

Ross Crothers



DEAD MAN'S CUT

AN ASH TODD
THRILLER

CHAPTER 1

The explosion in my left ear was the first clue that all was not right. The furious sound and burning smell of metal searing across asphalt, was the second. When we stopped on a steep slope, maybe forty-five degrees, well that was the clincher.

I was at the bottom.

Trapped.

Silence.

Metallic dust filled the air.

I coughed.

Couldn't move. Knees pinned by the collapsed dash.

"You okay, Sal?" I said.

More silence. Black silence.

I coughed again.

A sharp light flashed through the windscreen. Blinded me for a second. A male voice called out, "Shit, mate, are you alright?"

"Can you roll us the right way up? Gotta get to the hospital," I said. "Wife's having a baby."

"Hold on, buddy," said the voice.

Sirens started. Getting closer.

The dust, thick from the heavy, humid air, settled in my eyes and mouth. The acidic taste was bitter, stinging.

The siren wailed right on top of me. Then it stopped.

Somebody pulled Sally out, and a paramedic stuck his head in.

"Take her to Prince of Wales, fast," I said. "Baby's name is Jack."

He said, "You hang in there, mate. Okay?"

Time passed. Quickly? Slowly? I don't know. Maybe both.

A machine started—loud in my left ear again. Someone said, “This'll be noisy, but we'll have you out in a jiffy.” It was like a giant can opener, and they cut the car out around me. Lights swirled. Another car lay flipped on its roof about thirty yards away. I wondered what it was doing there. A paramedic led me to an ambulance, and they took me to St. Vincent's hospital.

A nurse from Accident and Emergency ushered me aside and I caught a glimpse—my headshot—in a mirror. Blood streaked across my face, onto my shirt. Under the fluorescent light it looked gruesome, but strangely it didn't hurt. She cleaned me up for twenty minutes. When she was done, there wasn't a scratch. Sally's blood, I guess.

In a narrow hospital room, under a harsh ceiling light, I sat alone on a small bed against a wall, legs dangling, trying to make sense of what had happened. A mid-twenties policeman came in.

He took off his cap. “Are you Commander Ash Todd from the Australian Federal Police?”

I nodded. He handed me my wallet and badge. “Found these in your car.”

Another slightly older cop arrived. Similar age as me. They both stood mute for a moment, heads down. Not a good look.

The older one shook his head. “Commander, I'm very sorry, but your wife didn't make it.”

My mind whirred...confused. Sally...didn't make it where? Here? This guy's got it wrong. She's at Prince of Wales—the maternity hospital. I was in St. Vincent's because it was the closest emergency ward to the accident.

“My wife?” I said. “No, no...my wife is...different hospital...she's in Prince of Wales. Having our baby.”

“I'm sorry, sir. They had to bring her here. No time...you see...”

This couldn't be. We've only been married a little while. This is not what happens. Not when you're having a baby. That was it...they had the wrong woman.

“It's the surnames. I'm Todd, she's Sinclair...that's the problem.” I felt my spirits lift a little. But the cop just looked away.

A doctor appeared, dressed in a blue operating gown, a mask hanging loosely around his neck.

“I’m sorry, Commander.” He placed a hand on my shoulder. “There was just nothing we could do.”

Nothing they could do? The words echoed in my head. *Nothing they could do?* At that moment, I felt a pain. Middle of my stomach, and it felt like I’d been whacked with a sledgehammer. A hard belt of reality, which didn’t feel real. My thoughts raced to a dozen different, muddled places in succession. None of them made sense. I gasped a breath. I felt empty. All these fuzzy, churning ideas raced through me, with no beginning and no end, yet my mind and body felt completely vacant. Come on, I told myself...*focus*.

“What about the baby?” I rasped. The doctor shook his head. Another nurse came in with Sally’s hospital bag and a teddy bear.

“So...you mean...they’re dead. Both of them?” I barely choked the words out. The policemen, the nurse, and the doctor stood almost to attention. None spoke. After an awkward silence, the doctor merely nodded and said again, “I’m sorry.”

Somehow, I managed to shuffle from the hospital to a waiting police vehicle, though I don’t remember a single step. The two officers drove me home in silence. I couldn’t bring myself to look at the bear.

The older cop looked back at me, as they pulled up outside my apartment block.

“Have you got family we can call?”

“No. They were my family. That’s it.”

“Is there anything you’d like us to do?”

