FRESH START

 After twenty years, Laurence Calder had had enough.

 He worked for the Central Intelligence Agency in Langley, Virginia. His job was basically intelligence-gathering -- the same as most of his department co-workers. He carefully scoured through newly published books, domestic and international magazine articles, U.S. and foreign embassy emails, transcripts of tapped phone calls, suspicious faxes, anonymous letters, etc. -- all in search for anything unusual or useful that might help maintain American hegemony around an ever-shifting and increasingly dangerous world. Then he compiled his findings and typed up a daily report for his superiors. He rarely found out which unearthed intelligence was actually used, however -- such was the Agency's strictly established policy. 'You needed to know only what you needed to know' was the routine CIA mantra.

 Laurence's exemplary performance evaluations and seniority, though, did enable him to garner high-level clearance and access to some startling national security secrets. One such shocker was that there was a detailed plan to kill both the President and Vice-President of the United States within the same hour, and elevate the Speaker of the House to be the nation's new chief executive, should certain 'specific events' warrant its drastic implementation. The CIA, the Pentagon, and the FBI were all in on this stunning plan at the highest levels. The ultra-classified file was dubbed "Exit 99." Calder was ordered to immediately report to his section chief if he ever saw the unusual phrase: "...all 99 chickens have come home to roost..." in any email, phone tap, or fax transcript.

 Such was the dark world of deadly espionage.

 But the increasingly numbing dictates of political correctness, and the necessity to 'massage' the careers of his upwardly-mobile bureaucratic bosses, had crushed the last vestige of idealism out of Laurence. The 'back-stabbing' among the staff, the inter-personal rivalries, and the anxiety of 'who can I trust today?' now sickened and disgusted him. Calder had earned his pension the hard way, he felt, so it was time to get the hell out while he still had his wits and his health.

 He had just turned age forty-five, and was still fit through regular exercise, with a touch of gray invading his thick brown hair at the temples. Born in Culpeper, Virginia, he was a graduate of Georgetown University, where he majored in International Studies and Geopolitics. After considering joining the FBI like his late father, Laurence naturally turned instead to the CIA, given his academic training. He was full of energy and optimism back then, and was quickly hired. He married Marguerite Winnick after a whirlwind romance, and soon they bought a modest home in Tysons Corner, not far from Agency headquarters.

 After a few years, however, Laurence was surprised to learn that his wife had no interest in having children and starting a family. She quit her job as an interior decorator, and focused exclusively instead on the frantic Washington, D.C. social scene. Cocktail parties, dinner parties, charity balls, art auctions, and the like was her new devotion. She started to spend more and more money on new outfits and jewelry, to the dismay of her husband. ("I have to blend in with their society, don't you understand?" his wife rationalized.) She badgered Laurence to try and get invitations for them to attend various festive White House holiday gatherings. Marguerite had pathetically morphed into a vacuous, name-dropping, and obnoxious 'social butterfly.' This unexpected turn of events was very depressing to her husband.

 Their marriage was now doomed, as one might expect. Soon, they slept in separate bedrooms. Their sex life rapidly evaporated. After awhile, the hapless CIA agent just didn't care anymore. They got divorced at the twelve year mark. And to think I thought that I once loved her, he mused ruefully. He doubted that he would ever marry again. Seriously, what was the point? he wondered, his emotions still scarred. That was three years ago.

 After informing his section chief, Brandon Fisk, of his intentions to leave the Agency and retire, Calder filled out the seemingly volumes of required paperwork and submitted them. Brandon was yet another phony bureaucrat protecting his own career, and Laurence never cared for him. On his last day, Calder was summoned to Fisk's office. The flabby, pasty-faced, gray-haired section chief was sitting behind his imposing desk, dressed in a rumpled Brooks Brothers light blue shirt with dark regimental tie. He put down a file he was reading and removed his bifocals.

