

Ghosts in the snow



Prologue – Missing in the Sun, Found in the Snow

The first thing Matt Schultz noticed was that Harry's towel was still dry.

Gold Coast mornings were supposed to be simple: sun, sand, and Panda complaining about the price of coffee. Their hotel balcony looked over a strip of beach already filling with tourists the colour of uncooked chicken, eager to burn themselves into holiday stories.

Matt leaned on the rail, squinting down at the surf. No sign of Harry. No familiar compact shape cutting through the waves, no dark head between the bobbing boards.

"Maybe he's in the gym?" Panda suggested, appearing beside him with a mug large enough to drown in. He wore shorts, thongs and an expression that said he'd already checked.

Matt nodded at the untouched towel on the chair, the hotel keycard on the table, the battered duffel in the corner of the room. "When has Harry ever gone anywhere without backup?"

"True," Panda said. "Bloke treats a trip to Woollies like an op."

The three of them had not taken an actual holiday together in years. Someone, somewhere, had decided they had earned one: a week on the Gold Coast with nothing more dangerous than rips, cocktails and the ever-present threat of themed restaurants.

Harry had lasted less than twelve hours.

He'd been with them at dinner the night before, picking at a steak and mocking the décor. He'd come back up to the room, dropped his bag in the corner, muttered something about needing a decent night's sleep for once.

In the morning, the bed was made. Too neatly. The kind of neatness that said it hadn't been slept in.

Panda set his mug down carefully. "I checked reception. He didn't go past the front desk. No charges on the room. No ride-share data. Phone's off."

"Maybe he met someone," Matt said, though the words tasted wrong. Harry did not vanish for women. He vanished for work.

"Did you see his face last night?" Panda asked. "That wasn't 'I'm about to get lucky.' That was 'someone's about to ruin my week'."

Matt checked his watch out of habit. In his old life, in green and sand, there had been procedures for this. Missing men triggered protocols and search grids.

In civilian life, your mate went missing on day one of a beach holiday and the only protocol was panic.

“Maybe he just—”

Matt stopped. The television behind them was running breakfast news, volume low. A financial segment, the usual beige man in a beige suit talking about global markets. The ticker at the bottom ran: AURUM GROUP CEO ARRIVES IN VIENNA FOR PRIVATE SUMMIT.

On screen, for half a second, a woman stepped out of a car in the snow. Black coat, black hair swept back, no hat despite the obvious cold. Imogen Morozova. The caption called her “The Ice Queen of Ethical Luxury.”

Panda glanced over his shoulder. “She looks like someone who schedules other people’s heart attacks for fun.”

Matt barely heard him. His gaze had snagged on a small detail the cameras weren’t meant to care about: the man in the background, half-obsured by the car door, plain dark coat, profile turned away.

Compact build. Familiar shoulders.

It might have been anyone. The world was full of men with forgettable faces and good posture.

But Harry Loscam had built a career out of being anyone, anywhere.

“Back it up,” Matt said, reaching for the remote.

Panda squinted at the paused image. “If that’s not Harry, I’ll give up caffeine.”

The silence between them tightened.

They had seen this pattern before. A “holiday” that coincided a little too neatly with someone else’s crisis. Hogarth Cooper’s way of taking care of its favourite problem-solvers: throw them toward the fire and call it coincidence.

“Reckon Fleur’s been shopping in our calendar again,” Panda muttered.

Matt exhaled, long and slow. The Gold Coast sun beat down on the balcony, all flash and glare and heat. Somewhere on the other side of the world, snow was falling on old stone.

"He could have said something," Matt said.

Panda snorted. "You know Harry. Easier to slip out in the night than admit he cares if we worry."

They stood there a while longer, two men on a balcony full of someone else's sunshine, staring at a frozen frame of Vienna.

"Fine," Panda said eventually. "We're not going after him, right?"

"Not this time," Matt said. "This one's above our pay grade."

He didn't add: for now.

He picked up Harry's towel, folded it once, and dropped it over the back of the chair as if the man who owned it had simply gone for a walk and would be back before the afternoon storms rolled in.

On the television, the image flicked away to interest rates and market chatter.

In Vienna, Harry sat in a café that smelled of coffee, buttery pastry and history, waiting for a woman he had only ever seen in dossiers and television clips.

Café Mozart was half full. Tourists took photos of the chandeliers. Locals pretended not to notice them. Outside, the city moved at winter pace, breath misting, cars hissing on the wet road.

Harry warmed his hands on a cup he hadn't touched and watched the door.