In the heavy, suffocating blackness that had enveloped the street, the police car, the two cops, and me, I could only think of one thing.

“Bring them back.”

CHAPTER 2

For four months, I was married to Sally Sinclair. A lawyer. Tall, long legs, very pretty, very smart. We lived in an apartment in Elizabeth Bay, in Sydney, overlooking the harbour. Two bedrooms, the second one very small, and a balcony covered in brown tiles and surrounded by a glass railing. Ugly things those tiles, from the 1970s I think. But the balcony looked out onto that blue water through the glass, so I didn't notice the tiles.

We'd been together for about a year. Ten months ago, Sally fell pregnant. I don't know if we were in love when we kicked off, but I do know that by three months in, we were. Head over heels, as they say. Pregnancy can do that to a man. The mother glows. Sally glowed. Every day she looked more beautiful. Every day I was busting just to feel her belly. We took long walks. I liked that—so I could show her to the world. Look—this is my woman. Look—she's having a baby. My baby.

We married five months into the pregnancy, in a little, old, brown-brick church up the hill in Kings Cross. The druggies used to camp in the entry vestibule, until they put big metal gates across it. Now they just piss against the church wall, so it always seems to stink a bit. No big deal wedding, her parents are dead, as are mine. So, we invited a few friends, maybe ten or so.

All twelve of us piled into the church, which left plenty of vacant space if anyone else was interested in witnessing the nuptials. No-one was. My best mate, Dick Mayvers, was my best man. He's an Australian Federal Policeman, like me. We started together, and are in the same unit. Have been since day one. I've got a few other mates...mostly from the Feds...but it's pretty much Dick and me who are the closest. It's funny, but I don't keep a lot of friends. Never did. One or two up in Queensland...from my days in the force up there...but I haven't seen them for half-a-decade, or more. Guess I just like my own company...and in this career, solo is less complicated.

Anyway, Dick got a new girlfriend about the same time I hitched up with Sally, and our lives seem to run in parallel. The only small difference is he's a Superintendent, and I'm a Commander. And a detective too. On the job, we're all Field Officers, or FO's, but it means I'm winning. Or so I tell him.

Julie Fotheringham-Smythe was the best girl, or matron-of-honour, or whatever. We call her Fothers—it's just easier. She and Sally were best friends from school, and now she's a mother of three and lives across the harbour at

Mosman. Married to an investment banker called Simon. Shitloads of money, nice big house, two BMWs. I'm six-five, and on tiptoes I can just about see their big house from our little, brown-tiled balcony.

The marriage service was quick, and we gave the nice minister a decent wad of cash for his effort, which made him happy. Then all twelve of us walked down the hill in the warm autumn sunshine, and squeezed into our little apartment for the wedding breakfast. Actually, it was about ten hours of booze and food. I made a speech no-one can remember, which is a good thing. Everyone knew about the baby—they all wanted to pat Sally's stomach too. The tests showed it was a boy.

The labour pains began. They were quite some time apart, maybe a few times a day at first, then several hours. Late one evening, they got much closer together. Five minutes or so. Sally was booked into hospital—Prince of Wales—a fifteen-minute drive. Ten if I used my badge. Now, they were four minutes apart. I said, "What's a minute or so?" Wrong attitude apparently. At three minutes apart, and at eight minutes to one in the morning, Sally said, "Time to go."

I got her to the car, hospital bag in tow. In it was a small teddy bear for our soon-to-be, Jack Todd. Two minutes apart. I took off—up through Kings Cross, past the strip joints, across the William Street overpass, and hurtled though Darlinghurst. Made a set of lights, just. I'm sure it wasn't red. Empty streets, no traffic, eighty kilometres an hour...twenty, no...thirty, over the limit. Another set of lights, staying green. We made these, easy.

Someone else made them at the same time.

CHAPTER 3

There was a funeral, and it was held at the little old brown-brick church with a grey slate roof, up the hill in Kings Cross. The one where we were married.

This time it was full, but I'm not sure who was there. A hearse took mother and baby away, as one, for the cremation. Nobody seemed to know what to say, and frankly, I didn't want anyone to say anything. I walked down the hill, alone, to our little apartment and stared at the harbour. All that was one month ago.

I went back to work a few days later. I took to the gym—twice daily workouts. I had to do something, and sitting on my butt staring at nought was doing my head in. Nobody at the office seemed to know what to say, and I still didn't want them to. They'd shake my hand, or pat me on the back, but they couldn't look at me.

