you with the respect due to you for the person you were - a loving wife and good mother to our children. I recognised how selfish I was in so many things and how the compromises that there should be in a marriage were all on your side. I vowed to be more generous and considerate to our sons. But all my good intentions were forgotten in my initially unforgiving response to James's actions. Now I am telling myself I must adopt a more studied approach to life's vicissitudes.

As I was pondering how upheavals in people's lives can force changes in their outlook, I was intrigued by the recollection that you and I both derived from adventurous stock and that unforeseen developments thrust both our fathers into unfamiliar and challenging situations. Your ancestors were among members of a small community in northern Fukien Province in China, who, astonishingly, it seems to me, accepted a proposal by Dutch officials in 1791 to uproot themselves and make a new home in Java, the most densely populated island of the Netherlands East Indies, thousands of miles across the sea to the south. This involved proceeding from their village to the coast of China and making the long, perilous journey to the Dutch colony on sailing vessels no bigger than junks plying the China coast. Some 70 years later, my grandfather, like many Scots, decided to leave his homeland and make a new life in New Zealand.

In the beginning life in New Zealand and the Netherlands East Indies was relatively trouble-free and fruitful for the Scott and Tan clans but it turned sour for my father with the outbreak of World War I and for yours with the end of Dutch rule in the South-East Asian islands that were to become the Republic of Indonesia. I learned while working in Jakarta that the Chinese were hated by the indigenous inhabitants for the privileges accorded them by the Dutch and the wealth they acquired through their commercial acumen and they had been made to suffer under the new regime.

I saw the extent of this when I was taken by your father to a government office, during my first visit to Surabaya after we married, so he could register me, as required by law, as a foreign visitor to his home. He drove me through the streets of the city to our destination in his pre-World War II, convertible Hupmobile, the lone symbol left to him of his former wealth when the Dutch left their former colony and the indigenous races of the archipelago took control and named it Indonesia. It had not been confiscated by the Indonesian military authorities when they seized his properties and other valuable possessions only because they did not recognise its value as a prestigious vehicle.

I remembered that you had told me your family had been forced to hand over both a grand weekend home at the Tretes hill resort and a town mansion, subsequently moving into a more modest dwelling in the city. Your father's foreign funds and bank accounts had been frozen and your family had to survive on the wages your brothers earned when they were old enough to work. The government banned public displays of the Chinese language in romanised or traditional writing and Chinese were forced to take Indonesian names. Your father was outraged by this demand but your brothers persuaded him it was necessary to change the clan name to protect him and his family from attacks by military-backed thugs. He found a way to salvage a modicum of self-esteem by searching for and discovering an Indonesian name, Tandjung, the first syllable of

which had a familiar ancestral ring and was always accented when he was introducing himself.

When we reached our destination, your father led the way into a room where a Javanese man was seated at a desk behind a counter. Directing me to sit on a bench, he approached the counter. The official at first ignored him and then, after several minutes, motioned him to join his foreign guest. Your father apologised to me for the delay in a whisper, clearly anxious not to upset the person he had come to see by showing impatience. Another man, also a Javanese, entered the room and walked to the counter. After a moment, the official attended to him, giving him a document which he had apparently come to collect, before returning to his desk without a glance in our direction. About an hour and a half later, during which the official had briefly left the room, used his telephone and spoken to five indigenous Indonesians who had come to the office on business, he finally summoned your father to the counter with a peremptory gesture. He then gave him a form to fill in and told him to come back the next day. When we returned to the office 24 hours later there was another long delay before he looked at the completed form,. For about 40 minutes he went over it with your father, finding fault here and there, before finally accepting it and putting my name on a register.

It must have been galling for a proud Chinese man in his late sixties, who had once enjoyed community respect as a leading banker, to have a bureaucratic bully treat him like a second-class citizen in the land where he had been born. However, he endured the indignity of it all without a single complaint in my hearing. He also acted the perfect host despite the fact that I had caused him this trouble on top of marrying his youngest and favourite child, whom he had always assumed would wed a Chinese from another prominent family.

My father's career - interestingly also in banking - and his expected future as a national rugby union star was wrecked by the war, during which he experienced the insanity of the failed Gallipoli expedition and the horrors of fighting in trenches on the Western Front. He returned to New Zealand profoundly transformed by these events and the loss of many close friends, wounded in body and spirit, and unable to settle back into the routine of work in a bank or regain his sporting prowess. It was extremely difficult for him to adapt to civilian life, but he survived, despite becoming bankrupt during the depression, and managed, with his Scottish wife, to raise three healthy and goal-oriented children.

I will keep these two survivors in mind as I face the future, reminding myself that the challenges that lie ahead are unlikely to be as testing as the traumas that turned their lives upside down. Nevertheless, I am a little apprehensive about the consequence of my decision to return to Sydney, where I will have to come to terms with living in an empty house, alone with memories of you and our sons when they were younger. I have been working hard over the past years to ease the pain of your death and have not given serious consideration to remarrying. As I contemplate my departure from here, I am, for the first time, beginning to wonder whether I should try to find a partner. I am lonely here in Kuala Lumpur; I will be even more lonely in the place where we were together. But even if I was fortunate enough to meet a woman with whom there was a mutual attraction, setting up house with her, after 30 years of living with you and ten years by myself, would represent a more massive change for me than anything that has occurred in the past decade. I am not sure that I am ready for it.

All my love,

John

Chapter Forty-Three

Scott put his beer down on the counter of the Lake Club's Batik Bar and reached for a handful of peanuts.

"It doesn't look as if I'm going to get the interview I was after with your beloved leader," he said to Yusuf. "It's been four weeks since I made my application through his press officer and I haven't heard back from Zak yet."

"Did you really expect Dr M to invite you to his sumptuous office at Putrajaya for a chat in the current climate? You seem to forget that you're a member of the vile Western media, which only today was the subject of another attack by the PM over an American newspaper's criticism of Malaysia's human rights record."

"But he's always been polite and cordial to me when I've spoken to him at official functions and press conferences."

"That's the Malay way," Yusuf retorted. "Smile at your enemy to divert him from the fact that an accomplice is about to plunge a keris into his back."

"I assumed he would be sympathetic to me since we are almost of the same advanced age."

"Hah! It's not your age but the colour of your skin that is important. I told you about the time when I was a junior reporter covering a trip he made to Perlis. He got all wound up about the perfidiousness of the British in colonial times, when he was a young doctor, and ended his speech with the declaration: 'Never trust a white man.'

"But he was mad at the British. I'm an Australian."

"Same thing. As far as he's concerned all Australians are of British stock. He ignores the fact that there's been a huge migration from Europe and Asia. Additionally, he sees the Australian Government as a lackey of the United States, which he hates for its neo-colonial arrogance."

"That line about not trusting a white man, that's pure racism."

"Really?" Yusuf said mockingly.

"Okay, so racism is universal. We humans are an intolerant lot."

“Yes, intolerant of people of different races and of people’s different sexual preferences.”

“Touché.”

“How is your son coping with his incarceration in the Singapore Government’s guest-house for wayward visitors?”

Before Scott could answer, his mobile telephone rang. Since the noisy bar was no place to take the call, he let Yusuf know he was going to a quieter place by pointing to the door and walked out into the lobby.

“Hello.”

“Mr Scott?”

“Yes.”

“It’s Jeff. I’m calling from Sydney.”

“Hi, Jeff. Would you like me to call you back?” Scott asked, not wanting the artist to have to pay for the call.

“It’s okay. I wanted to let you know that something occurred to me that might be important. Marilyn caught up with me this morning and said you found it hard to believe that Meckleson’s racist attitude could have prompted him to frame James. But racism might not have been the only factor.

After talking to Marilyn, I remembered something that happened a few weeks before the advertising convention in Singapore. I had gone to the Bennelong offices to drop off some of my work and stopped by to see Mike Monahan, a friend who works in the marketing department. The door to his office was open and I stuck my head in and said hello. He asked me who I’d managed to get to make up an advertising group for the Gay And Lesbian Mardi Gras in Sydney. I named a few people and he said: ‘What about James?’ I replied that James had told me he wouldn’t be able to make it because he was flat out preparing stuff for the convention and any spare time he had would be spent with his seriously-ill daughter.