He'd been lifted out of the Gold Coast overnight with the efficiency of a company that thought in shipping routes rather than time zones. A knock on the hotel door, a word from a Hogarth Cooper courier, a flight manifest slid across the bed. No argument, no explanation. Just a new map.

Fleur's voice had crackled in his ear over secure line somewhere above the Indian Ocean.

"Aurum Group has a problem in Vienna," she'd said. "You've been volunteered."

"Volunteered by who?" he'd asked.

“By the same people who paid for your beach umbrella,” she replied. “Consider it a refund.”

Now, here he was. No sun, no surf, no Matt’s running commentary or Panda’s bad jokes. Just a table in a café and a job description that included “try not to destabilise Europe.”

The door opened.

Imogen Morozova stepped in, winter air clinging to her coat like a second skin. She removed black gloves with unhurried precision, as if the room owed her its attention and knew it.

Harry watched her look around, eyes adjusting, assessing. The dossiers had not mentioned how the light caught the edges of her restraint.

Her gaze found him. She crossed the room without hesitation and sat opposite him as if this had been inevitable since the day the first container ship sailed.

“Mr Loscam,” she said, accent threaded with places he’d only visited under aliases. “I believe you were on a beach this morning.”

“Afternoon,” he said. “Different hemisphere.”

“And yet,” she said, sliding a slim folder onto the table, “here you are.”

Harry glanced at the folder, then back at her. Somewhere, thousands of kilometres away, two men stood on a balcony staring at an empty deckchair and an over-bright ocean, trying to decide how worried to be.

“Here I am,” he said.

Outside, Vienna’s snow fell in quiet, disciplined lines.

Inside, in Café Mozart, two very different empires met for the first time over cooling coffee, and the map of Harry Loscam’s life began to redraw itself around a woman whose world ran on circles.

The Gold Coast was already starting to feel like a lie.

Chapter One – The Boy at the Deep End

Before Harry learned how to disappear in foreign cities, he learned how to vanish at the local pool.

He grew up on the edge of Melbourne's suburban sprawl, in a house that smelt of lawn clippings and cheap aftershave. His father worked shifts at the port, his mother did battle with three kids and a tired washing machine. The Loscams were ordinary in the way that made the census happy.

Harry, middle child, perfected the art of being forgettable early. Teachers' comments were variations on a theme: "quiet," "polite," "could apply himself more." He discovered that if he kept his face neutral and his grades adequate, adults stored him in the mental drawer labelled Not A Problem.

Swimming was the exception.

The local pool was old concrete, its lanes faded and rough underfoot. Harry wandered in one January afternoon to escape the heat and walked out an hour later with chlorine in his hair and a coach insisting he join the squad.

For the first time, his body felt like an asset instead of an inconvenient attachment to his brain. Length after length, he pushed the water aside with the stubborn determination of a boy who had finally found something he was good at.

He never became Olympic material. His times were good, not legendary. But the discipline the pool demanded imprinted itself on him: the early mornings, the silence of underwater, the way effort translated so cleanly into distance.

He liked the anonymity of lanes. You did not have to talk to anyone. You just had to keep breathing.

By the time he finished school, he had a decent set of marks, a decent freestyle, and absolutely no idea what to do with his life. University looked like more of the same – classrooms, people, noise. The idea of an office filled him with a quiet horror.

He needed something else. Something structured, where there were rules and consequences and clear lines.

The Australian Defence Force recruiting office offered all three, wrapped in air conditioning and brochures.

“Signals,” said the woman across the desk, flicking through his file. “You test well for pattern recognition and languages. Could be a good fit.”

Harry looked at the poster of a soldier diving from a Hercules into blue nothing and thought, I could jump.

“Can I still swim?” he asked.

She shrugged. “We have pools.”

He signed.

Chapter Two – Uniform, Wires and a Man Called Panda

Basic training hurt. That was the point.

Harry's body adjusted. His brain, already wired for spotting patterns in water, turned out to be very good at spotting patterns in people. Instructors who barked louder when they were unsure. Recruits who folded early and those who got sharper under pressure.

Signals school was another world again: rooms full of screens and cables, acronyms and code. Harry expected to hate it. Instead he found a quiet joy in the logic of it all. Information moved like currents; his job was to learn how to read them without drowning.

On the third week, a stocky, round-faced bloke with laughing eyes sat down next to him in the mess.

"You look like someone who's pretending this pasta is food," the bloke said. "Tran. Bao Tran. People call me Panda."