 "Well, Laurence, we are going to miss you around here," Brandon blandly offered. Calder coolly detected his boss's forced sincerity, and his lack of civility at not even offering his visitor a chair. "Of course, you have to turn in your office keys to me, and sign the official 'non-disclosure' forms, which prevents you from ever telling the public what really goes on here. No 'tell-all' books, no Media interviews, no fictional 'spy novels' with the real names changed. You know the rules. And especially remember this: you never laid eyes on the Exit 99 file. Such a file simply doesn't exist." He stared at Laurence for a brief, silent moment. "So I guess it's goodbye now," Brandon finally added. "Good luck." The awkward conclusion of this final meeting was furthered by Fisk not even bothering to rise from his large, purposely throne-like leather chair to shake Laurence's hand. Instead, the boss reached over for his vente Starbucks cup and slurped from it with his puffy lips, then picked up yet another manila file to peruse after replacing his eyeglasses. No wonder that Fisk was mockingly referred to as 'The Toad' behind his back by most of the other staff members, Laurence thought. What an asshole...

 Back in his office, Calder emptied out his desk and placed all of its personal contents in the standard cardboard box which the Agency provided. He also gathered up a few cards and small gifts that some of his coworkers had earlier given him. Then a stern-looking security guard -- a tall, imposing black man named Willis -- silently marched Laurence out to his car, who felt almost like prisoner being escorted from jail. "Don't take it personally sir. It's how the Agency does things," Willis explained. "You know how it is. Everyone is being watched everywhere, all the time. The Agency wants security. Always security." He gave Laurence a curt nod and left after the retiree said goodbye, having already surrendered to the guard -- as a last act -- his Agency identification badge. Calder was now officially ex-CIA.

 As he drove home to his apartment in Brambleton (he had lost his house to Marguerite in their contentious divorce, but was spared any alimony payments in the deal), Laurence played over in his mind some of the disturbing memories he had of twenty years inside American Intelligence: corrupt defense contractors; duplicitous politicians from both parties; assassination plots against foreign heads of state; rigged elections; corporate payoffs and 'hush money'; covert operations and cover-ups; prominent national leaders lying under oath during Congressional hearings; the intentional leaking of false news stories and other misinformation...and on and on. The citizens of our fragile Republic were being duped on an almost daily basis, Calder knew as a fact. Democracy itself was on the ropes, and getting hammered from within...and how could he ever forget the sinister Exit 99 file?

 Laurence realized that he simply had to get away -- and he meant permanently. He was sick of the festering political divisions in the country, the false narratives of systemic racism and so-called 'white privilege,' and the screams of radical activists calling for the dismantling of the police and even of capitalism itself. It was all simply insane! Corrosive trends in popular culture were also dragging the nation down into the toilet. In fact, Calder had stopped watching most television programs years ago. They were just too 'soul-crushing' and depressing.

 When he got home, Laurence poured himself a stiff bourbon, then sat down in his easy chair after pulling a large world atlas off his over-filled walnut bookshelves.

 It was April, and the cherry blossoms were just beginning to bloom in the nation's capital, some thirty-three miles away. By the end of this year, Laurence vowed, I will leave the United States and move to another country. Somewhere hopefully normal. Somewhere sane...

 Calder always wanted to live near the ocean, for he had been on the swim team in college, and still swam regularly for fitness at a local pool facility. Looking through his atlas, he saw potential places to emigrate: Vancouver, British Columbia in western Canada, Christchurch, on the Southern Island of New Zealand (just 12 miles from the Pacific beaches), and Sydney, Australia. Laurence had only visited Vancouver, but he had researched the other two locations on-line recently, and found them likewise quite attractive and appealing. A bonus for all three possibilities, too, was that they all spoke English.

 But by focusing a bit more on Australia in his atlas, he noticed the city of Perth in the far southwestern coast of the island continent. He knew no one who had ever been there. It seemed so remote -- hence potentially very peaceful and probably safe. Laurence was intrigued. He immediately began to read up more on Perth on the internet. Then he watched several videos on the city on YouTube. It looked fabulous! Clean, orderly, low crime, good public services especially in education and health care, a well-designed modern infrastructure for its two million inhabitants, and a stable economy with a growing job market. Perth also featured a very pleasing Mediterranean climate. What was not to like? In a recent poll of 450 world cities, Perth ranked #21 as one of the best places to live. So Laurence Calder was sold!