“At that point, I heard someone at the water-cooler in the corridor on my right. I turned my head and saw Meckleson with his head down filling a plastic cup. I don’t know how long he had been there. He looked up, nodded to me and headed back down the corridor to his office. Nobody knew that James was gay except for a few close friends. I wondered then how much of our conversation had reached Meckleson’s ears. Now I think he must have heard everything and learned for the first time that James was a homosexual. He had made some nasty remarks in the past about poofers in the advertising industry so we all knew he was homophobic. I can imagine that all his pent-up hatred of James was inflamed by the discovery that the man who had taken his job was detestable, by his reckoning, not only ethnically but also sexually.”

“But would this have been enough to prompt him to act in a way that could result in James being sent to prison?” Scott asked.

“I wouldn’t be surprised by anything that an ardent homophobe might do. A recent hearing in the New South Wales Coroner’s Court revealed that in the 1980s members of a gay-hating gang of perverted citizens calling themselves the Part-Time Killers beat four homosexuals to death and were suspects in a fifth slaying, in two missing persons cases and in two assaults. A police informant recorded a conversation in which one of the gang said he loved to hear the poofers scream. If Meckleson is consumed with that kind of malice towards gays, it would have given him great enjoyment to cook up a scheme that would get James into his present plight.”

“You could be right,” Scott said, remembering the deadly harassment of homosexuals by police in Auckland and the vicious torment inflicted on a gay man by his neighbour in Sydney.

“And there was an incentive for Meckleson to try to destroy James’s career and end his employment at Bennelong.” Jeff added. “If James went to prison, Meckleson would be in a position to get his old job back, which is exactly what has happened.”

“You’re right. Marilyn made that point, too. God, it’s horrifying to think that a person could be driven by hatred of homosexuals to such a vile course of action. As well as slipping money, James’s room number and a time into the Malay youth’s pocket, Meckleson must have made the call to the police that prompted them to raid James’s room. But if we assume Meckleson was the guilty party, how can we prove it? He only has to deny everything and the police will say our case against him is wild conjecture with no substance to it.”

“We have to get Meckleson to admit he framed James.”

“How can we do that?”

“Try to bluff him into a confession. Marilyn said you told her the police have a piece of paper with James’s room number and a time on it. Tell Meckleson that it can be traced back to him. Say an expert told you the person who penned it could be identified even if he attempted to disguise his writing and the defence will be asking police to compare it with a sample from Meckleson.”

“You mean tackle him face to face?”

“Yes. He’s due to fly to Singapore next Friday, the twenty-sixth, to begin a regional tour. If you can be in Singapore on that day, you could confront Meckleson as he walks into the Regal . He’ll be tired after the flight and might be shaken into a confession by a frontal attack. You’ll need a witness - James’s lawyer perhaps?”

“It’s worth a try, I guess.”

“Okay. I’ll have Marilyn check his flight arrangements. I know Bennelong, like us, uses Qantas when they can. He would probably fly on QF9. I took that flight to the convention. It got in around 9.30 p.m. and we were at the hotel around 10.30. I suggest you plan on being in the hotel

lobby from 10. But check the arrival time on Tuesday, assuming Marilyn confirms that's his flight."

Scott expressed his thanks to Jeff for his help and said he would let him know how the plan went.

Chapter Forty-Four

May 27, 2000

My Dearest Siu Mei,

I am in a very despondent mood as I write to you on my notebook computer in my hotel room in Singapore.

A friend of James and I had come up with a plan to use bluff in an attempt to obtain a confession from a Bennelong executive, Maurice Meckleson, who, we are convinced, framed our son, but, like so many seemingly bright ideas, it did not produce the intended result.

As we had arranged, I flew to Singapore yesterday and positioned myself in the lobby of the Regal Hotel shortly before 10 p.m. I had brought a Singapore journalist friend, Peter Lee, with me as a witness because James's lawyer had said his involvement could prejudice his role as our son's defence counsel. I had earlier received a call from Marilyn, another friend of James, confirming that Meckleson was on a Qantas flight, QF 9, and had then checked that it was expected at its scheduled arrival time of 9.30. Even with the renowned efficiency of the Singapore International Airport, he was unlikely to arrival at the hotel before 10.30 but in my nervous condition I preferred to be in place early.

I had just glanced at my watch, which was showing 10.32, when Meckleson, walked into the lobby. I identified him immediately from Marilyn's description. He was a short, stout man in his fifties with a bristling demeanour which gave the impression he was monitoring the performance of everyone around him with a critical eye. The desk clerk recognised him from previous visits, helped no doubt by the fact that his name was on the list of expected guests.

"Good evening, Mr Meckleson," he said. "Welcome back to the Regal ."

"Evening," Meckleson mumbled and took the proffered room card.

I had walked towards the reception counter from where I was standing as soon as I spied Meckleson and when he had pocketed his room card, I stepped forward to catch his attention.

"Mr Meckleson, my name is John Scott. I'm the father of James Tan. I have information that points to the fact that you framed my son by giving the Malay youth you knew as 'Judy' a piece of paper with James's room number and a time written on it. I'll be giving that information to the police together with a report from an expert who says he can identify the person who penned the

note even if there has been an attempt to disguise the writing. The defence will ask the police to compare the hand-writing on the note found on the youth with a sample from you.

“Tell me, why did you do it? Were you so filled with hatred for James because he was not only half Chinese but gay, offending your racist and homophobic disposition, that you were prepared to destroy him?”

Meckleson’s expression did not change. He stared at me with the same cold eyes and glowering face with which he had entered the hotel. As I stood face to face with him, I reflected: This is a man who is so egocentric, so consumed by prejudice and so totally ruthless that he was prepared to write a false report about James and then to set him up for a criminal charge that could put him in jail for many years. I realized it would be exceedingly difficult to get a confession out of him.

“I have no idea what you are talking about,” he barked. “If you are trying to find some way of exonerating your son by incriminating me in a so-called frame-up, you’re not going to succeed. It will be very obvious to the Singapore police that your wild accusations are no more than the desperate recourse of a distraught father. And if it came down to the point of the defence introducing a hand-writing expert, you can be sure that another hand-writing expert could be found to dispute the analysis of the first.”

Meckleson turned on his heel and headed for the lifts. I stood there knowing my bluff had failed and that the Bennelong marketing director would now be on guard against any further attempts to get him to disclose that James was in jail as a result of a malevolent plan he had implemented.

Peter Lee, who had been following the exchange from a short distance away, walked over to me and put his hand on my shoulder.

“You tried your best,” he said sympathetically, “but that man is not going to crack easily.”

I nodded, feeling foolish and embarrassed, like a school-boy called to the front of the class and upbraided by his teacher for making a smart-alec remark.

“Hey, don’t give up yet,” Peter urged as my face reflected my dejection at the outcome of the meeting with Meckleson. “As a result of what you’ve told me and what I witnessed tonight I’m now convinced that your son is innocent and that Meckleson is the bastard who put him in jail. I don’t know why but I sense something rotten about that man. You’ve got to keep working to find evidence to prove your son’s innocence and I’ll do whatever I can to help you.”

I thanked him for his encouraging remarks but I must tell you Siu Mei that I am desolate that I have been unable to make any headway in extricating James from the terrible situation in which he has become entangled through no fault of his own. I can’t think of anything more to do. But Peter is right. I must continue to search for some way to persuade the police that James is a victim and not a criminal. If I am unsuccessful he will be sent to jail, losing not only his freedom but the opportunity to pursue his chosen career. If he is sentenced to the maximum term of imprisonment, he will find it hard to resume a normal existence even if he can get a reasonable job. Even if his time behind bars is shorter, the conviction will most likely preclude him from being able to work

with his old agency or any other top organisation.

Despite all this I must not succumb to defeatism.

All my love,

John

Chapter Forty-Five

As Scott reached for his keys at the entrance to his apartment, his hand touched his mobile telephone, which was in the same jacket pocket. Transferring the keys to his left hand, he took it out to check if he had missed any calls. He saw that he had forgotten to switch the phone back on after shutting it down for his flight from Singapore and shook his head at the memory lapse. Stupid, he muttered to himself, fretting - as he always did - that his periodic forgetfulness was evidence of a general deterioration caused by the aging process. After he had opened the door, he put the keys back in his pocket and stepped inside, hauling his suitcase behind him with his free hand. The apartment was hot and stuffy. He closed the door, turned on the air-conditioning and thumbed the keys to activate the hand phone, producing almost immediately the two beeps that signalled the receipt of a text message. It was from Jega, saying: "Please call me."

