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REDBACK

Treatment for a telemovie/short feature

by

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Forgetting can be fatal...

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1.

A narrow sealed road turns off the highway. Off the sealed road is a dirt road. The dirt road leads to a tiny village, Glen Douglas. Long ago, they mined shale here. Now there's no one left but old-timers and hobby-farmers on the weekends. High ancient cliffs, a bubbling creek, a rusty railway line. Not far from Sydney, as the crow flies, but to a city-sider it feels as remote as the dark side of the moon. A wounded but beautiful landscape. Not many people get this far. Hardly anyone goes further.

Harry Walker's down the end of the valley, on a private road, across a creek which sometimes floods. Brooding cliffs rise beyond steep bush on three sides. Cockatoos fly over lush meadows. Kangaroos rest in the shade. The house can't be seen from the village, and there aren't any other properties along the road. Harry likes his privacy - he doesn't have many visitors.

Harry breeds horses. Expensive horses. Thoroughbreds. It's summer and the cicadas are loud. From his verandah, Harry Walker surveys his domain, rifle across his knees. He's a hard man to pin down. Late 40s. A face that's seen a bit of life. Good-looking, in a dangerous sort of way. Rough around the edges. Born in Australia, but he looks like he's seen more of the world than most people. Now he's trying to forget what he's seen, and what he's done...

Flashback to the night before. Walker and his young, Aboriginal right hand man, Merrick, have visitors from the city for dinner. Peter Snow, late 40s, smiles a lot but there's something cruel about him. Lou, in her early 40s, is still an attractive woman, but she's a little hard as well. From the conversation, it emerges that Lou is Walker's ex-wife, and Snow his ex-business partner, now married to Lou. Although Lou and Peter appear to have had plenty to drink, Merrick and Walker don't join in the fun. They behave as though they're at a funeral.

Snow keeps talking about the old days. He mentions an organisation called "The Nest" and a man called Joe Halley who seems to have been a mentor to both him and Walker. It's not clear what their business was exactly, but the work seems to have involved plenty of physical risks and international travel. Snow has come to the house seeking some kind of new business partnership, which Walker is not at all interested in. Failing that, Snow's seeking to buy or borrow a list of business contacts contained in something he refers to as Walker's little black book. Walker refuses to admit that the book even exists, and says he wouldn't pass it on if it did - he doesn't do "that sort of work" any more.

There is a moment of tension, which is broken when Snow smiles and says he's going out for a smoke. He invites Merrick to go with him. Merrick looks to Walker. Walker nods, as if to say "keep an eye on him". The enmity between Merrick and Snow is tangible. With the others out of the room, Lou starts coming on to Walker. He says he's not interested in women any more, least of all her, but she still has plenty of charms, and it's clear Walker is tempted. She suggests they go into the next room, "for old time's sake".

Walker regains his senses as he hears a noise at the other end of the house. Despite Lou's protests, Harry goes to his study, where he finds Snow going through his things. Suddenly it's obvious that Snow and Lou are both completely sober. Snow pulls a gun on Walker. In the same instant, Walker pulls two guns from nowhere. He levels one at Snow and one at Lou. Walker tells Snow to get out of his house.

Snow says they're not going without the little black book. It's a stand-off until Merrick appears behind Snow's back with another gun, bleeding from his head. He explains that Snow hit him from behind. Realising they're outnumbered, Snow reluctantly allows Merrick to take his weapon.

Snow and Lou are ushered out to their car. Walker says he never wants to see either of them again. Snow is very angry, and says that if he won't help them voluntarily then they'll force Walker to hand over the book. "It's war", says Snow. And they drive off.

Merrick switches the security system for the property to full alert mode. Walker says he doesn't trust it - he's going to spend the night on the verandah with the gun, one of the dogs at his feet...

Next day, and Walker's still in the chair, squinting into the sun. He frowns as a car kicks up dust in the far distance, approaching the house. Cameras automatically focus and adjust, laser tripwires cause the lock on the main gate to close, the high electric fences surrounding the main property hum with energy.

Inside, Merrick watches the information coming in from the high tech security system. A girl is at the wheel of the car. She's alone. Merrick smiles. "It's Claire, Harry! Looks like she's got a new car."

