

# PART ONE





# ONE

## *Vinnie*

Old spirits walked here. Ghosts as old as time. Vinnie stepped into the clearing, the leaves of the eucalypts trembled in the midday heat and the occasional insect chirped. Otherwise, the bush stood silent. In the trees behind, the black cockatoos which had been shadowing him through the treetops for the last two hours ceased their cries, and an unusual eeriness descended.

The silence was unsettling. Strange. Not a real quiet, but a kind of gentle restlessness that Vinnie sensed rather than heard. Not since the hospital had he felt so tranquil. And here there was no disinfectant smell, this was no sterile silence – here was not so much absence of sound as lack of noise.

He stood still. During the hike out, he'd become accustomed to the crunch of his footsteps on the gravel path, the gentle labour of his breathing. Now, with a jolt, Vinnie was aware how far he was from other people.

Refreshing, yet at the same time frightening. Walking, his eyes on the path, he had not been touched by the immensity of the forest, the overwhelmingness of it. The trees had closed in, their branches a dim green canopy shutting out all larger perspective. Now though,

at the edge of the clearing – because of the clearing – his sense of scale returned and the forest took on new dimensions.

Vinnie moved from the end of the path and took a few steps out into space. The clearing was enormous. It sloped away from where he stood, dropping in rough terraces for about five hundred metres, to where a creek ran hidden through thick brush and scrub.

He glanced back towards the trees. The wall they formed was broken by patches of darkness – undergrowth not yet trodden flat. The path stretching away out of sight, an insignificant curve against the wild.

This would do.

The decision to run had not been difficult. Home was cold and lifeless now, his mother introspective, his father bound up in the hatred of loss. And Vinnie knew that despite their assurances, their empty protestations, his presence there would do nothing to exorcise their grief. Just the opposite. As long as he was around, with their pain etched in the scar tissue on his face, they would look at him and see not their son but their daughter. Would imagine the screams of their eldest child, trapped in her coffin of burning steel, and would resent him.

And what of him? Vinnie wasn't stupid. He knew that his life was never going to be as it was. Not now. The moment he'd made the decision to crawl alone from the flames – to let the monster engulf Katia – he knew he'd changed everything. In many ways it was only fitting – the scarring – so that for the rest of his life he would be reminded, each and every day, of his cowardice.

'You let your sister burn.'

Later on, his father had apologised for those words. But why? He was right, wasn't he? The proof was there, in the livid red tissue that covered the right half of Vinnie's face. His own personal mark

of Cain. How could he stay in the house knowing that every time he entered a room his dad would think of Katia?

Unconsciously his hand lifted, fingertips tracing gently over the ridges and valleys of his skin, searching for the point where the old met the new.

No, the decision to run had been right. The thought of being in a place without people was appealing. The only difficulty was working out some way of doing it that wouldn't cause his parents any further grief, so they wouldn't search for him. But in the end even that hadn't been too hard.

Vinnie picked his way down the terraces, towards where the creek trickled among thickets of thorn bushes. The day was hot, the pack heavy, and he was out of shape from months spent lying immobile, wrapped in bandages. Still, the sun felt agreeable, and the sweat, and the dirt. After all that time in the clean sterility of the hospital, it was good to feel real again. To be alive once more.

Perhaps that was why he'd ended up here in this place with its dusty colours and persistent sense of restive life, standing alone in the middle of the bush, two hours walk from the nearest town. Perhaps he had needed to come somewhere like this to replenish himself.

Vinnie knelt and examined the water. It was running, seemed clear, but he'd boil it before he drank it. He sluiced some onto his face and tasted the tang of dried sweat mixed with icy creek water. Then he stood again and looked around once more.

The clearing was the site of an old forestry town that had burned in the nineteen-sixties and never been rebuilt – that much was written on his map. But he'd have thought by now the bush would have reclaimed the old town site – wasn't that what was supposed to happen? Shouldn't there have been a few lumps of concrete and tin and perhaps a stone chimney or two dotted between the trees?

But nothing remained, not even ruins, and the forest still stood aloof, leaving the scar of the old town site as an empty, grassy slope, punctuated only by a few sparse shrubs and a couple of scraggly trees. It seemed almost as though this particular place, once home to loggers and millers and their families, was no longer fit to be forest. Perhaps this land too was being punished.

Even so, it would do. A thick-branched pine stood on higher ground, just a little away from the creek and Vinnie decided to set up camp there, in the deep shade. In his pack he had his sister's hiking tent – no one would even know it was missing – and food for at least a few days. Eventually, he'd have to walk back into town for more supplies, and there was always the risk of him being noticed, but he'd deal with that problem when it arose.