"Harry," he said. "People call me... Harry."

"Tragic," Panda said. "We'll fix that."

Panda had been born in Vietnam, raised in western Melbourne, and somehow turned a childhood of library cards and hand-me-down computers into a high-level posting in Defence signals. He could break down an encrypted transmission in half the time it took most people to find their login password.

He was also, Harry realised with mild shock, capable of friendship that asked for nothing in return.

They began running together in the mornings, Panda puffing like a steam engine but refusing to quit. In the evenings, Panda dragged Harry into the computer lab to teach him shortcuts he wasn't technically supposed to know.

"See, it's all routing," Panda said one night, fingers blurring over keys. "Everyone thinks the trick is the front door. It's not. You change the map. Make people think the house is somewhere else entirely."

Harry blinked at the screen. "We're still talking about networks, yeah?"

"Mostly," Panda said.

They graduated into different units but kept crossing paths. Harry was attached to a recon outfit that went where the maps bled into guesswork. Panda followed signals, often the quiet man in the tent at the edge of the forward operating base, headphones on, eyes narrowed on lines of data.

The first time Harry met Matt Schultz, they were both muddy, exhausted and angry.

The exercise was supposed to simulate a contact scenario in scrub country. Harry's team had been dropped late, given bad intel, and then discovered their radios had been 'jammed' by an over-enthusiastic instructor.

Matt, then Captain Schultz, had sorted the mess out in fifteen minutes.

He was tall, broad-shouldered, with the kind of easy athleticism that made other men mentally check their own posture. Blond hair, surfer's tan, that faint white scar along his cheek like an accent.

"You're the idiot who tried to cross the creek line," he said by way of introduction, once the exercise was mercifully called.

"You're the idiot who planned a route without checking the weather," Harry replied.

For a moment it looked like Matt might swing at him. Then he grinned.

"Fair," he said. "You swim?"

"Enough to know a creek line is a bad idea," Harry said.

From that completely unpromising beginning grew the oddest of friendships. Matt was everything Harry was not: charismatic, openly kind, the sort of man strangers confided in. Where Harry spent nights alone with a whisky and his own thoughts, Matt somehow ended every deployment with three new mates and a phone full of contacts he never abused.

On operations, the three of them formed an unspoken triangle.

Harry moved quietly through whatever ground needed crossing.

Matt led, steady and unflappable, even when things went sideways.

Panda watched from the glow of screens, voice in their ears when the radios worked, ghost in the wires when they didn't.

They went where they were told. East Timor. Afghanistan. The sort of places that appeared in headlines for a week, then fell off the world's map while locals kept dying.

They saw things. They did things. Harry learned how to compartmentalise horrors into neat mental boxes and label them "later." Later never came.

What did come, unexpectedly, was Hogarth Cooper.

Chapter Three – Missions Without Flags

The job in the Horn of Africa was not, strictly speaking, on any Australian tasking list.

Officially, Harry and Matt were on extended leave. Unofficially, they were "consultants" attached to an international logistics company that had politely offered the Defence Force access to shipping intelligence in exchange for certain quiet favours.

The company's name was Hogarth Cooper.

The briefing came not in a bunker but in a glass boardroom overlooking Sydney Harbour. The man at the head of the table looked like a retired aristocrat who had misplaced his shooting weekend.

"Sir Thomas Fairfax-Stalbridge," he introduced himself. "Hogarth Cooper is my problem. For the moment, gentlemen, so are you."

With him was a woman in her thirties with dark hair tied back and eyes that appeared to miss nothing. Fleur Harris, operations coordinator. She spoke less than Sir Thomas but when she did, the words had weight.

"There is a vessel," she said, tapping the table to bring up a map. "Registered in Liberia, operating out of nowhere in particular. On its manifest, fertiliser. In its hold, we strongly suspect, something people intend as more than just agricultural improvement."

"Why us?" Matt asked. "You've got your own people."

"We do," Fleur replied. "Our own people are busy not dying in three other time zones. You, on the other hand, are on leave and have the misfortune of being good at both water and trouble."

Sir Thomas smiled thinly. “Consider this an audition. Successful candidates may find their post-service employment prospects improved.”

The mission blurred into a familiar rhythm: insertion, observation, a tight little window where everything could go catastrophically wrong.

Panda, brought in under the table, sat in a cramped, overheated comms room in Melbourne, ghosts of signals reflected in his glasses.

“Your target ship’s AIS has just ‘developed a fault’,” he said in their earpieces, dry as ever. “Poor thing has no idea where it is. Luckily, we do.”