The security system is over-ridden and the gate opens automatically. Walker's daughter, Claire, drives towards the house, home for a surprise weekend visit. She's in her early 20s, innocent-looking and bubbling with energy. She stops the car and jumps out, embracing her father joyously and asking after her beloved horses. Her energy is infectious. Walker smiles. She kisses him and Merrick. She tells her father she's picked up the mail from the post office in town. Walker flicks through bills, bank statements. He pauses as he reaches a letter from overseas marked "Citadel Security".

Walker stuffs the envelope into his pocket and asks Claire how long she's intending to stay. She says she's not sure. A few days. Isn't he pleased to see her? Walker says of course he is, it's just not a good time for a visit. Claire laughs and says he's talking nonsense - with him it's never a good time. She obviously feels some bitterness about this. Her humour returns as she drags Merrick off to show her the new horses. It's obvious that Claire has a great bond with the animals - she's studying to be a vet at a country university.

Back inside the house, Walker opens the Citadel letter. It's a reminder note from the American company who sold him the security gear, confirming they're sending a representative called Joseph Patterson to check that everything is okay. Walker checks the date with the wall calendar. He's dismayed to see that the rep is coming today.

Suddenly Merrick is at his side. He asks about the letter. Harry shows it to him. Merrick reminds him that the company faxed weeks ago to say the guy was coming. Harry is confused. The security gear is working fine. Why would they send a rep so far out of his way? Anyway, the last thing they need now is another visitor. Merrick reassures him that it's all fine. They'll give the guy a cup of tea and send him on his way.

Outside, Claire is rubbing one of the horses down. Walker looks at her through the window, worried. He tells Merrick it's dangerous for her to be at the house with Snow sniffing around. She's going to have to go.

At lunch, Walker tells Claire that it's not safe at the house, that she can't stay. She asks why it's not safe. Walker won't go into details. He offers her money to go "somewhere nice" for the weekend. She says she doesn't want to go somewhere nice, she wants to see him. Walker becomes angry. Claire says he's turning into a crazy old hermit, and stomps outside.

That afternoon, the Citadel rep arrives, coming down the little road in a hire car. Joseph Patterson is about 30; charming, well-dressed, and black. He wears a sharp suit and has a mid-Western accent. Claire is very impressed. Now she's definitely not going anywhere.

Over coffee, Joseph explains that he's on a working holiday of Australia, visiting Citadel clients as he travels around the country. He asks about the security system. It sounds like an extremely sophisticated set-up, only ten or so like it in the whole world. Walker is polite, but it's clear that he'd like Joseph to go. Joseph asks if he could just see the system on the ground, check everything is working properly, just to be sure. Grudgingly, Walker agrees.

Claire tags along as Walker shows Joseph the system. It's all very high-tech, computer-controlled from a central nerve centre with backup power. The house, which looks ordinary enough from the outside, has special bulletproof windows and triple-buttressed doors. The perimeter fences are backed up with hidden cameras, computer-controlled razor wire gates and smart sensors throughout the grounds, all networked to a satellite 3D mapping and imaging system. There's even an independent water supply. Are the horses really that valuable, asks Joseph. Walker pretends not to hear. Claire says of course they're not, her dad's just paranoid.

When the tour is over, Claire says she wants to show Joseph one of the property's secret places; the glow worm tunnel, where she played as a child. Joseph is fascinated and says he'd love to see it. Reluctantly, Walker agrees, but says afterwards they'll have to leave. Both of them. Before dark.

On the way to the tunnel, Joseph asks Claire why Walker wants them to leave. Claire's theory is that he's having some hot relationship with someone he doesn't want her to know about. She says he's always been secretive. What about your mother, asks Joseph. Claire says she died in an accident when she was young. Her dad married again, but they're not together any more. Claire points out something to Joseph. It's a military mine laid on an old side track. It's half-submerged, and covered with leaves. "See what I mean?" she says. "Dad's paranoid".

Claire and Joseph reach the tunnel. It's an old, small gauge railway tunnel from the shale mining era. The tracks are gone now, and glow worms make tiny points of light on the walls. Light seeps in from each end of the tunnel. It's a magical, wet place. Joseph is very impressed. There is a sexual energy between Claire and Joseph which neither acknowledges openly. For a moment they are very close, but Joseph doesn't take advantage of the situation, and the moment passes.