Vinnie sat for a few minutes, letting the unsteady silence of the afternoon settle around him, and, when he felt that the bush was getting used to his presence, he started to quietly set up his camp.

### *May 1943*

The pale light of pre-dawn was filtered by the fog that lay across the clearing. Kangaroos feeding by the fence line were little more than ethereal shadows as they grazed. In the surrounding trees the birds stirred and with the first rays of sunlight the mist began to burn away and kookaburras and magpies launched into strident greeting.

Their cry was answered by the unlikely sound of a bugle, and as the reveille echoed through the trees, wraith-like shapes emerged from the huts, bleary-eyed and stretching, moving automatically towards the latrines and the mess hall, where smoke already drifted from the chimney.

Erich watched the scene dispassionately from the steps in front of Hut Seventeen, German division. His first morning. The cold air bit through the thin material of his desert-issue uniform and he stifled the urge to shiver. No weakness. Not here. Not in the enemy heartland.

‘Morning.’

The speaker, in a heavy reddish overcoat, emerged from the haze of sleeping men in the hut and stood in the doorway at the top of the steps, lighting a cigarette.

‘Want one?’ His German was rough and his accent coarse. Nothing like the high language Erich was accustomed to. He shook his head, no, and the man looked him over.

‘Get any sleep?’

‘A little.’

Erich had arrived late, the only German in a shipment of Italians, and the guards who had shepherded them off the truck were disinclined to process a single prisoner at that time of night. Instead, he’d been given some bedding, scrounged together from what was available outside of the store, and escorted to Hut Seventeen. His bunkmates had all been asleep when he’d been shown in. After the long ride, with the truck lurching through the dark along rough gravel roads hewn into the forest, Erich had been exhausted and expected sleep to come easily. Once alone in the darkness though, the night sounds of the surrounding bush, so alien, so foreign, had worked their way into his consciousness, holding sleep at bay. Each distant screech and howl startled him with its primal aggression, until eventually he rose in the first gloom of dawn and crept from the hut to watch the morning slink between the trees.

The other man sat heavily on the step beside him and drew on his cigarette, the smell slightly nauseating in the clean morning air. The stranger took in Erich’s brown uniform and high boots.

‘*Afrika Korps*, eh? Not a lot of sand here.’

No reply was forthcoming and the two sat in silence until the other man stuck out his hand.

‘Günter. Günter Bote. *Wehrmacht*.’

‘Erich Pieters.’ He shook the offered hand.

‘Welcome to Australia.’

Erich didn’t reply.

‘They issue you with a kit yet?’

‘Like yours?’ Erich nodded at the magenta greatcoat wrapped around the other man’s shoulders. It was far too big for him, and the sleeves were rolled up. ‘I’d rather wear my uniform.’

‘Suit yourself.’ Günter shrugged. ‘You’ll freeze in a month or two.’

‘I’m happy to suffer a little for the Fatherland.’

The other man laughed, his mirth striking a blaze of embarrassed anger into Erich’s cheeks.

‘What’s funny?’

‘You.’

Erich was on his feet, ready to fight, but the other man just laughed harder, until Erich stepped away.

‘Your disrespect for your country is a disgrace.’

‘Settle down, youngster. You might be young, but that’s no excuse for being stupid. You want to get thrown into the detention cells before you’ve even been processed?’

Turning sharply on his heel, Erich stalked off in the direction of what he assumed were the latrines. He could still hear the other man chuckling behind him.

When he returned a few minutes later the hut was empty, all five men up and gone. Erich looked around, confused, until he noticed movement down at the cleared parade ground, a hundred metres away. Rollcall. They’d mentioned it briefly last night. He strolled towards the lines of men.

On the other side of a fence the prisoners in the next section – Italians, he guessed – were also lining up for the morning count. There didn't seem quite so many of them as there were in the German ranks.

'You there! Hurry up!'

The order was barked through a megaphone, the speaker an Australian army guard not much older than Erich himself. Throwing a bored glance in the direction of the guard, Erich continued towards the parade at the same steady pace and joined the end of the back line.

'New bloke, up here. Now!'

There was some sniggering among the gathered men, but no one laughed out loud. Erich fell out and walked to the spot indicated, in the middle of the front row. For the next ten minutes the young one with the megaphone announced the names staccato fashion and the men replied with a simple 'here' – most answering in German. Another Australian checked the speaker's identity and a third marked a clipboard. The whole process was quick and efficient, the men cooperative. Erich's name was not called.