Harry and Matt boarded in the middle of the night, sea spray cold on their faces, masked under the official cover of a customs inspection. The crew’s surprise was genuine. The stash in the hidden compartment beneath the fertiliser was, depressingly, exactly what Hogarth Cooper had predicted.

Explosives with a destination list that read like a who’s who of failed states.

The clean-up was handled at levels above their pay grade. What mattered, to Sir Thomas and Fleur, was that Harry and Matt had walked into a mess with no flag and walked out without leaving a footprint.

“That is a useful talent,” Fleur said, when they debriefed in London.

Harry shrugged. “You’d be amazed how easy it is to be invisible if you’re boring-looking.”

Fleur’s gaze flicked over him, assessing. “I suspect that particular camouflage is calculated rather than innate, Mr Loscam.”

Sir Thomas steepled his fingers. “Nonetheless, Hogarth Cooper appreciates calculated boredom. When you have had enough of being shouted at by officers who consider PowerPoint an art form, our door remains open.”

They took the hint.

Over the next few years, the patterns shifted. Uniforms gave way to civilian clothes, official deployments to “consultancy assignments.” Harry’s pay slipped from government payrolls to Hogarth Cooper subsidiaries. Matt followed, partly for the challenge, mostly because Harry had a talent for getting himself into trouble if left unsupervised.

Panda drifted into academia and then into something more interesting: Head of Cyber Security Training at a Melbourne university. On paper, he taught future analysts how to defend networks. In reality, he built a quiet little fortress from which he could do almost anything Harry needed, so long as there was plausible deniability.

The three of them still met in pubs that pretended not to serve Defence staff. They still ran together when they could, still insulted each other with the easy cruelty of men who would die for one another without hesitation.

They had grown up, sort of.

They had not, however, become sensible.

Which was how Harry ended up buying a farm.

Chapter Four – The Farm Outside the Lines

The property was fifty minutes out of Melbourne if you drove like the police were already bored of you, and an hour and ten if you obeyed the laws of physics.

Harry found it because he wasn't looking for it.

He'd gone for a ride to clear his head after a particularly untidy job in Eastern Europe, the kind that left behind more ghosts than bodies. The real estate sign looked as tired as the house behind it: weatherboard, sagging veranda, paddocks gone to seed.

"Bit of a dump, mate," the agent said cheerfully, opening the gate. "Good bones, though. Bloke who had it before got sick. Needs someone with energy."

Harry walked the boundary fence, boots kicking at old rabbit holes, and felt a strange sensation in his chest: the possibility of stillness.

There was room for a pool. Room for a shed big enough to hide a ute and a couple of things no one needed to know about. Room for nothing in particular.

He bought it in cash through a shell company that sounded like it sold fertiliser. Hogarth Cooper's legal team tidied the paperwork, barely concealing their amusement.

"Retirement plan?" Fleur asked, arch one eyebrow, on a secure call.

"Cover," Harry said. "If anyone asks what I do, I can point at the paddocks and say 'not enough.'"

"Try not to grow anything illegal," she said. "That's someone else's division."

The first months were chaos. Harry knew the theory of farming – water, soil, seasons – in the same way he knew the theory of relationships: abstractly, with no practical application.

It was Matt who saved him from turning the place into an extremely expensive paddock of dead grass.

Matt had left formal service the year before, honourable record, a chest full of ribbons he kept in a box under his bed. The army would have happily kept him until his knees gave up. Matt, however, had decided he preferred mornings that didn't start with someone yelling.

Harry flew him down “for a weekend to help with some fencing.” Two weeks later, Matt’s bags were still in the spare room, and he had replaced half the fence, reorganised the shed, and drawn up a plan that used words like rotational grazing and soil regeneration without irony.

“This isn’t a hobby farm,” Matt said, leaning against a fence post, sweat shining on his forearms. “You’ve accidentally bought a business.”

“I can pay someone,” Harry said.

“You are paying someone,” Matt replied. “Me.”

Harry frowned. “You sure?”

Matt gestured toward the paddocks. “You know what I would be doing otherwise? Sitting in a DFO car park having an existential crisis about selling insurance. I’d rather shovel manure.”

And that, essentially, was that.

The farm became theirs. Harry handled finances, machinery, and the parts of paperwork that required creative accounting. Matt handled the land.

He also acquired, with unseemly enthusiasm, an old Toyota ute.