And then came the booze. Bourbon mostly, but sometimes whisky. A bottle a night and maybe more. After a while I stopped counting...it didn't seem important, so I drank until the pain went away. The mental pain, mostly, but also the physical. The thump in the gut.

Sally would appear in my alcohol fuelled dreams, in the middle of the night, with the same question. "*What were you doing...?*" I had no answer, and anyway, she was gone again before I could find one. When I woke, anytime from four o'clock on, my mind played out that drive to the hospital over and over. It was too fast...I was going too fast. Somehow, I had to find a way to do it again, but with a different result.

Sometimes, mid-dream, an answer would arrive. Cindy. My thoughts would race to our affair on the Riviera, the year before. I could feel the sweat from our bodies, pressed together in the little hotel room above the harbour. The affair I had when Sally had fallen pregnant. The pregnancy I didn't know about...but that was no excuse. And it threw up another question. *Was this a payback for the fling with Cindy...?*

The office gave me no new cases. Maybe they thought I couldn't handle them. I pored over old files—some approaching cold-case status. First a drug shipment from Asia, which we'd been watching nineteen months earlier. The cargo was jettisoned off the coast north of Broome for a local pickup and

promptly sank. Its caretakers fled the scene before anyone in authority realised what had happened.

The second involved an investment banker, one Brendan O'Hara, who had misplaced some funds from the boutique institution he headed in Perth. Apparently eleven million dollars had vanished out of a total of thirty-five million. His backers were not pleased, it seems. Then Brendan vanished. No word of him for over two years. Nothing of interest in either of those.

Despite my nightly dose of bourbon, sleep became increasingly difficult. Sometimes, after untold re-runs of the hospital trip and just as I was deciding I should crawl from bed and get to work, I'd fall asleep. Then I'd wake mid-morning, and in a panic, drag some clothes on...any clothes...and dash to the office. Often, I turned up unwashed, unshaved, and reeking of last night's stale booze. My immediate superior, Andrew McPherson, ignored the first few slip-ups.

Mac, an Assistant Commissioner usually based in Canberra, was the most senior person in the Sydney office. He held the title of National Manager Serious and Organised Crime and officially was on secondment to Sydney. It had been so long, it seemed the move was permanent. On the third...or fourth...occasion, he pulled me aside and said, "Ash, I know it's a tough time, but you've got to get a grip on yourself."

I stepped back, hands on hips and stared him down. "Get a grip? Who are you kidding, buddy? Have you ever tried this shit?" I could feel the booze doing the talking, taking over my mind to the point that it seemed the words came from a totally different person. Mac simply looked away and moved off. I don't think he knew how to handle it...me, the situation, grief, or any other part of the whole mess. Not part of the Fed's training.

At other times, with my head banging and too tired to bother dressing, I'd simply ring in sick and crawl back to bed, curled into a sort of semi-foetal position. How long I stayed there was anybody's guess. I became increasingly difficult, and I knew it...but I didn't care. Caring had long since deserted me. Someone running a red light, just like I had done only moments before the smash, had changed my world forever. They told me he was dead too. Care-factor? Zero.

Two weeks later, on an otherwise perfectly agreeable spring day, I snapped. I couldn't concentrate. The crap on my desk bored me. Letitia, our plumpish, bubbly PA popped her head in my door. She smiled her angelic smile. "You want to come down for coffee?"

I looked up at Letitia and gave her a hard stare. Just like the one I'd given McPherson. Her being so upbeat irritated me. Why should she be so happy? Was she trying to make me feel sorry? I said, "No. I don't want to go anywhere for fucking coffee." Letitia's gentle face began to crumple, and she scurried off in tears. I usually don't swear...at least not at women. And certainly not at soft, placid Letitia. I felt bad already, and now I felt worse.

I sat at my desk, head buried in my hands, and felt the sting of my own tears rise. In the six weeks since Sally and Jack's death, I hadn't cried. When my parents died, I didn't cry. But then, they were pretty old, so maybe they didn't need crying over. No, I didn't cry. This was all my damn fault, and crying wouldn't fix it. Wouldn't bring them back. I blinked the tears away, and bashed both fists down on the desk.

After some moments frozen in a mixture of anger, frustration, and grief, I looked up to see McPherson staring at me. A big, burly man, with wavy brown hair and dark eyes...his frame over-filled the doorway. He fixed me with a gaze of concern and sympathy. At least, that is the way I like to think of it. Otherwise it was a look of horror.