At the end of the roll, a German officer, older than most of the others in the compound, stepped forward from where he had been standing beside the Australian officers and spoke in German.

'Another fine day at the office, my friends.'

A few men chuckled obligingly. Erich guessed that this was a standard joke.

'Not too much to report this morning. There will be a concert this Saturday evening and the Commandant has generously invited any interested men to attend. Günter will take your names after breakfast. Other than that, have a nice day in the woods. Sick parade in twenty minutes, work parade at seven thirty-five as usual.'

Enjoy your picnic lunch. New boy' – a nod at Erich – 'stay behind for a couple of minutes, please. The rest of you are dismissed.'

Again there was some quiet laughter as the men drifted off in the direction of the mess hall. The officer chatted amiably in broken English with the guards for a few moments, before crossing to where Erich still stood at attention.

'Stand easy, young man.'

Resentment flared in Erich but he didn't let it show. Hadn't he stood up for himself in Libya when the bastard English had stormed in to their little encampment from all directions? And this man couldn't see past his age.

'I'm Heinrich Stutt. Ranking German officer.'

'Erich Pieters. *Afrika Korps*.'

'Welcome to Marrinup.'

'Thank you, sir.'

The man was middle-aged, wearing a regulation naval uniform beneath his magenta greatcoat. His flashes indicated that he was a first officer.

'I understand that you haven't been processed yet.'

'No sir.'

'Fine, then. We'll have breakfast and then get you organised with a kit and some supplies. Where did you spend the evening?'

'Hut Seventeen, sir.'

'Günter's house. You could do worse. We might leave you there for the moment.' A bell sounded from the door of the mess hut. 'Come on, breakfast.'

Erich followed.

'We organise our own meals and do our own cooking. The Australians keep us supplied with the basics, and we have a vegetable garden for extra nourishment. You won't need to worry about going hungry.'

‘Thank you, sir.’

Stutt stopped mid-stride and turned to him.

‘You’ll also get along a lot better with everyone, including the guards, if you relax a little. We tend to remain reasonably informal here, within limits, of course. The Australians like it that way, and it certainly makes life a lot more bearable for all concerned.’

‘Informal, sir?’

‘You’ll work it out. Hungry?’

A nod, and they entered the mess hut. At one end stood a rough wooden table where Erich was handed a plate, a boiled egg, and several pieces of bread.

‘You can toast the bread through there, if you wish.’ Stutt nodded in the direction of a small kitchen, built off the main eating area. ‘And there’s coffee in that urn. This mess is also our main recreation area so we keep it tidy. You’ll do your own dishes.’

The food was good, filling the emptiness that had settled, heavy and insistent, upon him. Throughout the quick meal, Stutt carried on telling him the rules and regulations of camp life.

‘This isn’t a bad place,’ he concluded. ‘Not too bad at all. A bit foreign, but there’s not a lot we can do about that.’

It was hard to be certain whether the man was trying to be funny.

Outside, a siren shattered the peace and the last remaining men bolted down their coffees and headed for the door. Stutt seemed unconcerned.

‘One of the good things about being the ranking officer – no work detail. Come on, let’s get you processed.’

As they left the mess Stutt pointed out other buildings in the compound.

‘Canteen – you can buy supplies and cigarettes there with the credits that they pay you. The latrines you’ve already found, I imagine. School room and hospital. You have any medical skills?’

‘Not really, sir.’

‘Pity. We need a new orderly. The doctor’s having to make do with a stretcher bearer we borrowed from the Italians and he’s proving less than satisfactory. You sure you don’t know anything about medicine?’

‘Only what I picked up in the field, sir.’

Stutt stopped. ‘And what was that?’

‘When the British took our position we had a lot of dead and injured, sir, including our medical officer. I was one of two who didn’t get shot, so it fell to us to tend to the wounded.’

‘What sort of tending?’

‘Fishing out bullets, mainly. Administering morphine, bandaging. At least until we ran out of dressings.’

‘What then?’

‘Made more bandages out of the dead men’s uniforms, sir.’

‘Not a pleasant task.’

‘They didn’t need them any more. In the end it was pointless anyway.’

‘Why is that?’

‘Infection. We were in a fenced compound. Most of the men already had dysentery and there was no way to sterilise the material. The British wouldn’t even allow us to boil water, for fear we’d use it to scald the guards. We lost as many men to infection as we did in the initial attack.’

Stutt had stopped walking again and was looking the young man over.

‘How old are you, Pieters?’