It was a faded blue Hilux that had seen more lives than most politicians. The tray was dented, the seat fabric had long surrendered, and the stereo worked on the condition that you hit it exactly once above the volume knob.

“This thing is a hazard,” Harry said, when Matt rattled up the drive the first time.

“It’s a classic,” Matt replied, patting the dashboard. “She’s got character.”

“What she’s got is no airbags.”

Matt grinned. “You planning on crashing her?”

Harry had to concede the point.

The ute became as much a fixture as the battered gum tree near the front gate. Matt used it for everything: feed runs, fence checks, midnight drives to nowhere when his brain got too loud. He talked about replacing it occasionally, the way people talk about moving cities, with no real intent.

In the back corner of the property, Harry built what the plans called a “pool and outdoor entertainment area,” and what he called a sanity maintenance facility. Undercover, heated, practical. The barbecue area beside it became the default gathering place for the odd little circle that orbited him.

Panda visited often, driving out from Melbourne in whichever sensible hybrid he’d been bullied into buying that year. He would stand by the pool in his croquet whites, drink Harry’s whisky, and mock Matt’s country playlists.

It looked, from the outside, like a life.

Inside that life, encrypted messages still arrived. Flights still left from Melbourne at inconvenient hours. Harry still disappeared for days or weeks at a time, returning with new scars and new silences.

The farm became the fixed point he navigated around.

When Hogarth Cooper pitched Vienna, he almost said no.

Almost.

Chapter Five – Panda’s Fort & Melbourne’s Shadows

Officially, he occupied a sleek office at Victoria University’s Cyber Security Training Centre. Glass walls, racks of servers, an endless parade of students who showed up thinking “hacking” was a synonym for “being edgy on social media.”

Unofficially, 13 Magazine Avenue was the real headquarters.

The house was an unremarkable five-bedroom in Cairnlea, brick veneer and a front lawn that made neighbours feel better about their own. Inside, it was part social club, part data bunker.

The front rooms were all couches and gaming consoles, the kind of chaos that made students flock and never quite want to leave. The back rooms were racks of equipment, screens running quiet code, a whiteboard covered in diagrams that meant nothing to anyone without the right clearances.

“Why here?” Matt had asked, the first time he visited. “You could live on a beach in Thailand.”

“I like Bunnings,” Panda had said. “Also, my mother would kill me if I left the country again.”

Panda’s wealth – accumulated from an unholy alliance of stock market instincts, early crypto bets he never spoke about, and consulting retainer agreements written with beautiful cynicism – meant he could have lived anywhere. He chose Melbourne because it felt like home, and because Harry was within driving distance.

He ran cyber exercises for government agencies, trained corporate security teams, and occasionally “stress-tested” critical infrastructure networks with permission and without. He also, discreetly, ran support for Hogarth Cooper operatives who needed a digital ghost.

“Well, you’re on somebody’s list now,” he would say, as he wiped traces of a location or buried a file. “Good thing I keep multiple copies of everything in places no-one thinks to look.”

Harry trusted him with more than his life. He trusted him with his data, which for a man in his line of work was almost more intimate.

The Gold Coast had been a rare concession: three friends, one pool, no manifests, no clients, no one trying to kill them. It lasted less than a day.

Harry's sudden disappearance had turned the holiday sour. The TV footage that followed – Harry, in Vienna of all places – had turned it into something else entirely.

Back in Melbourne, Panda replayed the clip until the pixels blurred.

He sat in the back room at Magazine Avenue, the blinds half-down, the hum of machines filling the gaps between his thoughts. The newsreader's voice was muted. He didn't need her commentary. He was interested in the background.

Vienna International Airport. Arrivals hall. Security cordon. A group of officials moving through the frame with the confidence of people who expected the world to get out of their way. In the middle of them: Harry.

Same shoulders, same gait, the same way of scanning a space without looking like he was scanning a space. Different clothes. Cleaner hair. No warning.

Matt had sent him the clip from his phone with a single message: **Tell me this isn't him.**

Panda had known it was Harry before the video finished buffering.

Now he paused the frame and stepped closer to the screen, studying the artefacts around the man in the centre.

Logos. Security badges. A corner of a timestamp the network hadn't bothered to crop. It was all surface noise, but like any good port, the surface told you where to start digging.

He pulled the raw feed from an unsecured mirror the station used, stripped out the broadcast graphics and followed the metadata back to its origin. Airport security. Government servers. Somewhere in that chain, a request had gone out to Hogarth Cooper.

And, crucially, it had not gone through him.