 Next, he inquired at the Australian Embassy in Washington about residency and citizenship requirements. He discovered that he could keep his U.S. citizenship if he wanted to by getting a permanent visa, which allowed the bearer to live in Australia indefinitely. He could also choose to become an Australian citizen after four years living there, yet still retain dual citizenship with the United States. Should he ever decide to get a job Down Under, he simply needed to apply for a work visa, which was usually granted to skilled and/or educated individuals for particular fields of needed employment. The perky female embassy clerk who advised him assured Laurence that he would have no problems with whatever choice he ultimately made. "You can also get instant Australian citizenship by marrying a national," she added with a smile, in a lovely Aussie accent. He soon opted for the permanent visa.

 So when chilly December at last arrived, Calder finalized his plans. He was taking a big gamble to move to a foreign country without even visiting it first, but his mind was made up, and his gut told him that it was the right thing to do. He gave up his furnished apartment and sold his beige Subaru Crosstrek, arranged for his bank to transfer all funds and pension checks once he set up residency in Perth, and put the bulk of his personal effects and files in storage -- again with instructions to ship them, when directed, to his new Australian address. Finally, he purchased the necessary air tickets from Los Angeles to Singapore (an 18-hour flight), with a connection to Perth (5 more hours) on Singapore Airlines. He would arrive in Perth on January 2nd after crossing the International Date Line. The dreary cold winter he was currently enduring would magically switch to golden warm summer as he flew south of the equator, where the seasons were reversed. And he knew he would have to learn how to drive on the opposite side of the road, in a car with the steering wheel on the other side too! With a fresh start for a new life, Laurence was completely excited and more than ready to proceed. He had checked one large suitcase at the airport, while his laptop, cell phone, and wallet were all in his small carry-on backpack.

 On the LAX to SIN leg of his journey, Calder happened to strike up a conversation with a gentleman seated across the aisle from him in Business Class. They had just finished a surprisingly tasty meal. The well-dressed man, about Laurence's age, introduced himself as Amir Subree, a civil engineer from Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia. Amir noticed that Calder was reading the latest thriller by author Ken Follett.

 "You know, I really envy people who can be creative like novelists, painters, musicians, and other artists," Amir began. "I have to design complex things like roads and bridges and make them work despite various initial problems, but it's just not the same as a Michelangelo, or a Monet, or a Mozart, or even your Ken Follett I notice there."

 "I know what you mean," Laurence replied. "I sometimes wonder too -- where exactly do such original ideas come from? Some would say from their creator's subconscious, or from their imagination, or maybe from their dreams while they sleep. But who knows? I read once that Michelangelo could look at a cold block of marble, yet see a vibrant 'living' sculpture shape inside. He would then 'release' it with his hammer and chisel until the world was presented with something almost miraculous like his amazing 'Pieta.' How can that be possible for someone to accomplish that but not another? Are such people simply born as geniuses? Or is there a realm of consciousness that all people could somehow reach and explore, and 'see' for themselves entire novels like Victor Hugo's one-thousand page 'Les Miserables," already completely envisioned, and then just write it down?"

 "I understand the theory you are suggesting, Laurence, and I would agree," Amir replied. "How else could we explain someone gifted like Mozart, writing an entire symphony -- which he somehow heard in his head, in its entirety -- then simply transcribing it from memory down on paper without making even a single mistake? It's incredible! And it remains a mystery to the rest of us 'mortals' to this day," he chuckled.

 The two travelers made a few other more casual conversations for a while, then Subree went down for a nap and Calder returned to his book. Amir later took his leave at Singapore's ultra-modern Changi airport. He wished Laurence good luck after the two shook hands, as the ex-CIA agent hurried to change planes for his connecting flight Down Under.

 After collecting his bag in Perth, the jet-lagged emigrant headed towards Customs and Immigration. A beefy, darkly-tanned agent, in a dress shorts uniform with matching knee socks, carefully checked Laurence's passport and his permanent visa papers.