Scott had telephoned the lawyer's office that morning before his departure for Kuala Lumpur but Jega was out. His secretary had agreed to inform her employer that the attempt to provoke Meckleson into admitting he framed James had been unsuccessful. She also said she would let him know that Scott did not want his son to be told about the botched plan.

Before he flew to Singapore to confront Meckleson, Scott had allowed himself to imagine a favourable outcome. In this scenario, he would visit his son in Queenstown Remand Prison and inform him that Meckleson had been bluffed into making a full confession and, as a consequence, he would soon be able to walk out of the jail and resume his life as a free man again.

However, after Meckleson had arrogantly dismissed Scott's accusations, he was too mortified to face his son and had decided to return to Kuala Lumpur without seeking a meeting with him. He was now deeply unhappy that he had been in Singapore without seeing James but while he was there he had been unable to summon the courage to give him the bad news, which would have surely shattered any hope he might have that his father could secure his release.

Leaving his suitcase in the living room, he walked to his desk and dialled Jega's number. The lawyer's secretary answered the phone and asked him to wait.

"John, how are you my dear friend?" The sonorous voice of the Singapore barrister and politician resonated in Scott's ear.

“Okay physically, thanks, Jega. But depressed by my failure to get a confession from Meckleson.”

“I thought you were perhaps a little hasty in confronting your suspect without further investigation, so I’ve been doing a little research on my own.”

“Really? With rewarding results?” Scott asked eagerly.

“I’m not sure what it all means yet. I decided to see if I could find out more about the brief message that directed Hassan to James’s hotel room and the piece of paper on which it was written. I have a contact, Ramon, in the forensic section of the Attorney General’s office, who went to school with my son and remains a friend. After he had examined it, he told me the few pen strokes it took to give a time, 11.30, and place, Room 1722, were probably insufficient for it to be convincingly matched to the writing of a suspect.

“Ramon believed it might be possible to detect some DNA on the paper with the technology now available but I said the police would refuse to ask Meckleson for a specimen for testing unless we could show compelling evidence that he could have been the writer. I asked him whether there was anything special about the paper itself.

“Ramon said it was quite distinctive. It was a quality product, light pink in colour, which appeared to have come from a small pad. It measured about 12 centimetres in length and 10 centimetres in width. Ramon concluded it had been 14 centimetres long before someone tore off a strip. He surmised it was personalised notepaper and the missing segment bore a name. Most interestingly, the paper was scented.

“I suggested to Ramon that for this reason the notepaper was more likely to have come from the pad of a woman than a man. He said that when he drew the same conclusion and mentioned this to the police officer who gave him the torn sheet, the man said he was not surprised by the paper’s fragrance, linking it to the gay culture embraced by the defendant.

“But we are conjecturing that Hassan was given the message by Meckleson not your son. The problem here is I cannot imagine that this homophobic advertising executive, as you have described him, would carry perfumed notepaper.”

“Not by choice,” Scott said excitedly, having suddenly remembered Marilyn’s account of the taxi ride with Meckleson. “But on this occasion he had no choice. He wanted something to write on urgently and was given a piece of paper by a woman.”

“How do you know this?”

Scott told him how Jenny, one of the women at the advertising convention, had provided Meckleson with a sheet taken from her notepad.

“You are saying he used the paper given to him by Jenny to write down the names of shops. But the only thing written on the paper confiscated from Hassan was the room number and time. I specifically asked Ramon whether there was any other writing or marks on it and he said, ‘No.’

Scott frowned, deflated by Jega's remarks after thinking they were making progress. "Hell. Maybe she gave him another sheet later."

The lawyer gave a non-committal grunt. "If we are to persuade the Attorney General's office to accept your conspiracy theory, we will need some very strong evidence tying Meckleson to the note paper."

"Okay. I'll get back to James's friends."

"Good luck, John. Keep me posted."

As soon as Scott had finished his call to Jega he telephoned Bennelong and asked to be put through to Marilyn. He ended up with the message service again and swore under his breath in frustration. As he left a message for her to return his call urgently, he hoped she would be back in her office soon. Scott knew he ought to check whether there were any news stories he should be covering but was not up to working. Staring out through the window at the green landscape across the road, he tried to curb the expectation building up inside him. It was too early to say whether the development reported by Jega would lead to a positive outcome. But maybe, just maybe, they were on the right track.

Chapter Forty-Six

May 28, 2000

My Dearest Siu Mei,

I think we are close to the truth about what happened on the night of James's arrest. But it is going to be difficult to persuade the Singapore authorities that he is innocent. Jega has just gained access to Hassan's statement, which fortifies James's protestation of innocence by showing that he was not waiting for the Malay youth but had gone to sleep. Hassan said that after a room boy opened the door for him, he undressed and was getting into the bed where a man was sleeping when two police officers burst through the door. That sequence of events supports our supposition that Meckleson gave James's room number and a time to Hassan and then alerted the police. But Jega said the police would either contest Hassan's assertion that James was asleep or ignore it since they had enough evidence of intent in what they saw to argue their prisoner had a case to answer under Singapore law. If Jega pursued the issue the prosecution would state that the note showed the defendant had clearly invited an under-age person to his room for the purpose of committing an illegal sexual act and if he had drunk too much and fallen asleep that did not weaken the government case.

I am trying to find a link between Meckleson and the paper on which the time and room number were written. I think I can do this if I can get in touch with Jenny, a Bennelong employee like

Marilyn. She gave a piece of her notepaper to the marketing director while she and Marilyn, were riding with him to the restaurant on the night of James's arrest. But if this is to lead to the Singapore police taking any action against Meckleson, I must have something to give them before he returns to Australia, where he will be able to stall efforts to question or extradite him. I don't have much time, since he will be back in Singapore in four days after visiting Jakarta, Manila and Kuala Lumpur and will then be heading back to Sydney two days later.

This makes it urgent for me to find information implicating Meckleson that I can turn over to the police so they can confront him with it when he arrives in Singapore. I left a message for Marilyn to call me but I am worried that she may be out of town on a business trip and not get back to me before Meckleson is on his way to Sydney. Each hour that passes makes me more nervous.

I keep thinking of James sitting in the loneliness of his cell in the Queenstown Remand Prison, contemplating the prospect of up to 20 years without friends or family, his career destroyed, his life as a free man abbreviated sharply. If he is convicted and given a long sentence, he will emerge at the end of it, like a time traveller, into a different world. But unlike the heroes of space movies, he will age during his "journey" and suffer - as an added penalty - the loss of his important middle years, when he could have expected to be enjoying a rich professional and family life.

I can imagine him worrying about the children and wondering when he will get to see them again. If, God forbid, I cannot secure his release I suppose I should give consideration to whether or not at some stage they might be flown to Singapore for a meeting with their father. I don't really know whether this would be a good or bad thing to do. I will have to seek some advice on the question of what is best for the offspring of prisoners and, of course, discuss it with James. It is far too early for Paul to undergo the traumatic experience of visiting his father in jail. But Linda will soon be old enough to make up her own mind about whether she wants to see him. The truth of what has happened to their dad cannot be kept from either of them for much longer.

It is incredible to me that I should be sitting here contemplating a future in which our son is confined to a prison cell for a significant length of time, during which the children are growing up without a father to love and counsel them. If you were here, I am sure you would give them so much affection and attention that it would ease the pain of his absence. But sadly they have only the one grandmother, who will ply them with bitter attacks on their father.

I am not sure whether Erika will be strong enough to counter her mother's denigration of James as she struggles to make a new life for herself. She surprised me with her readiness to believe in her estranged husband's innocence when we discussed his arrest at Westmead hospital, despite the antagonistic remarks of her mother and sister. But her spirit may weaken if he is convicted and sentenced to a long jail term. It will be up to me to do what I can to redress the balance in James's favour. That is rather ironic, given my earlier strong animosity towards James after learning of the breakup of his marriage, following his announcement that he was gay.