"That's rude," he muttered, fingers already moving.

He authenticated into HC's backbone with credentials that were official in one sense and absolutely not in another. Routes opened up in front of him: ships, ports, inland hubs, contracts. The living anatomy of the company.

Somewhere in there, Vienna was lit up like a nerve.

He found it tucked behind a cluster of legitimate traffic: an authentication hand-shake between one of Hogarth Cooper's secure clusters and an Austrian endpoint. Flagged with an internal code.

HC-VIE-54 / Gu-A.

“Cute,” Panda said softly. “You gave it a pet name.”

The operation file itself was sealed. Operations-admin rights took him as far as a grey curtain:

BY AUTHORISATION ONLY – FAIRFAX-STALBRIDGE / CHAIR.

Sir Thomas, then. Not some mid-level manager with delusions of grandeur. This was a Chairman-level job. That explained why Harry had moved without paperwork crossing Panda’s desk.

It didn’t mean Panda had to like it.

He leaned back, teeth worrying at the edge of a thumbnail.

Harry had vanished from a Queensland holiday and reappeared in a European airport attached to a file with the Chairman’s name on it. No formal briefing. No risk register. No request for support.

Whoever had set it up either didn’t trust the normal system, or wanted as few fingerprints on it as possible.

Panda didn’t trust people who bypassed the system. He was the system.

If he couldn’t open the job, he could at least map its edges.

He followed the billing codes attached to **HC-VIE-54 / Gu-A**, watching the money circle inward. Not through standard client accounts, the ones with logos and glossy decks attached, but through a family office structure he’d only seen twice before.

Each time, it had ended in a private meeting for Sir Thomas and a discreet uptick in Hogarth Cooper’s influence somewhere the public reports never mentioned.

The trail looped through Switzerland, then Luxembourg, and came to rest against a name.

Not a person. A brand.

Orris.

On paper, Orris was the sort of client the public face of Hogarth Cooper would crow about: global luxury, immaculate sustainability reports, tasteful philanthropy. Perfume, skincare, the sort of packaging that made people feel wealthier than they were.

Off paper, there was very little.

No ex-executives giving angry interviews. No leaked emails, no lively threads on the forums Panda lurked in when he couldn't sleep. The brand appeared, did its work, made its money and somehow left almost no digital footprint beyond the carefully curated one it paid for.

"I don't like that," he told the empty room. "I really don't like that."

He pulled up internal routing attached to the Vienna cluster. One name glowed back at him from the personnel list.

Fleur Harris. Local operations support. On the ground already.

That tracked. Fleur was the sort of person Sir Thomas sent when he wanted a situation felt as much as measured.

Panda hesitated, then opened a secure side channel. Not the stiff, logged one used for quarterly updates and internal memos. The older, quieter circuit that pre-dated half the compliance department and survived only because no-one liked to admit how useful it still was.

FROM: P. NGUYEN

TO: F. HARRIS

SUBJECT: Weather

Gold Coast's overrated. Vienna looks cold.

Tell me you're seeing what I'm seeing: HC-VIE-54 / Gu-A.

Our mutual idiot has turned up on your patch without going through the usual doors.

Someone's jumped the queue.

I'm locked out of the file. If anything smells wrong – or too clean – I'd like to know before it bites us.

He encrypted the message, watched it vanish into the pipes, then sat back and let the chair roll a few centimetres away from the desk and back again.

He could have gone to Sir Thomas directly. A polite note. A dry question. *I see there is traffic in my airspace. Would you like me to pretend not to?*

The likely reply wrote itself in his head. *Need-to-know. Sensitive client. Thanks for your vigilance, Pandora, do keep an eye on the general landscape.*

No. Better to play ignorant and build his own landscape.

He created a new folder in his private directory and labelled it with the code he'd stolen.

Gu-A.

At the moment it contained one paused frame of Harry in an airport, a tangle of traced connections and a single client name. Thin, by his standards. Too thin for comfort.

But routes joined. Threads crossed. Stories that began with a man on holiday and ended with him walking through a European airport under someone else's authority did not stay harmless for long.

If Harry had been asked, he would have called it just another job.

Hogarth Cooper knew better.

So did Aurum.

Chapter Six – Vienna: Ghosts in the Snow

Vienna's winter made Melbourne's seem like an elaborate joke.

The cold there was clean and disciplined, like everything else. Snow on the cobbles, breath in the air, light that turned the façades of the Ringstraße into painted backdrops.