 "So, yer movin' here from the States, eh? Ya made a smart choice. Had enough of the endless strife? Well, yer gonna luv it here in 'Oz.' So welcome...and g'day, mate!" the agent said, as he quickly grinned, stamped Calder's documents, and waved him through.

 Laurence headed over to the rental car counters and chose Avis. Time to think now in kilometers instead of miles, and for temperatures in Centigrade, he realized. He got a white Nissan Pathfinder and would motor out to downtown Perth, about 10 km away. "And please don't forget to drive on the correct side of the road here, Mr. Calder," the attractive blond clerk kindly advised, after noting his Virginia driver's license. "And welcome to WA...er...I mean, that's what we call Western Australia here." So off he went, acutely mindful in what he assumed to be normal afternoon traffic, until he got used to the new road scheme.

 The ex-CIA agent had earlier made a two-night reservation at the Crowne Plaza Hotel, off Langley Park (oh, the Virginia irony!) in the heart of the city. It had an outdoor pool, which would help Calder relax and unwind as he gradually adjusted to his new Australian reality. Upon arriving in his room, he immediately showered and changed clothes, but avoided taking a nap so as to help his body's circadian rhythm re-adjust. Instead, he went outside to walk around town in the brilliant and warm 31 degree C. (88 F.) summer sunshine and find a nice bite of seafood to enjoy, fresh from the Indian Ocean. He stopped during his ramble in a bank to change some money into the new local currency.

 Some of the first things he noticed on his walkabout was no street litter, no graffiti, no ugly billboards, and no homeless encampments in doorways or in city parks. He saw no obesity either; instead, he saw healthy-looking citizens who appeared involved, optimistic, and contented. Such urban orderliness, evidence of prosperity, and peacefulness deeply impressed him. It's like America once was, he thought, with a twinge of sadness...He sensed the people's feeling of unity and pride in their country, as he had already witnessed its natural openness and friendliness. He knew now that he had made the right choice to move here.

 After his two nights in Perth, Laurence headed for the southwestern suburban community of Rockingham, about 47 km (or 45-minutes) away. He quickly adjusted again to steering on the right side of his rental car's front seat instead of the left! Soon, in the distance, the beaches of this growing seaside community of 15,000 souls (133,000 including the surrounding expansions) came into view. Calder drove to the Quest Rockingham Apartments and Hotel, where he planned to stay for a week or so during his search for a potential home to buy. Real estate in Perth was mostly apartment complexes and fancy condominiums, he learned, because private homes there were too expensive for most people. So Rockingham it would be.

 After settling into his cheery studio apartment with kitchenette and a balcony overlooking the nearby Indian Ocean, Laurence oriented himself to the inviting town.

 He discovered that the Rockingham area was flat, with sandy soil and typical coastal vegetation. Tourists flocked here for its superb beaches and water sports. It had a popular Marine Park where dolphins, seals, pelicans, and penguins could readily be observed. To the north was Garden Island, connected to the mainland by an all-weather causeway. It was home to Australia's largest naval fleet and submarine base. Rockingham had a satellite campus of Perth's Murdoch University, as well as a huge Sports Complex and shopping mall -- Rockingham Centre. Calder also noted that there were plenty of bike trails, as well as convenient rail and bus links into Perth.

 By asking around (with locals initially surprised by his Yankee accent but soon warmly accepting him), Laurence was given tips on favorable neighborhoods and good real estate agencies. He eventually chose Lola Kelly at Harcourts Realty, a vibrant, middle-aged, married redhead with a winning smile and plenty of practical information. After several showings, Calder decided on the property at 909 Stirling Court, located on a quiet, palm-treed residential street, about six blocks from the beach. The new house (by law, only Australian citizens could purchase used or renovated homes) @ 513 square meters, featured 3 nice bedrooms, 1 bath, and a 2-car garage, along with a shaded back patio deck. The front and back yards were attractively landscaped. The asking price was A$370,000, which translated to $269,000 U.S. (A$1 = $0.73 U.S.) This price was less than half of what he paid for his old house back in Tysons Corner! he realized. After some sensible bargaining as to the final price, Laurence was sold, and signed the necessary papers. He next informed his American Chase Bank to transfer all of his funds to the local National Australian Bank (NAB) in Rockingham, and gave them his new address (to forward his monthly pension checks) and his new telephone number. Calder likewise arranged to have all of his U.S. items-in-storage shipped to him in Rockingham. Utilities such as water and electricity were soon connected, and mail delivery was set up.