But I have no choice. I am now certain that James has been wrongly accused and I must convince the children that he has committed no crime. I must persuade them that they can be proud of their father and, if he is sent to jail, they should give him their support and encouragement so that he will be able to look forward to a time in the future - however distant it may be - when, on his

release, he is reunited with them. To this end, I will make sure I regularly spend time with them when I return to Australia.

Meanwhile, I will turn my thoughts to you for the support and encouragement I will need - and know you would always give me - through this stressful period.

All my love,

John

Chapter Forty-Seven

Queenstown Remand Prison
Singapore

May 29, 2000

Dear Catherine,

Thank you again for your loving support in coming to Sydney for Sarah's funeral. You and Alan were a comforting presence during that extremely difficult period, when I sometimes felt more like a stranger who had joined the mourners than a grieving father. I was a pariah in the eyes of Erika's family and their hatred enveloped me like a toxic cloud whenever I was in their presence. The only succour I could find was the understanding and sympathy I saw in your eyes. Towards the end of that dreadful day, I recognised that Dad was also sensitive to my sorrow and loneliness and distressed by it and I remembered that it was only through his efforts that I was able to be with Sarah for a short period before her death. However, for most of the time before and during the church service I was too depressed to respond to the compassion shown by both of you.

You will remember that shortly before we left the church for the cemetery I was taken ill and the priest suggested I lie down for a few minutes. I was stretched out on a couch in a room to which he had taken me, with my head throbbing in pain, when you came in and asked me if there was anything you could do for me. You must have wondered why I remained silent. I did not answer because the headache had been aggravated by a strong perception in my mind that I was a bad person who had brought nothing but sorrow to my family. There I was, lying in this room in the church, where we had come to mourn the death of a little girl, and I should have been concentrating on memories of her life and the tragedy of her passing. However, my mind was filled with torment over the distress I had caused so many people as well as a sense of shame over my fixation with the question of my real sexual self at a time when my daughter was dying.

Now I have made it all worse by ending up in jail for something I did not do. If I believed in a God I would also have to believe that he was punishing me for the misery I inflicted upon people who

loved me. But that would mean He was prepared to let Linda and Paul endure more pain since, if I am convicted and sentenced to a long term of imprisonment, they will be without a father for many years. This would definitely be a more fraught outcome for them. While it hasn't been good for them to have a dad who left their mother, they will suffer more psychological damage if he is locked up in a prison umpteen kilometres away in Singapore. My situation seems so hopeless. I wake up every morning to another day in the life of my children which I will not be able to share with them.

Nevertheless, I am trying to find positive aspects in what has happened to me. To my surprise, I am now able to look at myself with less disdain. I have concluded that I am not really a "bad" person but simply an individual struggling to come to an understanding of who he is. My aim is to find a peace of mind that will enable me to live with myself, flaws and all. I also want to make a worthwhile contribution to the community of my fellows. Unfortunately, I will have to wait some time before I can attempt to achieve this goal.

I tell myself that I must see this episode as another life experience and a new test of my fortitude. At the same time, I have to prepare myself for the likelihood of a long prison sentence and a lashing with a rattan cane and find the strength to meet these challenges. The prospect of being caned and enduring pain does not frighten me but I am sickened when I contemplate the humiliating procedure of being strapped naked to a trestle for this Dark Ages punishment.

The worst thing I am having to deal with now - and will, it seems, have to confront in the years ahead - is the desolation of being confined by myself in a small, almost bare space, except for a short period during which I am allowed out to work out in an exercise yard. The loneliness that hit me after leaving Erika was a mild distress compared with my present desperate state of being cut off from friends, family and the world at large. Before my fateful Singapore trip, I had dared to hope that, having begun to make friends in the gay community, I could end the solitary state in which I had found myself, following the breakup of my marriage. As I met a wider circle of people with similar interests, I grew increasingly optimistic that I would, eventually, find an attractive partner with similar interests and aspirations, who would provide me with encouragement - perhaps even love - and would be there when I needed someone to turn to. However, at least for the immediate future, that expectation has evaporated. Accordingly, I must look inward to find strength and inspiration. I am attempting to convince myself that this horrible experience will in the end make me a better person and give me the confidence to survive whatever else might occur in my life. When I eventually get out of here, I will endeavour to find something more meaningful to live for. I want to have a goal on which to focus to make up for the wasted years in jail.

I have been told that if I am convicted and given a sentence of several years I will be moved to the bleak, old jail at Changi, where conditions will be worse and I will be among hardened criminals who have no future outside the high, stone walls. I try not to think about what lies ahead, confining my rumination as much as possible to the present and what I can do to exercise my brain and my body.

In the meantime, I am heartened by your love and the belief that my relations with Dad are on the mend. I hope you two will draw closer together now that the tension that arose between you as a result of my actions has eased. We three must once again stand strongly together as the core of our

family and make sure our children forge a staunch relationship that will carry through to the next generation. Every time I think “family”, I have an awful emptiness inside me because our mother is no longer a part of it. I was deeply hurt when Dad said in 1998 that it was better she was dead than to have to confront my homosexuality and the breakup of my marriage. But I now appreciate how distressed he was over my actions at a time when he was still grieving for his wife. And I am certain in my own mind that Mum would have empathised with my struggle and been a solid pillar of support over the past few years. If she had been alive she would have calmed down Dad and brought him around to an acceptance of my sexual odyssey long ago. I like to think that she is watching over all of us.

Love,

James

Chapter Forty-Eight

Scott was in a buoyant mood as he walked into the main hall of Terminal 1 after alighting from the shuttle train that had carried him from Terminal 2. On his arrival at Singapore’s airport from Kuala Lumpur he had experienced a pleasing sense of familiarity that came from the many hours he had spent flying into and out of the island republic over the past ten years of covering events in South-East Asia. He had enjoyed his home-comings, when he was based in Singapore, because he could always proceed smoothly from the aircraft through immigration and customs to the taxi rank and be on his way to his house in Sembawang in a few minutes. The airport was a clean, efficient hub for travel throughout the region, with more passenger services and less flight delays, baggage problems and unfriendly employees than neighbouring airports. On this occasion, the sense of well-being engendered by his accustomed return to Singapore was enhanced by Scott’s new hope that he could bring about the collapse of the case against James.

The day after Scott’s return to Kuala Lumpur, Marilyn returned his call. She was in Melbourne but had checked her message service and received his plea for her to contact him. He informed her that the piece of paper directing Hassan to James’s hotel room was pink and perfumed, prompting him to wonder if it had come from her friend’s note pad.

“I can tell you right away that Jenny’s paper is pink and perfumed,” Marilyn said. “I’ve seen it a number of times when she’s left messages on my desk. She went to a printer, chose the paper and a flowery typeface for her name and had him make up enough notepads to fill a couple of boxes.”

“That’s an important piece of information in making our defence for James,” Scott said. “But there’s a problem. You said that Meckleson used the sheet given to him to record the places where he planned to go shopping. However, there was nothing on the piece of paper taken from Hassan apart from the room number and a time. The only possible solution to this puzzle - apart from the unlikely coincidence that the pink, perfumed note came from another source - is that Jenny gave Meckleson a second sheet from her pad later - or earlier. Will you talk to her again, please, and see

if she can throw some light on the matter.”

“I’ll call her now. She had a couple of days off and she’ll either be at her unit or with her boyfriend.”

“Thanks, Marilyn. As you can imagine, I’m very anxious to hear what she has to say.”

“I’ll be as quick as I can.”

Within half an hour she was back on the telephone to Scott.

“Jenny had the answer immediately,” Marilyn said. “She uses her notepads to remind her of just about everything - tasks she’s been given, people to call, dinner dates and so on. I’ve told her she should get an electronic organiser but she prefers to write things down. Anyway, she brought a batch of notepads to Singapore but had used them all up by the end of the convention apart from one she had left next to her bed in her hotel room. As she was about to leave for dinner on our last night she picked it up to put in her handbag. Since there weren’t many sheets left, she counted them. There were six. After giving one to Meckleson she assumed she had five left. But later when she checked she found only four. She concluded that because she was flustered by Meckleson’s truculent manner and the taxi’s arrival at the restaurant, she inadvertently pulled off two, which were held together by the glue binding the sheets at the top of the pad. She remembered because she was annoyed that she had left herself with so few remaining sheets.”