Suddenly they become aware that the drips from the roof are increasing. Outside, thunder crashes. It's no longer a bright sunny day. At the edge of the tunnel, rain makes a curtain. A fierce storm has blown up from out of nowhere. Claire takes Joseph by the hand and they run down the hill, through the thick bush, back to the house, getting drenched on the way.

Down the road, the creek is rising fast. As the rain continues lashing down, even Walker is forced to acknowledge that it's too high to drive out safely in a conventional car. Joseph and Claire will both have to stay for the night.

At dinner, Joseph talks about his famous security clients in Hollywood and elsewhere. Claire is very impressed. Joseph talks to Merrick, asks him how he ended up working for Walker. It emerges that Walker and Merrick were childhood friends. They grew up in the same rough neighbourhood, in inner city Sydney. They were separated for a few years when Walker was conscripted to Vietnam, but have been close friends on and off ever since. Merrick runs the property when Walker has to go away. Joseph is intrigued about the Vietnam story (his stepfather fought there), but Walker is reluctant to talk about the war. For his part, Joseph is strangely reluctant to talk about his original parents. All he will say is that they died when he was young, and he was fostered.

The awkward silence is interrupted by water dripping from the ceiling. Walker and the others go upstairs to find a flood. Rain is getting in through a seam in the roof - Walker's boxes and files are getting wet. Aware that the task is beyond him, Walker allows the others to help move his papers to the dry room next door. Joseph sneaks a look at the contents of the boxes: it's mostly press clippings and notes about small wars and obscure international incidents over the last thirty years. A box marked "Peru" spills open and Walker hurriedly gathers up the papers. Claire jokes about her father's collection. She says he's had an unhealthy interest in "grubby little wars" ever since he was in Vietnam. Walker glares at her and changes the subject. When the hole in the roof is blocked, Walker locks the room. He shows Joseph and Claire to the guest bedrooms and says good night.

A little later, Claire knocks on Joseph's door and comes in wearing something skimpy and seductive. Again, Joseph is the complete gentleman, and doesn't respond, although he's obviously attracted to Claire. She asks him if he's married. He says he isn't, but has a special friend back home. As the storm rages outside, Joseph asks more about Claire's father. She says that she didn't see that much of him when she was growing up; Walker always spent a lot of time away travelling, going to international races and doing business with other horse breeders.

Suddenly there is a flash of lightning. The lights go out. A huge thunderclap reverberates through the house. Merrick, holding a torch, sticks his head in the door. He doesn't bat an eyelid as he sees Claire on Joseph's bed. He says there's been a blackout - the emergency backup generator isn't working. He asks Joseph if he'd mind helping out. Joseph agrees. Claire scampers back to her room as he gets dressed.

Joseph helps Merrick and Walker as they try to get the emergency generator in the shed working. The shed is far from watertight - they discover that the power supply is corroded. Over the howling storm, Merrick shouts that it can wait until morning, but Walker is adamant

that they have to fix it - the property is unprotected without backup power. All three men get drenched, but they manage to fix the generator, lit by torches and lightning flashes. Back in the house, the security system powers back up as the self-test runs and LEDS blink.

As the power returns, the fax machine starts whirring. Walker comes inside and pulls out the message. In large print it says, "They don't shoot horses, do they?" The source fax number is a string of question marks. Merrick asks what the message means. Walker screws up the paper and says "Probably just some fruit loop - forget it". In the background, Joseph watches curiously.

Next morning it's a sunny day. The creek is down. Joseph seems anxious to leave and catch up with his other clients. Walker thanks him for his assistance the night before. Claire is not around to say goodbye. Just as Joseph gets into his car, Claire comes running up, very distressed. Some of the horses have escaped somehow. Others are sick, apparently poisoned. Seeing Claire's distress, Joseph says he can stay and help for a bit if they need him - his other clients can wait. Walker isn't sure. Suddenly Merrick runs up and says he's found out how the horses have escaped; the stables appear to have been damaged in the storm, and one of the walls is hanging off. Walker agrees that an extra pair of hands could help.

They reach the sick horses in a nearby paddock. Sure enough, two of them are showing the signs of some kind of poisoning, one is stumbling around and the other one is already on the ground. Claire says she will try to save them while Walker and Merrick round up the missing thoroughbreds on horseback. Joseph can't ride, so Walker lends him a trailbike to help find the source of the poison.