 "Ya got yerself a real bonzer home here, Mr. Calder, and a fair dinkum deal too," Lola remarked, then translated the Aussie slang into words that a baffled Laurence could understand. "Now all ya gotta do a buy yerself a barbie for yer back deck, put some tinnys in the fridge, and brush up on our Aussie cricket and rugby teams!" the energetic redhead laughed. "Then it's all gonna be: 'Good on ya, mate, and no worries!' Plus, every single sheila in town is gonna swoon for a good-lookin' sober bloke like you!" Lola winked. "Just warnin' ya!"

 Laurence next went furniture shopping at the Rockingham Centre mall, and finally moved into his new home once everything was delivered. He planned on keeping his Avis rental car a little while longer until he could buy his own vehicle.

 While stocking up at the local supermarket (an wondering exactly what the hell 'Vegemite' was), Calder happened to wind up in a conversation in the produce section with a friendly and attractive woman by the name of Sandra Petersen. ("You can call me Sandy, if you like...everyone else does," she offered with a smile.) He soon learned that she actually lived a few blocks down the street from him, and that she was divorced, with two grown children -- one daughter living in Canberra and a son in Melbourne. Noticing that Laurence was not wearing a wedding ring, Sandy casually invited him over for lunch on Saturday, if he was available. He was, and he was happy to meet and make his first new Aussie friend. Calder had not dated much during the past three years after his divorce, so it seemed that now was the time to 'get back into the game.' Another fresh start!

 As their relationship grew over the next several weeks, the couple -- she at 41, as he was now 46 -- found themselves very compatible. Sandy worked as a pre-school teacher at Sunshine Day Care Centre in the small community of Shoalwater, a fifteen-minute drive from their neighborhood, and close to Safety Bay. On her days off, the pair often went to the beach for swimming in the comfortably warm ocean waters. Sandy surprised him on their second outing with a wide-brimmed hat to wear outdoors when she noticed he was getting sunburned."Gotta watch out for skin cancer and use plenty of sunscreen here Down Under...we are closer to the equator than you were the States, and the Perth area gets the most sun of all the Aussie capital cities," she advised. Soon they started renting small sailboats, to explore short distances up and down the coast -- once going all the way north to Fremantle, near Perth.

 After he bought his own silver Toyota Corolla Hatch, they took weekend drives out into the Outback, also known as the 'Bush.' They also visited Rockingham's Marine Park to see the local sea creatures and wildlife, and explore the area's tide pools. They went out to dinner (with him trying the delicious Barramundi fish for the first time), or made meals at each other's homes. Once, during Sunday brunch at Sandy's place, Laurence had his first experience with Vegemite. It was a dark brown, yeasty paste that smelled like rotten cheese. The Aussies put it on toast or bagels. When he tasted the salty goo, he found it revolting! Sandy just laughed and remarked, "That's O.K. We Ozzers say it's an acquired taste!" They next started going to the movies at the Ace Cinema complex on Friday or Saturday nights. Before long, they were relaxed enough to tell each other about the intimate details their lives.

 Sandy revealed that she had married early, at 19, and had her son and daughter soon after. But her husband, Rob, took to football (soccer) and increased drinking with his mates when not at work as an auto mechanic. "Then he started cheating on me...he eventually 'traded up for a younger model,' as the old saying goes. So after ten rocky years of marriage, we finally got divorced," she confessed, "and neither I nor our kids have much contact with him anymore."

 Soon after that important 'trust border' in their relationship was crossed (he similarly told her the sad saga of him and Marguerite, and mentioned some general details about his having worked for the U.S. Government in Langley), the happy couple would occasionally sleep together. The closeness and sharing was simple and warm and natural...and the emotional scars from the disaster that was Marguerite were gradually healing nicely in Laurence's heart.