Scott was jubilant. “That’s it,” he exclaimed. “I think we can nail the bastard.”

He thought for a moment. “We need Jenny to testify to her belief that she gave Meckleson two sheets of her notepaper. I don’t think she would have to do that in person initially. Probably a statutory declaration would be sufficient to get things moving here. And we’ll need one of her notepads, for comparison with the paper held by the Singapore police.”

Marilyn had agreed to seek Jenny’s cooperation and a day later called to advise Scott that after much ringing around friends they had found that an account manager for a woman’s magazine named Heather Sutherland was travelling through Singapore to spend a holiday with a boyfriend working as a hotel chef in Brunei. Jenny had arranged for her to take the statutory declaration and notepad to Singapore. She would be stopping in Singapore only long enough to transfer from the Qantas aircraft taking her to the island republic from Sydney to a Singapore Airlines flight that would carry her to the sultanate. Scott had selected a flight from Kuala Lumpur that would get him to Singapore in time to meet Heather as she disembarked from the Qantas aircraft. Although his SIA plane discharged its passengers at Terminal 2 and the Qantas flight arrived at Terminal 1, the shuttle delivered him to his destination within a few minutes.

Checking the nearest arrivals and departures video screen, Scott saw Heather’s flight was on time and set out for Gate 22 where the Mumbai-bound 767 was due to dock. As he waited for the passengers to disembark, he idly watched the streams of passengers surging along the walkways in opposite directions, some with the tired and intent look of people wanting to pass quickly through the immigration counters and get to their homes and hotels, others clutching boarding passes and

newly-purchased duty-free goods. He was so absorbed that he was not aware of the approach of the woman he was to meet until she was standing in front of him.

“Mr Scott?” she asked with a bright smile.

“Yes. You must be Heather.” She had the dark eyes and complexion of someone from a Mediterranean country but spoke without a trace of a foreign accent, suggesting she was the Australian-born daughter of immigrant parents.

She handed him a package. “Jenny’s statutory declaration and a notepad. Hope it helps you get James out of jail. I met him at a Bennelong reception once and thought he was a really nice guy.”

“Thank you. This is our best hope.”

Scott walked with Heather to the shuttle station and chatted with her until the train arrived. As she boarded it to make the short trip to Terminal 2 to catch her SIA flight to Brunei, he waved goodbye, then retraced his steps to the escalator leading to the immigration counters. He had brought only a single bag, small enough to take on board, so he would not have the problem of going back to the Terminal 2 baggage collection hall. Passing through immigration and customs, he joined a taxi queue where he was soon ushered into a vehicle.

“Colombo Court, please, behind North Bridge Road.”

The Chinese driver, whose rugged Hokkien features made Scott think that at an earlier time he could have been pulling a ricksha, asked: “You go see lawyer?”

He was obviously aware that Singapore’s leading counsel had their chambers in Colombo Court, a street adjacent to the Supreme Court.

The driver pointed to the clock on the taxi dashboard. It was just after 6 p.m. “Offices shut by time we get there.”

“I have an appointment with Solomon Jegathesan. He said he would wait in his chambers until I arrived.”

The driver was impressed. “Mr Jega? You know him?”

“Yes. I’ve known him for some years.”

“He good man, honest man.”

“Do you vote for him?”

The driver smiled. “No. He not Chinese. When I mad at PAP, I vote for Democratic People’s Party.”

The DPP was led by a young American-educated Chinese, who, like Jega, was continually embroiled in defamation suits launched by PAP leaders. It had one seat in parliament.

They made good time despite the peak hour traffic and shortly after 6.30 reached Colombo Court, where the driver pointed Scott in the direction of Jega's chambers. Climbing two flights of stairs, he found a door with a brass plaque bearing the name, "Solomon Jegathesan, Barrister-at-Law," and pressed a button he assumed was a bell or buzzer. Jega opened the door with a broad smile on his face.

"Good, good, good. You're on time. And you met your courier?"

Scott nodded.

"That makes up for a dreadful day. I'm feeling better already."

"What happened today?"

"I completed the sale of our house, which we've lived in for 30 years."

"You've sold your house? That beautiful old colonial structure?"

"I fear so. But there was nothing else I could do. I needed the money for the award made against me in my last defamation suit."

"Where are you and your wife going to live?"

"My son invited us to move to his apartment but I didn't want to be a burden on him and his wife, who have a son and daughter to look after. We're taking an HDB flat in Yishun."

Most Singaporeans resided in flats built by the Housing Development Board, a statutory body set up by the government in the 1960s to give the masses more attractive homes than the rough kampung dwellings scattered across the island during the colonial era. The standard of the units had steadily improved over the years but an HDB flat was in a class well below the splendour of Jega's family home.

"That's a shame," Scott said.

"That's the law and politics in Singapore. Just so long as I can carry on in my quest to make Singapore a real democracy with a real opposition. I will have to sell a few more copies of *The Anvil* to keep us going."

"Why do you stay in politics after all the tribulations you've been through?" Scott asked.

"We all do what we have to do, John."

Scott gave him a wry smile. "Yes, that's a lesson I have been learning lately."

“I am a stubborn old fool who can’t change. My wife says pig-headed is more appropriate than stubborn. But she still supports me, thank God. Now, let’s move on to something positive. You have what we need.”

Scott nodded.

“Excellent. Let’s go to work to free your son and make sure the man responsible for his unwarranted incarceration is made to pay for his despicable action.”

Chapter Forty-Nine

June 2, 2000

My Dearest Siu Mei,

Last evening, six days after my disastrous confrontation with Maurice Meckleson, I was once again in the lobby of the Regal. But this time I was there as an observer, intending to play only a passive role in the events I expected to unfold. Positive developments had followed my meeting with a woman acting as a courier at the airport the previous evening to collect a notepad and statutory declaration supplied by Marilyn’s friend Jenny. My hope that these two items would help me in my quest to secure James’s release had been fulfilled.

It had been a busy day, which began with a visit to Ramon, a forensic specialist with the Attorney General’s office, in the company of Solomon Jegathesan, James’s lawyer. After a series of tests, Ramon confirmed that the piece of paper directing the Malay youth Hassan to James’s room was identical with sheets on Jenny’s notepad. We waited while he detailed his finding in a report which we then took to the Deputy Public Prosecutor, together with Jenny’s statutory declaration. In it she described her conjecture about how Meckleson had ended up with two sheets from the notepad she was carrying on the night of James’s arrest.

Presented with this evidence, the DPP had agreed to have police make further inquiries, beginning with the interrogation of Meckleson on his return to Singapore from his regional tour. Marilyn had provided me with his travel schedule, wheedled from his secretary, which showed he would fly back to Singapore from Kuala Lumpur on an SIA flight arriving at 6 p.m. on June 1.

I decided to witness his return to the Regal and invited my journalist friend Peter Lee to join me at the hotel. Again, I opted to be early and Peter and I went to the hotel at 6.20. About 10 minutes past seven Meckleson marched through the entrance of the Regal as imperiously as if he owned the hotel. Peter and I had stationed ourselves on armchairs on the right hand side of the lobby, between the entrance and the reception desk, so we were out of his line of vision. As soon as the clerk on duty caught sight of the man he would normally have welcomed back with a friendly smile, he slipped quickly through a doorway, leaving the counter unattended. Meckleson frowned as he found no one waiting to greet him. At that moment two Chinese men in dark-blue suits, who

had been standing unobtrusively next to the reception desk, stepped forward. I left my chair and, followed by Peter, walked to a position behind Meckleson where I could hear what was said.

“Mr Meckleson?” one of the men inquired, displaying an identification card. “I’m Detective-Inspector Mah. This is Sergeant Ling. We would like to ask you a few questions in connection with events that occurred on the night of April 26, which led to the arrest of an executive of your company, James Tan.”

“We’ve been through this before. I don’t have anything more to tell you.” Meckleson was brusque and dismissive. He seemed to expect the detectives to excuse themselves and leave. But Inspector Mah impassively stood his ground.

“This time, sir,” he said, “we need to get from you your fingerprints and a DNA sample.”

“What? What?” Meckleson spluttered. “You can’t have them. I refuse.”

“If you are not prepared to provide them voluntarily, I can exercise a court order which I have obtained. But it would be better if we had your cooperation in this matter.”