The young man shuffled awkwardly, unconsciously, eyes down-cast like a child reluctant to reveal a secret. Talking about Libya, Erich had seemed distant, recalling experiences and sights well beyond his years, leaving Stutt with a fleeting impression of a boy grown old.

‘Twenty-two.’

‘Rubbish. I’m a father of two boys, Pieters, and I know a twenty-two-year-old when I see one. I’m sure it probably says twenty-two on your enlistment papers, but I’m not interested in what you told the recruiters. How old? And I want the truth – that’s an order.’

Erich loathed the man for his patronising attitude, for his softness, for his willingness to accept the rules that the Australians – the enemy – imposed.

‘Seventeen.’

‘Seventeen.’ Stutt shook his head. ‘So young, so very, young.’ The implied pity drew no response. Erich stayed mute. If he’d learnt anything in Libya, it was how to remain silent in the face of stupid leadership. Stutt studied him a little longer.

‘You’ll make a fine orderly, Erich. Come and meet the doctor.’

## TWO

### *Vinnie*

Night settled on Vinnie without its usual baggage of fear and hesitation. Perhaps tonight the dreams would leave him alone – wouldn't be able to find him so far from home. The twilight passed quickly into darkness, and even though he hadn't wanted to light a fire – didn't want to kindle the flames – it was the only way to stave off the cold. He made the camp fire as small as he could – a tiny ring of stones scavenged from the creek bed. A handful of dry brush, one small branch.

His hands trembled as he struck the match and watched the tiny spark take hold, first of paper, then twigs. He held his breath; this was the first time since the accident that he'd been near fire, or even allowed himself to think about it. Already the heat was beginning to radiate and his scars tingled.

With the end of day the bush closed in and outside the small glow cast by the meagre flames Vinnie could hear creatures of the night rustling and foraging. Nearby, a cicada started its incessant ticking. Vinnie started, momentarily surprised. The fire cast leaping shadows against the curtain of trees and Vinnie found himself staring, entranced. The dance of light on darkness was

familiar, frighteningly so, and despite himself Vinnie was falling away . . .

‘Vinnie?’

Everything upside down. After the startling, almost gentle slowness of the slide, and the crushing violence of impact, his world was inverted.

‘Vinn . . .’

Her voice reached out to him, sloughing into his consciousness. He felt like sleeping. Why wouldn’t she let him sleep?

‘Vinn. Wake up!’

Awareness. Stillness, darkness, a world upturned. A world of tortured metal. The belt biting into his shoulder, into his waist.

‘Kat?’

‘Vinn. Are you okay?’

‘What?’

‘Are you all right?’ Her voice scared, insistent.

‘I . . . I think . . . where . . .’

Everything so still. So quiet. Only the ticking – the strange, steady, ominous tick of cooling metal.

‘Vinn, listen to me. You need to get out. Can you get out?’

Katia. His sister. Always there. Always looking out. Always telling him the right thing to do.

‘I . . . my belt . . .’

Fumbling in darkness, fingers numb with shock and awkward with fear. Finding the button, pressing – stuck – then loose, falling into a heap on the upturned roof.

‘Vinn, get out of the car right now. You need to get help. My legs are trapped. I can’t move.’

The car was a tangle of crushed metal and broken glass, the windscreen crazy with spider patterns that flickered in the firelight . . .

Fire. Burning.

‘Kat, where are you?’

‘Here.’

Her voice was on the other side, near the door.

‘I can’t see you.’

‘I’m here. My feet are caught. Get out and get help.’

Light and heat started to fill the space. Beside him the passenger’s window was a broken mouth, shards glinting like teeth, the darkness beyond cool and inviting.

‘Katia . . .’

He could see her now. The roof had crumpled between them but her hand wormed through a tiny space and waved him away.

‘Vinn, get out. Now.’

Hotter. More insistent. Fire licking at the shattered windscreen. The smell. He knew that smell; acrid, bitter.

‘What about you?’

‘Just get out. Get someone to help me.’

Grabbing for her hand. Her skin cold and sweaty. She squeezed back.

‘Can you climb through your window?’

‘No. My feet are caught. Get out now!’

Hotter. Still hotter. Temperature climbing. Air filled with angry red light. Crackling, dancing, laughing. Sweat streaming from his brow. Indecision.

‘Vinnie, listen to me. I want you out of the car. Can you smell the fuel? The fuel is going to burn. Get out! Now!’

‘Kat . . .’

‘Out, Vinnie.’

An explosion. The car shifted, steel groaned.

‘Vinn . . .’

Her grip, icy and vice-like.

‘Kat?’

‘Don’t forget me.’