Harry arrived under an alias that belonged to a moderately dull risk consultant. His luggage contained one suit, one overcoat, and a small metal case that bore no external markings but contained enough encrypted data to make several intelligence agencies nervous.

Hogarth Cooper's local office was tucked discreetly into a building near the canal. Fleur Harris greeted him in a black turtleneck and an expression that suggested she'd been awake for thirty hours.

"Loscam," she said, as if acknowledging both his presence and the fact she had better things to do. "You're late."

"My plane wasn't," he replied. "I just walked slowly to irritate you."

Her mouth twitched once. "Our client is Aurum Group. Specifically, its Orris division. They're hosting a private event here this weekend. High-level investors, certain politicians, the usual parasites. We've been asked to ensure the supply chain around it is... uninteresting."

"Bomb threats?"

"Not yet. Corporate espionage. Counterfeit product. Political protest. Take your pick."

She tapped a tablet, bringing up a schematic of a warehouse near the outskirts of the city.

"Two days ago, one of Orris' shipments went off-grid. GPS blinked, then reappeared on a vehicle not designated for transport. Our internal audit suggests someone is testing the edges of their distribution. Aurum suspects a rival. We suspect something smarter."

"And you want me to...?"

"Follow the ghost, see who feeds it. Quietly. No dead bodies unless absolutely necessary. Our client is very particular about optics."

"Who's our client contact?" he asked, although he already suspected.

Fleur slid the folder across the table without looking up. The coffee between them was already cold.

"Client's file," she said. "Or what they're willing to show us, anyway."

Harry flipped it open. Corporate structure, holding companies, the usual legal wallpaper.

"Imogen Morozova," he read.

"Primary beneficial owner of Orris," Fleur said. "Built an ethical cosmetics company from the ground and has turned it into an empire. Public line is 'visionary businesswoman with a tragic family history.'"

"And the private line?"

"Depends who you ask," Fleur said. "To some, she's the only adult in the room. To others, she's the reason they sleep with their phones off."

Harry studied the photo clipped to the back. Press shot, controlled light, the kind of gaze that didn't apologise for anything. He closed the file. "You met her?"

"Once. Briefly." Fleur's tone suggested that was all anyone sane needed. "You won't, not if her people can help it. They prefer to keep the help at arm's length."

"The help?"

"That's us," Fleur said. "Smile nicely. Don't forget who's paying, and don't believe for a second that means you're in charge."

That night, in a city that wore history like a well-cut coat, Harry walked the warehouse district alone. Snow crunched under his boots. His breath smoked in the dark.

Panda's voice rode in his ear through a discreet earpiece. "Vehicle you're looking for is a white panel van with plates cloned from a bakery delivery truck. Currently parked two streets south of your position. There are three mobile phones idling inside and one signal jammer that someone thinks I haven't spotted."

"Can you see who owns the phones?" Harry murmured, keeping his head down as two men walked past arguing in German about football.

“Working on it. Reception out there is trash. Try not to get stabbed for thirty seconds while I make friends with a tower.”

Harry found the van. It was unremarkable, parked among others, a thin rind of snow on its roof. No movement inside.

He circled once, hands in pockets, posture loose. To anyone watching, he was just another bloke trying to smoke in peace.

Panda came back. “Phones are burner SIMs bought with cash. But one of them called a number we know. Belongs to a private security contractor in Prague who does deniable work for three different governments and at least four criminals with overcompensation issues.”

“Any link to Aurum?”

“Indirectly. Contractor’s client list overlaps with a couple of funds that own chunks of Aurum stock. Nothing clean. Which means it’s interesting.”

Harry exhaled. “Fleur wanted uninteresting.”

“Then she shouldn’t have called you,” Panda said.

The van remained stubbornly boring. No one returned to it that night. Harry placed a tracker on the underside, fingers numb, then retreated to the hotel Hogarth Cooper had booked for him. It was not, he noted, the same one whose penthouse Aurum had reserved.

He texted the number in his folder anyway.

Chapter Seven – The Weekend That Wasn't Supposed To Be

The Vienna office of Orris smelled faintly of expensive nothing. Air and glass and money that had never had to work outdoors.

“Herr Loscam,” the man said, crossing the floor with a practised half-smile. “Karl Reinhardt. Regional operations.”

He was mid-fifties, compact, the sort of man who had never carried his own suitcase if he could help it. His handshake was firm enough to signal confidence, not strong enough to suggest labour.

“Appreciate you making the time,” Harry said.