The detective’s calm announcement shattered Meckleson’s arrogant aplomb as effectively as a slap across his face. Looking around in agitation, as if he wanted to find an escape route, he saw me and exploded.

“This is your doing, isn’t it,” he said, shaking a fist at me. “Why are you interfering? You should be embarrassed at having fathered a homosexual son and not be trying to save him from what he probably deserves anyway. It’s people like you who’ve allowed Sydney to be overrun by chinks and gays, eroding the fine traditions of our British forebears.”

I could see by the look on Inspector Mah’s face that he was not impressed by Meckleson’s use of the word chink. His colleague was meanwhile recording the outburst of the man who was now the subject of an official inquiry in a notebook.

“I am very proud of my son, who has many of the excellent qualities of his Chinese mother and certainly more to commend him than the bigoted, conceited person I see in front of me,” I said.

Detective Mah touched Meckleson on the shoulder, causing him to flinch. “Please come with me, sir. The sergeant will arrange for someone to look after your luggage.”

The arrogance drained from the Meckleson as he comprehended the seriousness of what was happening. He allowed himself to be escorted out of the hotel without a further word.

“What a joyous day!” a voice exclaimed behind me.

I turned and to my surprise saw Jeff Carr standing near the entrance with a suitcase in his right hand as he watched Meckleson, with head bowed, walk past him. The artist was grinning with obvious delight.

“Hello, Jeff. Where did you come from?” I asked.

“I’ve been in Bali on vacation and was about to head back home to Sydney when I received a text message from Marilyn bringing me up to date on the James and Maurice saga. I couldn’t miss seeing how it panned out. And I got here just in time to witness the superior stare wiped off Meckleson’s face. Brought tears of happiness to my eyes. I think it’s time for a celebratory drink.”

“Good idea,” I said. “Will you join us Peter?”

“I have a story to write. If you are still at it in a couple of hours or so, I could meet you.”

“Harry’s Bar?” I suggested to Jeff.

He nodded. “Absolutely.”

You can imagine how elated I was. The occasion would have been perfect if I could have shared the joy of it with you.

All my love,

John

Chapter Fifty

Scott was awakened by heavy knocking on his door and a voice calling: “Breakfast, sir.” He was mildly irritated that he had slept past the time he had marked down for morning room service. He liked to be fully awake and ready to eat because cooked food delivered from a hotel kitchen was never piping hot and cooled quickly. At first, when he went to bed, he had not been able to sleep because the beery celebration at Harry’s Bar had given him a headache. After lying awake for more than an hour, he got up and wrote a letter to Siu Mei. The second time he put his head on the pillow he sank into a heavy slumber, which the room service waiter brought to an end only by persistently hammering on the door. Normally, Scott could set himself to wake up at a given hour but the beers he had drunk at the Boat Quay tavern - more than his usual maximum of two - had induced a sleep too deep to respond to his mental alarm clock. He scolded himself for drinking too much but his irritation evaporated as he remembered why he had been less particular about the amount he consumed.

As he was sitting with Jeff Carr at the bar’s riverside tables, Jega had called him on his mobile phone to inform him that Meckleson had admitted his guilt. In his agitation at being apprehended by the police on his arrival at the hotel, he had apparently resigned himself to the probability that either the DNA or fingerprint tests would link him to the note that had sent Hassan to James’s room. The lawyer told Scott that first thing in morning he would begin the paper work to get James freed. If all went well he should be released in the afternoon.

Cheered by the memory of his conversation with Jega, Scott swung himself out of bed, put on a bathrobe and opened the door.

“Good morning, good morning,” he said with exuberant good will, reflecting his contented mood.

“Good morning, Mr Scott. Your paper.” He handed Scott a copy of The Chronicle, Singapore’s morning newspaper, as he set about raising the sides of the portable table he had rolled into the room and removing covers from the breakfast ordered.

Scott signed the proffered bill and gave the man a tip of five Singapore dollars. When the door had closed he laid the newspaper down on the bed, where he could read it while eating, and began sipping his orange juice. The second largest headline on the front page immediately caught his eye. “Australian Ad Exec Detained,” it said.

The report under Peter Lee’s byline gave an account of how police were waiting for Meckleson when he arrived at the hotel after his flight from Kuala Lumpur to Singapore. It said he had been taken into custody in connection with a new inquiry into an incident involving an agency colleague who had been arrested and charged with sodomy after police found him with a Malay juvenile in his hotel room.

The article went on to say the writer understood that as a result of information given to police by Meckleson, the charge against the other man, James Tan, would be withdrawn. It ended with a profile of the youth Hassan, who, Lee said, had been caught up in what appeared to be a scheme to have Tan falsely accused of a criminal offence.

Scott had ensured a similar report would be appearing in Australian newspapers, including his own, by alerting Agence France Presse, the French news agency, to the development. When he was seated with a beer at Boat Quay, he had called the local bureau chief, who was an old friend, and given him the details without revealing his personal interest. Scott said The Chronicle was covering the story, knowing that AFP had an arrangement to use copy from the Singapore newspaper. He decided not to write a piece himself because of the obvious conflict of interest

Scott was certain that as soon as the wire report appeared on the foreign desk screen at his newspaper the duty editor would be trying to call him for any additional information he could supply so he switched off his mobile phone after he had spoken to the AFP chief. The fact that the foreign editor would be furious when he was informed the desk was unable to get in touch with its correspondent did not bother Scott one bit. He would soon be clearing out his office in Kuala Lumpur, packing his bags and heading home to Sydney.

Peter Lee had joined Scott at Harry’s Bar after writing his story. When he was told that Jeff Carr was a graphic artist, whose work was regularly used by Bennelong, he said: “You won’t be seeing Meckleson in his office soon, I would say.”

“He won’t be missed, that’s for sure. Since he got his old job back, he hasn’t given me a single commission.”

“Have they charged him?” Scott asked.

“Not yet,” Lee replied. But they’re holding him as a material witness and I expect charges to be laid within a day or two.”

“Won’t he try to get released on bail?”

“He may try but I don’t fancy his chances. Top people in the Attorney General’s office are profoundly upset that Meckleson duped them. At the same time, he reinforced his unpopularity with his racist remarks in front of the two police officers at the Regal. Singapore authorities are not known for showing softness towards criminals at any time and when an offender fails to accord the legal system the respect they believe it deserves he can expect a stern response. “

“Gee, that’s too bad,” Carr said sarcastically, adding: “I’m no fan of capital or corporal punishment but I doubt I’ll shed any tears if he ends up with a dozen lashes along with a stiff prison term. Now let me buy everyone a drink.”

Scott regretted that he had allowed himself to be coaxed into having another couple of beers but in his happy mood, the slight hangover was not a great problem. It hadn’t affected his appetite and as he finished his breakfast, he was looking forward eagerly to seeing his son set free.

Chapter Fifty-One

June 6, 2000

My Dearest Siu Mei,

My second visit to the Queenstown Remand Prison was a happy occasion, in striking contrast with the first when James’s future looked bleak. I went with our son’s lawyer to meet him on his release and take him to the airport, since he wanted to get back to Sydney as soon as possible.

He looked tired and haggard from grieving for Sarah when he was brought by a prison guard to the room where we were waiting but gave me a wan smile and wrapped his arms around me in a warm embrace. I was reminded of his exuberant gesture of affection and relief many years ago when he swept you off your feet after getting his first fulltime job in the advertising world.

He told me he wanted to get back to work as soon as possible and would ask Barney to give him back his job as senior creative director, which he did not think would be a problem now that it seemed likely Meckleson would not be around to contest his request. We didn’t talk much on the way to the airport. He was pleased to have me with him but was in a quiet mood, which I guess was a reaction to being locked up for a couple of months. However, two days after his return to Sydney he sent me an e-mail.

“Thank you again for all your hard work to get me freed,” he wrote. “I’m sorry for the distress I have caused you over the past two years. But I believe our relationship is now on a stronger footing than it has ever been and look forward to seeing you frequently when you move back to Australia after your sojourn in South-East Asia.

“It has been a painful time and I face a long and difficult road ahead as I continue to mourn for Sarah and try to build myself a new life

“However, the shock of our daughter’s death has taken the edge off the friction between Erika and me, probably because we are each aware of the other’s suffering and our mutual need for support wherever we can find it.