The hand pushed him away. Slipped back though the gap. Back into the hot steely darkness.

Then he was outside. Bleeding where glass teeth had bitten into his hands, legs and chest, running around to her side, reaching, trying to find the handle to try to free her, had to free her . . .

But the flames were too hungry, too angry and the car was burning. Steel and rubber and glass and flesh melting together, popping and spluttering, and the heat forced him back, though he pushed himself into it, again and again. Pain seared on the exposed skin of his face and arms. Her screaming grew faint and as other arms reached around from behind, dragging him back into cool darkness, he became aware for the first time of the flashing lights and the red glow dancing gleefully through the branches of the trees . . .

Somewhere in the depths of the forest a creature cried aloud, and Vinnie, startled, shook himself out of the past. The fire was nearly dead; glowing embers trapped within the stone ring. Feeling ill, and wondering what his parents were doing, Vinnie crawled into the tent and slept.

### ***May 1943***

‘Doctor Alexander, may I introduce your new orderly, Erich Pieters, Afrika Korps, Private. Erich, meet Doctor Alexander, Australian Army Medical Corps.’

The elderly man leaning over the bed at the far end of the small infirmary turned.

‘Retired now, of course. I’m just helping out for the duration of the war. Does this mean we can send Domenico back to his working party?’

Stutt nodded. His English, Erich noted, was much better than he let on.

‘*Ja*. Erich here looked after the wounded and dying in a British camp in North Africa. I suspect you’ll find him more useful than the Italian.’

The doctor was old, possibly seventy or so. His face, half hidden behind a huge white moustache, was mapped with wrinkles, lending a stern, paternal air. He looked at Erich appraisingly.

‘He’s not very old.’

‘Appearances can be deceiving, Doctor. According to his enlistment papers, he’s twenty-two.’

‘Ah, well, that’s all right then. If it says so on his papers, it must be true.’

The older men shared a smile, which irritated Erich.

‘In all seriousness, Doctor, I believe you will find Erich to be a very suitable orderly. The German Afrika Korps are renowned for their discipline.’

‘You’re not a Nazi, are you, Erich?’

‘Excuse me?’ The question, so blunt and unexpected, caught Erich unaware. He was saved by Stutt.

‘Now, Doctor, need I remind you about the screening? Erich is a German, just like the rest of us, who has been caught up in an exceptionally nasty piece of history. If he was an extremist then you know as well as I do that there would be no way he would have been stationed here in Marrinup.’

There was a long, still silence. The two men regarded one another.

‘Very well, Heinrich. I’ll take your word for it. When may I send Domenico off?’

‘At the end of the day, Doctor. I still need to have Erich issued with kit and provisions, and then he’ll be yours from tomorrow.’

‘Fine. I’ll see you then, Erich.’

Erich nodded a reply and followed Stutt back out into the morning.

The mist had lifted and for the first time Erich became aware of the immensity of the forest surrounding them. Beyond the barbed wire and no-man’s-land of the camp perimeter, trees reared massively into the blue, their smoky green canopy dappling the undergrowth into a thick, dark, hostile world of shadow, pressing in upon the camp. For a moment Erich had the odd impression that the guard towers, some of them perched atop lopped stumps of trees at the corners of the camp, were there to keep the forest at bay, rather than to prevent the prisoners escaping.

They headed towards the mess again, around the side of the canteen.

‘So, Erich, was the doctor right about you? Are you a Nazi?’

Stutt asked the question in German, hiding the conversation from Australian ears.

‘What do you mean?’ The reply was measured, cautious. Everyone knew that the Gestapo had agents everywhere, in every corner of the German army, navy and Luftwaffe.

‘Simply that. They screen everyone who is sent here and the extremists never make it as far as Marrinup. But every now and then one slips through the net.’

Stutt was watching Erich intently.

‘Let me make this very clear to you, Erich. There is no room for Nazis here in Camp Sixteen. If your loyalty is to Germany, that’s fine. No one here will have a problem with that, not even the Australians. But if you are foolish enough to sprout the philosophies of our self-declared *Führer*, then I’ll have no choice but to

see you on your way back to one of the less pleasant British camps in India. Do you understand me?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Good. This is not a bad place, Erich. My job is to keep things that way. Remember that we’ll have no problems. Now, let’s get you some provisions.’

From a rough storeroom attached to the back of the mess hall Erich was issued with bedding, shaving gear and a set of the heavy magenta clothes that many of the men wore.

‘You won’t need a lot of this working in the hospital, but take it anyway. You’ll probably be glad of it in a month or so when the winter sets in.’