In a far corner of the property, beneath a steep bushy hillside, Joseph finds an old drench run full of green slimy water, its corrugated iron covers apparently uncovered by high winds during the storm. Walker and Merrick ride up. There are horse tracks all around the drench run. Certainly the horses are showing all the signs of arsenic poisoning. It all seems to make sense. But Merrick questions whether even high winds could have moved the huge stones holding down the corrugated iron covers.

While Joseph is out of earshot, Merrick reminds Walker about the fax of the night before. Could Snow have had something to do with the poisoning of the horses? Walker dismisses the idea. There's no way anyone could have got past the security cordon around the property. It must have been the storm.

On the way back to the house, Walker and Merrick take a shortcut through the bush on their horses. Joseph can't follow them through the scrub, so he takes the main track on his trailbike. Crossing a ridge, Walker and Merrick are momentarily separated.

Suddenly a shot rings out. Walker's horse struggles for breath and then dies under him. Merrick quickly comes back and helps Walker scramble for cover as another shot thuds into a tree nearby. Hearing the shot, Joseph comes racing up on his trail bike. For a moment Walker and Merrick are suspicious of him, but he seems utterly guileless and doesn't have a weapon. Joseph asks Walker where the shot came from. Walker doesn't know. But didn't he hear it? Walker explains that he's deaf in one ear - a horse kicked him in the head a couple of years

ago and he's had no sense of location with his hearing ever since. Risking his own safety, Joseph edges forward towards the tree that was hit and figures out the trajectory of the bullet - it came from a nearby ridge. Walker assures him that the entire ridge and all the high country surrounding the property is owned by him and is part of the secure area - there's no way anyone could get in there without him knowing.

Joseph asks Walker what's going on. Why does someone want to kill him? Walker doesn't reply. Joseph asks Merrick. Merrick urges Walker to tell him about Snow. Joseph asks who Snow is. At first, Walker says Snow's nobody. Under pressure, Walker admits that Snow is his ex-wife's husband. And? And his ex-wife is trying to scare him. Joseph is confused - this seems a bit more serious than a nasty ex - but Walker is anxious to get back to the house and see if Claire is all right.

Claire's okay, but when the men check the security system they discover the outer perimeter has been breached somehow. At least the next level is still secure. Claire wants to know what's happening, but Walker doesn't tell her anything, he just locks her in the secure, electronically controlled core of the house and says he'll explain later. He gives Joseph the opportunity to get out, leave, but Joseph says he's happy to help. Walker gives Merrick and Joseph bulletproof vests and high powered rifles. Joseph says he doesn't want a gun - he wouldn't know how to use it. The others are amazed that an American doesn't know about guns.

As they're preparing to leave, the power supply goes down again. Despite all their efforts of the night before, once again the backup power fails to come on. Claire steps out of her temporary prison, which is now offering no protection. When she realises that the house is unprotected, and there is a gunman somewhere on the property, her earlier indignation is replaced by fear.

They check the generator equipment and discover the capacitors are damaged. Joseph is adamant that he's coming to help - this is what after-sales service is all about, he says. Anyway, he's the only one who can use the Troubleshooter (this is a tiny mobile-phone sized computer which can be used to control the security system remotely and work out what isn't working). He gets the gadget out of his pocket and shows them how it works. Merrick and Claire agree to stay together and look after each other. They'll replace the damaged capacitors while the others find out what's happening on the ridge perimeter.

After a difficult climb, Joseph and Walker approach the perimeter from below, staying under the cover of a ridge in the next zone. There's no sign of anybody in the sector where the shot came from - Joseph does a computer-aided search using satellites from his palm computer. They discover that the perimeter lasers have been tricked with ingenious remote-controlled mirrors, creating a false complete circuit. The perimeter razor wire has been disabled by a fallen tree.

Suddenly the perimeter alarm on the computer sounds. There is a thud nearby, but it's just a kangaroo jumping through the beam.

Walker and Joseph return to the house to find Merrick still having problems with the backup generator. It's working again, but only at half capacity; there seems to be a problem with a blockage in the fuel tanks in the basement of the house. Merrick and Joseph work together in the grease and grime, away from the others, while Walker guards Claire.