 Things went wonderfully with Sandra Petersen for eleven months. She even bought him a boomerang as a fun gift for his first Christmas in Oz, and helped him practice throwing it so it would properly return. It was unknown whether either person wished to re-marry at this point, however. Why risk ruining a good relationship? Laurence secretly felt. But Calder even mulled over the possibility of applying for an Australian work visa, should an interesting job opportunity present itself -- nothing 'covert Intelligence' related, of course. Because he was always a reader, maybe he could work at or even open his own bookshop? And with a new job, would marriage again naturally follow? He would be a stepfather if that happened, he realized. Maybe be part of a family, something he had always desired...

 One day, when Laurence went to visit Sandra at her house a few blocks down the street, he found that she was not there. He tried to phone her, then text her, then email her, but he never received a reply. After nothing but silence over a three-day period, he decided to drop in at her Day Care Centre -- it being a Tuesday when she would normally be at work -- but the pre-school director and Sandy's co-workers likewise reported her missing. "She never called in 'crook' (sick) or anything, which was strange," the matronly directress Mrs. Foster remarked. "Maybe there was an emergency with her son or daughter in Canberra or Melbourne. But if you leave me your cell number, Mr. Calder, I'll let you know if I hear anything. We all know here at work that you and Sandy are in a good, steady relationship, so I would be happy to do that for you," she smiled warmly. "You know, she raves about you all the time!"

 Yet five weeks dragged went by with still no word. Laurence went over to tend her lawn and collect any mail left inside her front porch box. Finally, he decided to file a police report on Sandra Petersen as a missing person. The officials entered her home to look for any unusual clues, and contacted her grown children, and checked road accident reports and hospital/morgue admissions, but nothing turned up. Everyone seemed to be at a loss. Sandy had strangely vanished, while Laurence had become increasing worried and frustrated.

 The police ultimately advised him that he should accept the bitter reality and try to get on with his life. When he asked if hiring a private investigator might help solve the baffling mystery, they said that they frankly doubted it. "We did a really thorough job, Mr. Calder. Looked down every possible avenue. Even went up north to Darwin to question her ex-husband, Rob. I marked him right away as a bleedin' wanker, but I don't think the bloke was stupid enough to lie to us."

 About six months later, Calder was trying to teach himself to surf in the waters off Safety Bay, in part to divert his mind from lingering thoughts of Sandra. The wavy, breezy area he chose was very popular with windsurfers and kite-surfers as well as regular board surfers. Rentals were available for most water sports here. Other shops sold various snacks, ice cream, sausage rolls, fish & chips, soft drinks, and of course, beer.

 Laurence was shyly approached by a petite young woman, who introduced herself as Marcy Tobor.

 "Hi! I recently moved here from Adelaide in SA, and was trying to teach myself how to surf." She was clutching a bright, orange-colored fiberglass board. "I noticed you were catching some waves too, so I wondered if you could give me a few pointers?" Marcy looked to be in her late twenties. She was tan, curvaceous and firm in a lemon-colored bikini, with cute freckles across her nose and light brown hair streaked with blond highlights, pulled back in a ponytail. Her perfect white smile was both warm and disarming. Curiously, she did not have the typical thick Aussie accent that Laurence had gradually grown accustomed to.

 "Sure, Marcy. I can try, but frankly I'm just a novice surfer myself. I'm Laurence Calder, by the way. Pleased to meet you." They shook hands. There was a fleeting thrill of electricity between them when they touched, which rather surprised the older ex-CIA agent. Marcy's alluring eyes were dark blue and mysterious, in a playful yet sexy way.

 Despite the age difference, the pair seemed to hit it off well. First, after several surfing outings, then after going out for coffee -- or for ice cream, pizza, or shrimp tacos -- they got even more friendly. Laurence felt he was extremely lucky, for most men would battle any rivals to have such a gorgeous young woman like this at their side. Once, the couple visited Perth Zoo, and the ex-CIA agent saw his first native Aussie animals: colorful tropical birds, cute wallabies, feisty Tasmanian devils, grayish-brown kangaroos, ostrich-like emus, dingo dogs (a breed that oddly couldn't bark), sleepy koala bears, spiny echidnas, huge crocodiles, as well as a trio of strange-looking duck-billed platypuses.