The clothes were Australian Army uniforms, dyed bright red especially for the prisoners. If he managed to escape, he’d stand out like a sore thumb.

‘I’m sure that my own uniform will suffice, sir.’

‘Take them. The nights are only going to get colder and the days wetter. In a little while you’ll thank me.’

He took the clothes without further comment. For all he cared they could sit on the floor under his bunk and go mouldy.

‘Now, let’s get the paperwork out of the way.’

Sitting at one of the mess tables, Stutt recorded his details on an official form: name, rank, serial number, where and when he’d served and been captured, next of kin. Each piece of information carried Erich somewhere else – back to the burning sand and dry oppression of the North African desert, back to his first posting on the Italian border, and finally back to his family in Stuttgart. Erich realised with a start that he hadn’t thought of them in some time. Not properly. Were they worried for him? Were they even alive?

The paperwork done, he was handed a slim booklet, written in German, and dismissed.

‘Take your provisions to your hut. Today I expect you to familiarise yourself with the rules and procedures of the camp. You’ll find them written up here. From tomorrow you report at 0735 to the infirmary. If the doctor isn’t there, find yourself a broom and start sweeping. Any questions?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Good then. If you have any major concerns, speak to Günter. I’ll ask him to keep an eye out for you.’

‘I’m sure I can manage, *sir*.’

Erich spat the final word with a sarcasm that Stutt seemed not to notice.

‘I’ll see you at evening rollcall then, Pieters.’

## THREE

### *Vinnie*

He woke to a few silent seconds of confused orientation. The morning was cold, and as he shrugged out of the warm cocoon of his sleeping bag, Vinnie shivered. Mist had settled across the clearing, cloaking the trees on the far side. The gurgle of the creek reminded him of the pressure in his bladder and a nearby tree provided relief, his stream steaming slightly in the chill air. A couple of metres away the brush trembled with the passage of some creature startled from its morning feed. Magpies cried in the treetops, the timelessness of their song calling the sun through the fog.

Lighting the fire was easier this time. The flames, stripped of their dancing shadows by pale, growing daylight, were clear and innocuous. Soon a billy of creek water bubbled on its way to boiling. Watching, Vinnie thought of home. By this time his father could be up, boiling the kettle for his mother's first cup of tea. His parents. Had they worried?

The letter should have explained everything. The hours he'd spent on it, trying to put down in writing feelings and ideas he couldn't convey any other way. Rationalising his decision into stark

black letters on white paper. He'd left it by the kettle, where his father would discover it first thing.

The letter had been the hardest part. The rest was simple.

Leaving through the back door, retrieving pack, food and tent from the shed, stopping to scratch a silent goodbye behind his dog's ear, the creature dozy at this hour of the night – some guard! Then creeping around the side and out, through the gate into the lane. Sleep hung on the world. Houses, their windows sightless eyes, slumbered either side of him as he walked the few blocks to the all-night deli. There a taxi to the central bus depot. The driver barely looked at him, other than the expected double glance at his scars. Paid for taxi, waited fifteen minutes, sitting on his pack. A little down the platform a couple of drunks slumped, singing unintelligible words at the occasional passing car. Across the road a shopping complex crouched empty amidst its car parks. A security car cruised by, spotlights on the roof, passing both him and the drunks without pause. Bus arrived, driver yawning, drinking coffee from a flask for five minutes before pulling out again into the deserted streets. Ride to outer suburbs, then a forty-five minute hike to the truck stop, the first outside the city limits. A couple of cars rushed past without stopping, lights on high beam, drivers comfortably ensconced in heated cabins, hurrying into the darkness. Nothing for twenty minutes, then the logging truck.

The neon of the roadhouse receded in the mirrors and, after the first bend, he and the driver were left alone in the glow of the moonlight and the faint illumination of the dashboard. The driver, a balding man in his fifties, cast a sideways glance.

'Where you headed?'

'Wherever you can drop me, if that's okay?'

'I'm headed out to a logging stand the other side of Dwellingup. I can let you off there if you want.'

‘Yeah, thanks. That’d be great.’

No further questions. No further conversation. They had driven through the early morning in companionable silence, and Vinnie had been grateful for that.

Dwellingup at sunrise, breakfast in the park, reading until the tourist information place opened at nine. Bought a map of the area, not certain what he was looking for. A little square in the middle of the bush caught his eye. *Marrinup. Prisoner of War Camp – Heritage Area*. The idea seemed incongruous – so totally alien. There was a camping symbol next to it, and a hiking path from the town. It would do. A quick walk through the museum, finding out about the timber town, the fire that destroyed it, then into the bush, to here . . .

