

Chapter 1

The Carrot and the Stick

Merran Scofield is under her desk, patting the carpet and groping for a lost contact lens when her phone goes off. She stands up quickly and hits her head; then reaches across the desk, grabs her cell on the third ring, and scatters pages of her book proofs. Bloody hell!

She recognizes the high, wispy voice of the new chair of history at Clare College, J. L. Short. He's attempting to sound authoritative but failing.

“Please come to my office. I need to speak to you urgently.”

Merran stalks down the hall, irritated. One eye is blurry; the other is twenty-twenty.

She knocks on the door to room 1012 and waits in the dim hallway, fuming. Five minutes go by. She gazes, one-eyed, out the rain-spattered window at her beloved San Francisco skyline, wishing she were quietly at home planning her future, with her fluffy mutt Hero stretched by her side, her hands wrapped around a mug of hot chocolate. Richard's sudden departure last July has set her adrift in a way that is new and unnerving.

Lost in thought, she jumps as the door opens, and is surprised to see Jess Wallace walk out, with J.L. behind her. Red-faced and tearful, Jess avoids Merran's gaze and walks quickly away. Has she been fired? She's tenured, isn't she? Then what's going on?

J. L. watches Jess walk away. He seems unperturbed. As usual he's dressed in a white shirt, knife-pressed pants, tie and jacket, not yet having adjusted to California's informality. After Jess disappears, he invites Merran in. His smile is directed at the richly coloured Persian carpet (knotted by small children, Merran thinks), and the seat he indicates for her is across his vast office. She's immediately wary.

He shuffles papers on his large oak desk, shooting uncomfortable glances in her direction. She realizes with a start that she presents a threat. He must be fifteen years younger than she is; this is his first post as chair. He's barely unpacked his boxes from Iowa and already he's pulling rank. She stares out the window, determined to wait him out. She pulls her skirt straight and adjusts her aching back. The rain is pelting now, rattling windows, and she imagines a draft of cold air curling around her legs.

"We have a problem," he says finally, his glance not quite meeting her eyes. The royal 'we' or the collegial 'we'? She waits.

"Jess has applied for leave next semester," he says.

My God, his voice is shaking.

"Her mother's cancer has spread; she hasn't much time left. That's why it's such short notice." So that's it.

"I'm sorry to hear it."

"Someone needs to take over her Australian History class."

Snap, in the trap. Of course. But she plays the game anyway.

"Who do you have in mind?"

"I thought it would be obvious. That's why you're here."

"Not me. I'm too busy."

"Why not? Your résumé mentions some Australian studies. And you grew up there—that must count for something. Besides Jess, you're the only one in the department who knows anything about the place."

His message delivered, his body relaxes. He picks up his cup and sips. Their eyes meet. She draws a breath, her mind racing. Her face grows hot. These hot flashes are a bugger.

“Yes, but my studies are old news. Bachelor’s.” She omits the masters. “Several prime ministers back. You know as well as I do that I’m still working on my new book on Sino-Japanese relations.” No need to tell him she’s just received the proofs.

“*And* I’m teaching two classes next semester: Mao’s Great Leap Forward, and the Boxer Rebellion.” No need to tell him they are her special areas of interest and require little preparation; he might not know that yet.

He smiles and looks at the ceiling, then plays his trump card.

“Your promotion evaluation is due very soon.”

She turns her head away, shocked. It’s a statement with serious repercussions. She feels like a boxer lying in the ring with the ref counting down. Down and out. This step promotion comes with a significant salary increase. She’s at Step V and has been scraping by now that Richard’s freelance writing contributions – not large, and certainly intermittent, but adequate – have disappeared. Without the promotion she might have to consider applying to a liberal arts college in a less expensive part of the country. Her publication record is extensive, and she has over thirty years of teaching under her belt.

Now she’s reached the nub of her hurt and frustration. The faculty should have given her the chair job in the first place; she was next in line after Old Robertson had practically promised it to her. But instead, the faculty appoints this - this – teenager, a rising star, whose opinion on her step promotion wouldn’t sink her but might carry some weight.

She looks up. J.L. is studying her intently. She feels the fight go out of her.

“And how do you think I’ll manage to do it all?”

“You will, Merran; you will,” he says. “Your reputation for fine work precedes you. Let’s get together tomorrow, when you’ve thought it over.” He walks towards the door. She sits tight,

thinking quickly. This is blackmail. She must regain some control. As his hand reaches the door handle, she has a brainwave.

“J. L., I haven’t been to Oz for donkey’s years. I’ll need a couple of weeks of research over there to get my mind around it. And some money to do it.”

His eyebrows shoot up. He holds the door open for a moment.

“How much do you need?”

After making a cup of tea, she crouches and scans her bookshelves for *The Fatal Shore*, Robert Hughes’ definitive account of the convict transportation system from the late 1700’s until around 1850. She hasn’t opened it in years. It’s hefty and well-researched. Better get cracking.