"Ash," he said, "this is no good. You're a mess, and it pains me to say this, but you're also a potential risk to this office. And to yourself."

I stared at him. "You want my resignation?"

He shook his head. "Take time out—whatever you need. Get away, get professional help. Your office will be here when you get back."

I fixed my gaze on my desk, seeing nothing. All I could think was that I was now unwanted. Of no use...to anyone.

"Sure, sure, you're the boss...so what do you suggest? I've already got too much free time. Middle of the night, and all that." My smart-arse tone wouldn't have gone unnoticed, but he didn't flinch.

"You take a break—I'll see what I can do to help."

"Right. Help, eh? And how are *you* going to help? I'm out of here. I know when the odds are stacked against me." I stood, and with a sweeping right-arm motion, made an exaggerated bow at McPherson and said, "Sayonara, old pal."

I shoved my chair in hard against the desk, and grabbed my coat. McPherson stepped from the doorway to let me pass. My phone rang. I snapped it up.

"Yeah, what?"

“Ash, darling!” The gentle, sweet voice stopped me mid-stride. A voice I hadn’t heard for weeks.

“Fothers?”

“Thought I’d check-in...see how you are getting by. How about lunch?”

CHAPTER 4

The view through the huge picture window was sublime. Across the Macau waterfront and Nam Van Lake, across the bridges linking Macau to its islands of Taipa and Coloane, and out to sea. An infinite mass of water, all the way to the bottom of the earth. All was quiet. Bullet-proof glass cancelled traffic noise from the streets below. The only sound...the faintest 'shhh'...came from the air-conditioning system.

Sebastian Lam stood at the window, taking it all in. Arms crossed, he lightly fingered the lapel of his suit coat. The delicate texture of the cloth was soothing. Just knowing the cost of it made him feel powerful. It reinforced his feeling of command. He turned his attention slightly to the left, taking in the sweep of casinos. The two monoliths of MGM and Wynn. Their high-roller rooms were nothing compared to *his*. His *whole* operation was high-roller.

Minimum bet, five hundred thousand US dollars. Minimum daily wager per member, two million US dollars. Can't find two mill? Don't bother showing. The place was booked solid for the next six months. Four hundred of the wealthiest men and women on the planet, desperate to do business with Sebastian Lam. He smiled inwardly at the thought, and resumed his gaze over the lake.

Lam's vast suite took up a little over three thousand square feet. Two thousand of that was office...plush, deep-red, down-filled sofas, and a gently curved, jade-coloured, marble-topped desk, all carefully arranged on a striking herringbone parquet floor of Purpleheart. To the far left-hand-side, taking in a full view of the Bank of China, sat a board table. Black marble, with ten black, high-backed leather chairs each side and one at each end. The chair at the end closest to the entrance door had a slightly higher back than the others. Lam's chair.

Spanning twenty-feet either side of the corner behind his desk, were forty-eight closed-circuit television screens. Six per row, four rows deep. Two banks of each. The left bank covered the basement, the discreet, street-level lobby with twenty-four-hour concierge, and the first three levels of the Lam operation. Reception, office, housekeeping, and security on the first...and five one-bedroom suites on each of the second and third. Six-star naturally.

The right bank covered the next five levels. A further five suites on each of the fourth and fifth and three exquisite private dining rooms and two bars, on the sixth. But it was the seventh and eighth levels which were the driving force of this

enterprise. Five private gaming rooms per floor, ten in total. Four of baccarat, and three each of blackjack and roulette.

On his desk sat a further five screens. One large screen which was connected to the house computer, showed a continuous state of house profits from each of the tables in the five gaming rooms. The other was Lam's personal computer. Three smaller screens were connected to cameras covering Mr Lam's floor—one each for his lobby, his office, and his bedroom suite. These five screens were for Lam's eyes only.

Sebastian Lam could slink in his oversize office chair, and survey his little kingdom in a matter of seconds. It occupied the nine uppermost levels of one of the most prominent buildings on the Macau waterfront. The most circumspect gambling operation in Macau. Totally under the radar. No phone listing, no website. Members only. And membership by invitation only. Bigger than high-rollers. Whales, the lot of them.

A bespoke casino...made to measure punting. What a genius idea. Founded by his father, and now controlled by Sebastian. Yes, sir, he did enjoy being top-dog of The Golden Mountain Club.