Vinnie sipped his steaming coffee and let the morning wash over him, bathing in its quiet warmth. With the growing sun the fog was lifting, shifting, dissolving into blueness. The sounds of night animals surrendered to the more boisterous screeches of those who dwelled in daylight and the diurnal cycle of the forest started again, either unaware of, or ignoring, his presence there. Vinnie found himself filled with a sudden and overwhelming sense of being just another part of something – of somewhere. It was a sensation he’d long missed at home in the city. Hadn’t felt since before Katia, and hadn’t been alert to even then. As the fire spluttered and hissed, he whistled for the first time in many months.

The day stretched ahead, empty. He had books and his journal but for the moment Vinnie was content to just sit and be.

A few hundred metres away, up at the far end of the clearing, a wooden sign caught his attention. It stood at the mouth of a pathway that disappeared into the shadowy hollows of the forest. A different trail from the one he’d followed yesterday, and with nothing better to do, Vinnie meandered slowly up the terraces,

clambering over small piles of rock and crossing the dirt road that ran through the clearing. The words, cut into the timber of the sign and daubed with white paint, stood clear against the greeny brown background:

*POW Camp Trail. 4 kilometres, 1.5 hours return.*

Black cockatoos chortled overhead. Vinnie cast a glance back across the deserted clearing, stepped onto the pathway and into the enclosing, living dimness of the jarrah forest.

Vinnie examined his reflection in the trembling mirror of a small rock pool. The creek intersecting the path gurgled beneath a rough timber footbridge and Vinnie considered his scarred visage. The dull sheen of the water lessened the impact of the scar, its vivid brightness muted by the mossy rocks below the drifting water. With a little imagination, the old Vinnie could almost be seen there, lurking somewhere in the background, another layer beneath the echo of his face. But the old Vinnie was gone, dead. Burned away at the same time as his sister.

The old Vinnie would have made the walk without stopping to look at a rock pool. The old Vinnie wouldn't have been here in the first place. More likely down at the Galleria, hanging with his mates, eyeing girls and making a lot of noise – drawing attention to himself. He'd be making plans for the weekend with Marie or one of the others. Dancing until the small hours, late night coffee with the gang on the way home . . .

A water insect swerved its erratic way across the pool, landing here and there on the quicksilver of the water itself, its miniscule weight changing the surface tension just enough to make his reflected face swell and stretch. The old Vinnie didn't have that red welt of shame running from his neck, below his chin, up the right side of his face and nose, under his eye and back to where his ear was a twist of skin and cartilage. The old Vinnie was dead.

This new Vinnie, who stared back from the greeny-grey surface of the water, this was a different person. No, perhaps not person, not even certain of that yet. A different creature. This was something new, something without a place, without friends. A creature whose very image was a reminder of all that the old Vinnie had despised – fear, cowardice, shame. This was a being who could embrace isolation, who chased silence.

A rock eased into his searching hand, and the hated image shattered into a thousand rippling shards. Vinnie turned back to the path.

Here on the other side of the creek the forest seemed to draw in and the path narrowed to a thin trail not much wider than his shoulders, running between a swamp-like clump of ti-trees. The trail was straight, raised slightly off the marshy ground on a causeway of piled earth and lined with decaying railway sleepers. It was firm and easy to walk on.

The end of the trail was only a couple of hundred metres up a slight hill, an arrangement of gates and fences marking the entrance to the old prisoner-of-war camp.

## *June 1943*

‘Erich, would you mind passing the antiseptic?’

The query, like all the doctor’s requests, was uttered quietly and Erich took the large brown bottle down from its shelf in the dispensary cupboard and passed it without comment.

‘Thank you.’

The infirmary fell again into silence, broken only by the soft crackle of the pot-belly stove. Outside, the rain fell in sheets, as it had for three days now, turning the parade ground to mud and soaking anyone caught out in it for more than a couple of seconds.

Already the camp hospital was busy with cases of colds and mild influenza.

‘Steady now.’ The doctor’s voice was reassuring. The patient, a burly private who had sliced his leg open with an axe, swore in German as the sharp sting of the reddish-brown liquid bit into the wound.

‘He doesn’t speak English, *Herr Doctor*.’

‘I know, Erich, but sometimes the actual words aren’t important, it’s the way that you say them.’

Erich didn’t reply, just as he didn’t respond to most of Doctor Alexander’s musings. Instead, he checked the fire, finding it low and the hopper out of logs.

‘I will need to get some more wood.’

‘That’s fine, Erich.’