“For Hogarth Cooper? Always.” Reinhardt gestured toward the glass-walled meeting room. “We value our partners.”

Harry followed, noting the view: ring road, river, the city laid out like a brochure. On the wall, a framed Orris campaign: Imogen in black and white, head turned away from the camera, the bottle in focus instead of her face.

“The owner,” Harry said, nodding at the photo.

“The face,” Reinhardt corrected gently. “She inspires confidence. The day-to-day burden is shared.”

Shared by men like you, Harry thought. Men who think they’re the real engine because they understand spreadsheets and warehouse metrics.

They sat. Files were produced. Reinhardt talked. Volumes.

On the surface it was all impressive: on-time delivery rates, flawless compliance scores, sustainability reports that would make a minister weep with gratitude. He had figures for everything, charts ready to go.

And yet.

“You’re very proud of your loss rates,” Harry said, scanning a summary sheet. “Zero per cent in three years?”

“We are very careful,” Reinhardt said. “And very well insured.”

“Even careful people misplace the odd crate.”

"Not here." The smile tightened. "Vienna is not São Paulo, Mr Loscam."

Harry made a noncommittal sound and flipped another page. The numbers were too clean. Panda would hate them. Fleur already did.

"And if something does go wrong?" Harry asked. "Who makes the call? You, or..." He let the sentence drift toward the framed campaign on the wall.

Reinhardt followed his glance. "We have a direct line to the owner when necessary."

"How often is 'necessary'?"

"Rarely," Reinhardt said. "Our job is to ensure she is not troubled by operational... noise."

Translation: she hears what he wants her to hear.

By the time Harry left, he had a notebook full of figures and a gut full of doubt. The numbers were perfect. The man presenting them was almost perfect.

Almost.

In the café that afternoon, he opened the notebook again, not to admire the data but to mark the gaps. Shipments that rerouted too smoothly. Contracts that were renewed without negotiation. A supplier in Eastern Europe who had never once triggered a compliance review.

The waitress set his coffee down. Across the room, the door opened and a woman walked in without hesitation, like she knew exactly where she was supposed to be.

Harry didn't need an introduction. He recognised her from the file, from the wall-sized campaign in Reinhardt's office.

Imogen Morozova.

She glanced at his notebook as she reached the table, taking in the columns of cramped handwriting, the underlined names.

"You've been busy," she said.

"I'm thorough," Harry replied.

"Good," she said, sitting opposite. "Because Karl thinks I don't need to worry about Vienna. I'd like you to tell me whether he's right."

Epilogue – Utes, Ghosts and Unfinished Maps

Back on the farm, the sky was huge and indifferent.

Matt leaned against the old Toyota ute, arms folded, as Harry pulled into the drive in a dust-coated rental.

“Vienna treat you well?” Matt asked.

“Depends how you define ‘well’,” Harry said.

“Come back in one piece, didn’t you?”

“Define ‘one piece’,” Harry replied.

Matt squinted at him, assessment trained by years of reading men after bad days. He didn’t push. “Panda’s inside. He’s been abusing your internet all afternoon.”

Inside, Panda was sprawled on the couch, laptop open, crumbs on his shirt.

“You missed the good biscuits,” he said by way of greeting. “Also, remind me never to mess with Aurum’s distribution. They play rough.”

“You already knew that,” Harry said.

“Knowing in theory is very different from watching the insurance paperwork,” Panda replied.

They moved outside to the pool area. The evening was warm. The smell of eucalyptus drifted on the breeze. Harry slid into the water, muscles loosening with each stroke.

From the deckchair, Matt’s voice floated over.

“So,” he said. “Holiday any good?”

Harry surfaced, water dripping from his hair. For a moment he saw a Gold Coast balcony, a woman in his shirt, the Pacific throwing itself at the shore. Then Vienna’s snow, Imogen’s silhouette against glass.

“Depends how you define ‘holiday’,” he said.

Panda snorted. “You’re insufferable when you’re being mysterious.”

Harry rolled onto his back, staring up at the sky. Planes etched faint lines overhead, routes drawn by people who thought they could predict where everyone needed to be.

Maps, he thought, were lies told with confidence.

The real story was always in the gaps.

He had a farm, a best mate who loved an ancient ute more than made sense, a cyber genius in the suburbs, and a standing invitation – explicit or otherwise – into the orbit of a woman who could shift markets with a raised eyebrow.

He also had Hogarth Cooper, with its circles and secrets and the quiet, relentless gravity of its work.

The backstory, he knew, was over.

The real trouble hadn't started yet.