“I had dinner at the house last night and Erika said I could come by any time. Linda and Paul were happy to see me and they seem to be settling down a little after the pressures of Sarah’s illness and the fighting between their parents. I am quite comfortable there because Erika’s family have gone and I can be who I am. A huge weight has been lifted off my shoulders now that I am free to live the way I choose and I can go to the house because I want to and not because I am forced to be there.

“We visited Sarah today and brought some new balloons for her. Her grave site is surrounded by flowers, windmills, toys and owls. Standing there with Erika, Linda and Paul gave me a sense of tranquility after the turbulence of recent months.

“We met the parents of a child buried next to her and gathered from our conversation that the two of them had much in common. Both were amazingly calm in the face of death. I am sure they are playing somewhere together.”

I was happy to hear from him that he had concluded that our relationship was on a stronger footing. The improvement, of course, is largely due to a change in my outlook. I discovered how far I had come in my journey from rejection to acceptance of James’s homosexuality when I found myself in disagreement with the stand taken by an old journalist friend in his weekly newspaper column. Affirming himself in accord with the Vatican’s opposition to gay marriages, he said that if he was invited to such a union he would not go. He added that he doubted if he would change his attitude in the future, implying that the only weddings he would be going to would be those of his relatives. There seemed to be a smug assumption that no one in his family would be gay. How could he be sure? Of course, he is a Catholic and may believe that his Catholic relatives would never engage in same-sex relationships, notwithstanding the recent exposure of widespread homosexuality (and abuse of boys) among priests.

Although I am not completely at ease with the concept, I would, nevertheless, accept an invitation from James to a wedding between him and a male partner. He is, after all, my son.

It is remarkable to me that I can reach this point of view now. I grew up in a conservative environment and while I did not undergo a rigidly orthodox religious education, like my columnist friend, sex was never discussed in my home. The word cropped up in conversation between me and my father only once - in my teens - when he said to me: “Never marry for sex.”

This, of course, prompted me to wonder if lust had been the motivation for his marriage to my mother and to try to imagine the relationship between them when they were two young people - a New Zealander and a Scots woman meeting in Edinburgh near the end of World War I. His unemotional demeanour in making this surprising remark discouraged me from exploring the matter further.

You, like me, had to educate yourself about sex through friends and by reading anything you could lay your hands on that was remotely related to the subject. But that did not stop us from having a joyful sexual relationship, discussing what each of us had learned and determining together what excited both of us.

I believe James, Catherine and I have successfully weathered a severely turbulent period in our lives and can now look forward to a warm family relationship. If only you were here to be a part of it.

Despite the torment I have gone through, I am confident that I am now a better person. It has been a rough time but at least I have broken out of the strait-jacket restricting my mind to its old obdurate beliefs. And I am eager to continue my education as a human being.

One Saturday, when I was sitting in your shop in the depths of my depression, two women in their sixties stopped by to tell me they were regular customers who had been saddened by your death two months earlier and missed you. They said they had both lost their husbands and one of them added a comment, which, at the time, seemed rather presumptuous, considering I had just met her: "It took us a little time but finally we came to the conclusion that our lives must go on," she said. "So I want to tell you, your wife may have died but this is not the end of your life. It's one chapter. There are many more chapters to come. The story doesn't stop here."

I was still too numb from your death to appreciate the essence of her remarks. But now I am beginning to see the need to look at my life less narrowly and to adjust to the fact that establishing who I am is a continuing process, which will not end until the last page of the last chapter of the story of John Scott is written. I realise that losing you, terrible as it was, provided me with an experience that added a dimension to my life. Similarly, while the trauma of James's sexual crisis and the tragedy of Sarah's death placed new strains on my emotions, I was also forced to reshape my way of looking at what was happening around me so I could endure each event and move on. It is now clear to me that change, which I have hated as I have grown older, is part of the process of life and the moulding of the person I am and have yet to become.

It seems that traumatic and unsettling developments can dramatically change our perceptions and force us to re-examine ourselves, our lives and the universe that surrounds us. I have become increasingly contemplative lately, pondering to an even greater extent the notion I have mentioned before of how everything is made up of the same ultimate elements - the cosmic building blocks. This has led me to the revelation that while we may cease to exist in the form we know as ourselves, we continue to be part of the universal existence and energy that we conceive of as "beginning" with the Big Bang or some equivalent occurrence. Importantly for me, this insight has made it easier for me to accept your passing and become more at peace with myself and where I am.

I attributed my interest in all this to the fact I am reaching the tail end of my life but James seems to have been going through a similar developing self-awareness. During our brief conversation on the way to the airport, he said that while he was in prison his reading and meditating had led him in a direction transcending his exploration of his sexuality.

I now look back with astonishment at the person I was just a short time ago, consumed with morbid foreboding over James announcement that he was gay. We need to look at the stars more often to put into perspective the petty issues that regularly take control of our daily lives.

All my love,

John

Chapter Fifty-Two

Tape-recorded and transcribed June 10, 2000

M. I was deeply saddened to hear of the death of your daughter. On top of everything you've undergone, this must have been desperately hard to bear.

J. The worst time was when I was in prison in Singapore and told that I couldn't visit her. By then we knew she was dying and it was the most awful period in my life. Thanks to the efforts of my father, I was at least able to see her before she died and attend the funeral. But then I had to go back to jail. For a time, I feared I would never throw off the severe depression that enveloped me as I sat in my cell.

M. But your imprisonment doesn't seem to have crushed you.

J. I don't think so but I wanted to see if you agreed. My doctor pronounced me physically fit and none the worse from a medical point of view for my time in prison, so it appears to me that I'm ready to go back to work. However, I decided I would like to get your opinion on whether the recent extremely stressful period of my life is likely to have any lasting effects on my emotional state and affect my work and human relationships.

M. Well, you look more relaxed now than at any time I have previously seen you. You are sitting quietly without signs of tension or nervousness, which you often exhibited in the past when you were struggling with so many unresolved issues.

My immediate impression is that you have come through your most recent challenges remarkably well. In my opinion, you seem to be mentally stronger.

J. I feel I am. It's not from any sense of victory but rather relief at finding myself in one piece after

making my way across a battle zone.

M. How did you fight your depression in prison?

J. I forced myself to have a positive attitude and learn from the experience. When my father was driving me from the jail to the airport, he said he could now look back at what we've been through and see positive aspects in the way it had made him adjust his thinking and examine how he should live his life. I have similarly been able to recognise that something good has come out of all the stress and pain. So I guess we've weathered this turbulent period in the family history surprisingly well.

I also directed my attention to the future - the future beyond my confinement in a Singapore jail. I contemplated ways I might be able to help people deprived of the life I had been able to lead.

It also helped that you had steered me into reading books on Zen, Taoism and other paths to spiritual awareness. The prison library was well stocked with such works because the prisoner who runs it is bent on spiritual self-improvement after a lifetime of robbing banks. The lists of recommended new purchases he drew up for the authorities reflected his personal choice of material, much of which, happily, was what I, too, was interested in.

So I read extensively and put my mind to work. I found books filled with ideas that were cousins to the notions bubbling around in my head since I began my search for who I am. And I began to see beyond my absorption with "who am I" and "why" and move towards an acceptance that I am what I am. This process is continuing.

M. Your absorption with "who am I" derived from your exploration of your sexuality. Is that still a driving force?

J. Perhaps not as much of a driving force as before since I extended my interest to discovering all the other aspects of the person I am. However, the realisation of my true sexuality is still very important to me. In the beginning, I believed the issue of my sexuality was something of a minor nature, which I could control. In every other way, I told myself, I was normal. There was just this odd sexual thing. I've always been interested in music and was fascinated to discover, from a book I picked up in a library, that Tchaikovsky had a long and difficult struggle with his sexual identity. The author said that in letter to his brother, Tchaikovsky wrote, "I must struggle with all my power against my inclination" and find a woman to marry.

I decided that I, too, must find a woman to marry and suppress my "inclination". But it was not, as I had first considered, a minor thing for me, as it was not for the great Russian composer. As I unearthed more about the gay community and discovered that there were many people like me, I began to take the sexual pressure more seriously and look inside myself with the aim of determining where I fitted into the world around me. Who was I? Obviously I was not the person my family presumed me to be. Initially, I told myself, this is my identity, I am a gay man. Then I began to wonder whether I fell into the bisexual category since I lived with a woman for 12 years. But I have never been at ease with labels. They are too simplistic.