Stepping out, Erich shivered as the cold slammed through his thin uniform. Despite the rain and dropping temperature he still refused, even after a week, to wear any of the crimson Australian issue uniform. At first the doctor had tried to persuade him.

‘At least wear the coat, Erich, or you’ll end up in here as a patient, and I can’t afford that.’

But Erich knew that his silent resistance sent a message to everyone, Australian and German alike, that despite his age he wasn’t the sort who would bow to pressure in the face of the enemy. Never. Unlike some others, he wasn’t about to surrender simply because he’d been captured.

During his first couple of days the other men had passed remarks, commenting on his youth and pride, but on each occasion he’d simply fixed them with a cold stare and refused to be drawn by their stirring. The novelty had rapidly worn off and he’d soon been left alone.

The wood pile was under a tarpaulin behind the mess hall. Erich ran through the sleeting rain, enjoying the opportunity to stretch his legs after the claustrophobic fogginess of the hospital. Water sluiced in icy streams down the back of his uniform and shocked him with its touch, but he revelled in the intensity of it, in the living power of the storm. In many ways the orderly position was a good one. The hospital was one of the few camp buildings that was heated and insulated against the invasive cold, and the doctor seemed a reasonable character, if a little staid.

Lightning flickered somewhere a few miles distant and the overcast was lit briefly. It was the middle of the day but so gloomy with thick, low clouds that the perimeter lights had been switched on, and through the rain no-man's-land bathed in the ethereal glow usually reserved for darkness.

At the timber pile he pulled back the tarpaulin and retrieved a couple of large logs, shoving them into the front of his jacket to keep them as dry as possible during the short sprint back.

'You there!'

The day grew suddenly brighter and Erich found himself caught in the sharp glare of one of the tower spotlights. Through the rain a voice floated, tinny and amplified.

'Stay right there.'

The light stayed unwaveringly upon him, and a green figure in an Australian uniform detached itself from the gloom near the compound gate and hurried through the mud, rifle held ready.

'Whatcha think you're doing?'

Erich recognised the guard as the young one who called the names through the megaphone at morning roll. He didn't answer, waiting until the guard was standing right before him.

'You speak English?'

'*Ja.*'

‘Right. So what are you doing here? Stealing wood?’

‘Not stealing. For the stove in the hospital. The doctor sent me.’

The guard snorted. A few tufts of red hair sprouted from under the brim of his slouch hat. Erich could see a smattering of pimples dotting his chin.

‘Not likely, mate. He always sends Domenico for this sort of thing.’

‘I am his new orderly. Domenico is back in the forest chopping wood, and has been for a week.’

The guard’s eyes narrowed.

‘You better watch how you speak to me, Fritz.’

The insult drew no response and the two stood eyeing one another in the rain, Erich acutely aware of the Australian fingering the trigger-guard of his rifle. He drew upon all of his self-control. No fear. Not in the face of the enemy.

‘Come on.’ The guard waved his rifle at the hospital. ‘Let’s check your story out, and you better not try anything. Understand?’

Erich trudged back through the mud, up the steps, and into the infirmary. The guard, rifle levelled at the middle of his back, followed.

If the doctor was at all surprised to have an armed guard follow Erich into the room, he didn’t show it.

‘Thomas. To what do we owe the pleasure?’

‘This bloke was nicking wood from the pile.’

‘Not at all, Thomas. This is Erich, my new orderly.’

The boy threw a sullen look at the far end of the room, where Erich had dumped the timber into the hopper and was busying himself re-stoking the fire.

‘Wasn’t informed about no new orderly.’

‘I’m sure the paperwork has been held up somewhere in administration, Thomas. You know how things are around here. You can take my word for it, though. Erich is simply doing as I asked.’

‘If you say.’ Thomas seemed reluctant to let it go.

‘I do say.’

The boy turned to leave, but the doctor stopped him. ‘And Thomas . . .’

‘What?’

‘I’d consider it a personal favour if you wouldn’t bring a loaded rifle into the hospital in future.’

‘Can’t leave it outside. Regulations.’

‘Then I imagine that next time you’ll simply have to stay outside with it. Have a nice day, Thomas.’

The door slammed and the guard was gone.

‘I’m terribly sorry about that, Erich. Thomas is only young, and at times can tend to be a little . . . enthusiastic. He’s really not a bad boy, for all that.’

Erich shrugged.

The man on the bed moaned again and Doctor Alexander returned his attention to his patient. Standing by the fire to dry out and warm up, Erich considered the look in the young guard’s eyes and wasn’t so certain.