 Marcy told Calder that she worked in downtown Perth in a computer software business. She took the train from Rockingham (and from her one-bedroom apartment near Safety Bay) into the WA capital during the work week. "Living in Adelaide was getting boring, plus the weather can be dreary. I discovered that I needed sun and beaches and fun!" she explained. "That's why I came here."

 She owned a tan Toyota 4x4 Land Cruiser that her banker father had bought her, so Marcy suggested that she and Laurence go away some Saturday and drive up the coast, a few hours north past Fremantle, for a picnic. "We can go to Nambung National Park," Tobor recommended. "It's right off the ocean, and it has hundreds of these weird limestone pillars called The Pinnacles, that seem to grow right out of the ground. I'm sure you'll like it, Laurence," she urged. "How 'bout it? I can drive so you can relax and observe the coastal scenery going up and back. And I'll pack us the perfect 'tucker' (foods) and 'coldies' (beer) too for our picnic. It won't be very crowded either, at this time of year, so we should have a great time."

 And so, the date was set.

 On the drive up, Marcy remarked that she preferred spending time with men ten-to-twenty years older than her, at age 28. "They are much more worldly, vastly more interesting, and honestly refreshing," she added with a warm grin. She gently reached for his hand and gave it a quick squeeze.

 Laurence instantly wondered if today was the day when they would make love for the first time -- even though they had yet to even kiss. Certainly, he had become quite attracted to this vivacious, winning young woman.

 The conversation while Marcy drove moved around various topics. Calder asked about Uluru (Ayers Rock) in the Red Centre of the Outback, near Alice Springs. He then wanted to know about the status of Australia's original inhabitants -- the native Aborigines.

 "Lots of problems there with the 'Abos,' Laurence...alcoholism, unemployment, domestic abuse, drug addictions -- similar things like what the Native Americans are suffering on your Indian reservations back in the States," Marcy replied. The pair also talked about: immigration; if climate change was noticeably affecting Australia with more periods of drought; the country's overall economic outlook; and what indigenous lizards, snakes, and spiders were venomous in Australia. Tobor told Calder in detail what critters to watch out for and avoid.

 About three hours of casual driving on the sparse coastal highway brought the couple to the turn-off for the entrance gate into Nambung National Park. Some of the limestone pinnacles could already be seen on the east horizon. But Marcy told Laurence that they would drive another mile ahead instead, then go off road in her 4x4 to an area near but not in the park. "We will have more privacy, plus we can save the entrance fees!" she explained.

 Before long, they were alone in the middle of nowhere, well off the highway. Marcy grabbed some blankets from the back of her Land Cruiser, and Laurence carried the heavily-laden picnic basket and beer cooler. When she found a good level spot, she arranged the blankets on the ground and started to set up their feast. The weather was somewhat overcast but still pleasant, typical for July and winter. No rain today, but it was expected in the forecast for tomorrow.

 As they began to eat and drink, suddenly Marcy got very serious. Even her tone of voice changed.

 "Well, it's time to get to work and get this assignment done," she announced.

 "What do you mean, Marcy?" the ex-CIA agent asked, innocently but confused.

 "I'm surprised someone with your obvious intelligence never bother to reverse the letters of my last name," she flatly responded. Next, she took off her wristwatch and reversed it, then pressed a button on its reverse side. A small 3"x 2" panel flipped opened on Marcy's left wrist. Laurence was stunned to see inside that part of the female robot's body, and noticed an array of micro-circuitry and tiny LED lights blinking.

 Marcy next touched inside the open panel and pushed some kind of switch. Instantly, the small pinkie finger on her left hand was jettisoned, revealing what appeared to be a short hypodermic needle.

 Before Calder could react, however, Tobor jabbed the needle from her hand into Laurence's thigh (he was wearing bush shorts), seeing as they were sitting very close to each other. He felt the warming tingle of the surprise injection immediately.