As I continued to examine the sensations within me, my exploration became wider and less narrowly focused. My sexuality was the spur for an inward awakening which, over time, allowed me to see everything in a broader perspective. For a while I was obsessed about who I was in a sexual sense. But now I see there is much more to me than my sexuality and so, as I said, I am moving in the direction of accepting that I am simply what I am - as we all are.

I see myself as having been fortunate to go through an extraordinary experience that has opened up the different aspects of the person that is "me". Additionally, I can now empathise with people who are labelled as different, who are marginalised or oppressed or victims of prejudice. I regard this as an incredible gift. I have much further to go on my road of discovery but that is something I look forward to. Having come this far, I feel much more at ease with myself and those around me.

M. That is why you are, as I have concluded, so free from stress. I believe you will be very successful in your chosen career. I'm always here if you want to talk to me. But I am confident you have the strength to achieve any goals you might set yourself. Good luck. And give me a call from time to time to let me know how you are doing.

J. Thank you. I will.

Chapter Fifty-Three

Seated with James at his side on a bench in a small park at the edge of Abbotsford Bay, an inlet on the Parramatta River, which was a short walk from his son's unit, Scott looked up from his newspaper and stared out across the water. A ferry was making its way to the city on a route that would take it under both the Gladesville Bridge, which he could see to his right, and the Sydney Harbour Bridge. He decided that one day he must take a ride on the ferry for the pleasure of standing on the deck as it passed beneath the Coat-Hanger, as Sydneysiders called the link between North Sydney and the central business district, before sliding close by the sail-themed Opera House into a berth at Circular Quay. On a day like today. It was a gorgeous afternoon, following a chilly winter morning, with the sun providing a shirt-sleeves warmth from a clear sky as it sparkled on the water and added a golden glister to leaves carpeting the ground beneath riverside trees.

Both James and Linda were immersed in books. Scott's son was reading *Conversations With God*, by Neale Donald Walsch, while his grand-daughter, who was sitting on a swing, was far away in the fantasy world of *The Lord Of The Rings*. Paul was vying with another boy of about the same age to see who could accomplish the most spectacular feat on a climbing contraption of horizontal and vertical bars. Scott hoped the sand pit beneath it was deep enough to cushion a fall.

He felt a contentment which made the painful events of the past few years seem like fading memories of a bad dream. He was back on good terms with his son and having regular opportunities to see his grand-children, who showed no outward signs of trauma from the crises that had rocked the family. They seemed to have adjusted to their new life of staying with their

mother and seeing their father only periodically.

Although James and Erika had argued angrily over the financial terms of their divorce settlement, they managed to be civil to each other when Scott went with his son to pick up the children for the latest of the alternate weekends they spent with their father. She greeted her father-in-law with an affectionate kiss and told him he must come and have dinner with her and the children one night. He sidestepped the offer with a remark about how well she looked, preferring to wait until relations between his son and daughter-in-law were more cordial so Erika could chat to him about the children without any residual bitterness towards James. Otherwise, the evening would not be relaxed. But he did not expect his wait to be long. He now believed it was entirely possible his son and daughter-in-law could become friends, after having previously considered it highly unlikely.

The outlook of blue water, blue sky and neat homes and gardens on the opposite shore had a calming effect on Scott, offsetting the jarring impact of the headlines in the weekend edition of The Sydney Morning Herald, which portrayed a world beset by calamities and crises. However, it was not the unsettling reports of horrific natural disasters, appalling suicide bombings and senseless mass murders that had caused him to pause in his reading. He had lifted his eyes from the newspaper to reflect on the incongruity, amid all the global infamy and injustice, of conservative Americans expressing fierce outrage over developments that harmed nobody and, judging by published photographs, brought a great deal of happiness to those involved.

Their anger was aroused by the sanction of gay marriage in the city of San Francisco and the State of Massachusetts. In San Francisco, the mayor announced that officials would issue marriage certificates to homosexual and lesbian couples, sparking a rush by gays to city hall to formalise partnerships. He was furiously denounced by opponents of same-sex marriage. Vowing to stop the practice, the director of the Campaign for California Families called the mayor a renegade, whose action was un-American, and said he could not be allowed to “play God”. Of course, Scott mused, the CCF director and like-minded Americans took it upon themselves to be the final arbiters of what God might or might not want, thereby giving themselves a divine right they denied to others. In Massachusetts, conservative legislators were vowing to introduce a constitutional amendment to overturn a decision by the state Supreme Court allowing gays to marry. Meanwhile, in Washington, aides to President Bush said he would soon endorse an amendment to the American constitution defining marriage as a union solely between a man and a woman.

To Scott, the angry response of American politicians to the actions of the San Francisco mayor and Massachusetts Supreme Court demonstrated a peculiar sense of priorities. Their fixation on the question of gay marriage was an absurdity in a world with far more pressing problems. They should be giving their attention to serious social issues, such as crime and poverty in the cities, and not to a personal decision of mature adults. Yet, he reminded himself wryly, just a short time ago he was infuriated by his son’s personal decision to end his marriage and announce that he was gay. He was embarrassed now to recall that his response had been almost a reflection of the kind of zealotry shown by members of the American religious right. He had been as fusty as the Singapore judge who, according to the newspaper he was reading, had dismissed an appeal by a 25-year-old man against his conviction for having oral sex with a teenage girl, declaring that the law must be upheld to safeguard Asians from an offence that was “repulsive in Asian culture”. But Scott was no longer quite so stern and stuffy. In the past year, he had undergone a radical transformation.

The father who fiercely condemned his son when he was struggling to come up with answers to burning questions about his sexuality was a stranger to John Scott now.

As he watched the ferry disappear around a bend in the Parramatta River, he decided the time had come to tell James about a conversation he had with Siu Mei before they were married. He had recalled it soon after his son's declaration that he was gay but had kept the memory dormant throughout the family crisis, not wanting to introduce a subversive factor into his thinking at a time when he was already having difficulty in assuring himself that his wife would be just as angry as he was with James over the whole affair. He had been conscious that if he examined his wife's words closely, he might be forced to change his stance towards his son. Now, this was no longer an issue. And his discussion with Siu Mei was simply an interesting adjunct to everything that had occurred.

He waited until James was turning a page. "Your mother told me something a long time ago which I'm sure will be of interest to you. Our conversation came back to me at the start of this drama we've been going through but I avoided giving it serious attention until recently because I had taken a stand that I didn't want to see undermined. It suggests that, contrary to what I said, she may have given you a sympathetic hearing."

"Really?" James exclaimed, putting his book down. "What did she tell you? And when did this happen?"

"We had just made love for the first time and were at a stage when we wanted to bare our souls to each other to show the depth and sincerity of our passion. Your mother asked me if I had ever felt a deep affection for a male friend. When I shook my head she told me that she had once been strongly attracted to a young American woman. Her friend declared that she was in love with Siu Mei, which at first pleased your mother but later made her feel uncomfortable. She decided to stop seeing the woman and the relationship ended. She had always wondered if her affection for her friend made her "different in some way".

Scott paused as the moment in time came back to him vividly and his son asked: "Did her admission bother you?"

"I suppose in a way it did. But certainly not enough to change my feelings for her. I sought to reassure her - and at the same time, perhaps, reassure myself - that it was not an unusual experience. I said I had read that crushes between girls were quite common. That seemed to satisfy her and she said that I had brought her a deep joy she had never experienced before and she was convinced there was something special between us which could last forever.

"God, I wish I'd had a chance to talk to her about my feelings of being different. Did the subject come up later?"

"No, she never mentioned it again."

"Does it still bother you?"

"No, not at all. She gave me her unconditional love for 30 years. What more could a man ask?"

They were both silent with their own thoughts. Out on the water a yacht was being pushed slowly across the bay by a languid breeze.

“It’s a beautiful day,” James said.

“A day to make you believe in God.”

“Do you believe there is a God?”

“I have an open mind on that question. But there ought to be, so we could give Him thanks for this day.”

“Amen to that.”