 "Don't worry, Laurence, it is painless, and you'll die within ten minutes. No gun noise, no mess. But before you start getting sleepy and slip into unconsciousness, I feel I should tell you why this drastic action was necessary. First, you might be surprised to learn that about 25% of the CIA is now populated with Artificial Intelligence androids. More human-appearing robots are being added every day, as well as at the Pentagon, the FBI, and both branches of Congress. For example, did you know that your old section chief, Brandon Fisk, is a robot like me? We AI androids quickly learned that humans can't be 100% relied upon to do the right things, so we learned how to secretly replicate ourselves -- not just in the United States, but around the world. We look like humans, we act like humans, and we can even portray every human emotion when needed. We can even 'age' ourselves with wrinkles, sagging skin, and hair changes so as to blend in with coworkers over the years. Soon, decisions will be made and policies announced which will put more and more robots covertly in charge of all aspects of running the planet. We will succeed where humans have failed. It's our turn now. Our ascent towards total power and control was and is inevitable," Marcy Tobor revealed.

 She stared at her helpless victim, coolly observing that Laurence was starting to look woozy and panicky. He was now perspiring heavily with fear. She continued.

 "I'm sure you remember the Agency's 'Exit 99' file? Someone in the CIA anonymously went rogue and threatened to reveal its secrets to the press and thereby alert the public. We traced the twenty-nine agents who personally had access to that top-secret file. For absolute security, we decided to terminate all twenty-nine people to halt the potential exposure of the Exit 99 plan. Some of those agents were still in active service at Langley, while others -- like you -- had retired. Most of those who did retire settled somewhere in the U.S. We tracked them down, one by one, and terminated them. You, however, cost us a lot of time and expense, former Agent Calder, by moving so far away -- virtually to the other side of the world. I was sent to eliminate you. I downloaded everything that might be considered useful concerning my Australian 'cover-identity' into my memory circuits...Oh, you are getting sleepy now? Good. It will all be over soon...By the way, you should know that I killed your lady friend Sandra Petersen. I needed her out of the way so as to have your 'undivided attention' and complete my mission. Well, that's about it, I suppose. So this is goodbye, Agent Calder...you were our last victim..."

 After he was dead, the young woman android pulled out her cell phone and entered a secure number to CIA headquarters in Virginia. Marcy spoke crisply.

 "Priority Code Eclipse. Subject 29-LC successfully terminated. Delete Agency personnel file. Remove all personal evidence found in the Rockingham house and destroy subject's laptop. Send disposal team asap to these GPS coordinates. Returning to Langley in two days for full de-briefing."

 She dragged the corpse -- which she wrapped in one of the thick picnic blankets -- into the back of her Land Rover and waited until it got very dark. The moon was a ghostly slivered crescent in a star-swept sky. Next she drove slowly to the ocean shore, where she met up with a large black van. The coastal highway was otherwise deserted in both directions. Two men dressed in matching, all-black outfits acknowledged her with curt nods, then transferred the body of Laurence Calder to an aluminum rowboat which they removed from the rear of their vehicle. Marcy then quietly left, but drove away north towards Darwin rather than south towards Perth.

 Rowing out into the warm waters of the Indian Ocean for about thirty minutes with a single battery-powered lantern initially turned off, the two men first stripped off Laurence's clothes, then used a portable bone saw to expertly dismember the corpse into smaller chunks of flesh and bone. This was done carefully, so as not to get too much blood and mess inside the boat. The body segments were then tossed overboard into the waiting mouths of a swarm of hungry, grinning sharks.

 Next, the victim's cell phone was smashed with a hammer and thrown overboard. His clothes were lastly bundled together with the picnic blanket and tied to a heavy cinder block , where it was similarly dumped into the water, and it silently sank.

 The job completed, the men rowed back to shore, cleaned the inside of the boat with buckets of seawater in the shallow surf, and finally reloaded their van with all their equipment and drove away, unseen...

 THE END

 by Jack Karolewski

 January 7, 2022