Joseph asks Merrick what the story is with Snow. Merrick explains that Snow was Walker's business partner until Snow ran off with his wife. He asks Merrick if Walker is a good bloke. Merrick says he's a queer character, but rock solid. Completely dependable. So what was a solid bloke like Merrick doing working in South Africa during the apartheid era, asks Joseph. And what about Angola? Merrick is disbelieving, and asks him where he gets his information. In his business, Joseph says, it pays to find out as much as you can about your clients. Merrick is suspicious, and clams up. A hostility is in the air between them, and they finish the dirty job in silence.

Merrick and Joseph go upstairs just as the fax machine starts receiving. Claire beats Walker to the machine. Again, big letters fill the page: "Claire's next". Claire becomes very quiet and scared. Suddenly Walker comes up and snatches it out of her hands. He makes a decision quickly. That's it, he says. Claire's getting out of there.

Joseph points out that the security system is working perfectly now; the safest place is where they are, but Walker won't listen. He tells Merrick to take Claire out of the valley in the bulletproof truck. He also wants Joseph out - with the backup generator on the blink it's not safe in the house. As usual, Walker won't elaborate, but he says that all this has nothing to do with any of them. He wants to face whatever dangers are ahead on his own.

Reluctantly, Merrick agrees with Walker's request, but says he wants to leave before Joseph - he doesn't want Joseph to see which way they go. Walker is confused by this, but then Merrick whispers something in Walker's ear. Walker's face hardens. He pulls out a pistol and levels it at Joseph. Joseph is incredulous that they seem to suspect him of being involved in all this in some way. Walker tells him to shut up. Claire is completely upset and confused - "Will someone tell me what's going on?!" But Merrick just bundles her out to Walker's bulletproof 4WD truck. With one eye on Joseph, Walker disables the security system temporarily so the others can leave. They tear off in a cloud of dust.

While the others drive away, Walker interrogates Joseph about how he knew about South Africa and Angola. Joseph says he knew from the paper clippings they moved during the flood. Walker doesn't believe him. He pistol-whips Joseph, and asks again. Joseph admits that he knew from his research at Citadel - he knows that Walker has worked as an international consultant for various nasty regimes - the horse stud is just a cover.

Walker accuses him of being in cahoots with his ex-wife and business partner, the people who are threatening him. He says Joseph doesn't work for Citadel at all. Joseph tells him to ring Citadel at their US office and ask whether his ID is valid. Walker isn't sure about this, but there seems to be little Joseph can gain from lying. When Walker rings Citadel, they confirm Joseph's identity. Walker apologises to Joseph; he says the stress of all that has happened is getting to him. He lowers his gun.

Suddenly there is a sound of an explosive crash from down the valley. Walker quickly checks his security monitors. It's the 4WD, crashed into a tree. The engine is on fire. There's not enough detail to see inside the vehicle.

Walker throws Joseph a gun. This time Joseph doesn't object. They tear down the road and find the crashed car, still burning. They get close enough to see that Merrick is at the wheel, dead, a bullet in his brain. Claire is nowhere to be seen. Her door is open. Joseph looks at the hole in the "bulletproof" glass. He says the shot was from a special high-tech armour piercing weapon, only just released on the market and very rare. The fire is spreading through into the passenger area of the car. Smoke billows out. There's no way they can drag Merrick's body clear.

Still deeply shocked at the loss of his friend, Walker calls desperately for Claire. But the cliffs are silent, mocking him with their echoes. Joseph reminds him how exposed they are, and gets Walker back into the car.

They return to the house to find another fax waiting: "Where's your daughter, Redback?" "Who's Redback?", asks Joseph. Walker doesn't answer. All he can think is that his worst fears are confirmed: his daughter's been kidnapped. He talks fast as he searches the security system's log. Sure enough, no one's left the zone containing the burning truck since the accident occurred. Unless the kidnappers had a helicopter, then they must still be inside that zone somewhere, along with Claire, dead or alive. Walker pulls out a map - the zone encompasses a number of potential hiding places; steep rocky country, an old quarry and thick bush.

Joseph suggests they go to the police, but Walker says he can't afford the negative publicity. Joseph is disbelieving that Walker would risk his daughter's life for negative publicity. He says he'll help catch the kidnappers, but only if Walker comes clean and tells everything he knows about why his ex-wife and business partner are threatening him. Again he asks, who is Redback? Walker says it doesn't matter, none of it matters, all that matters is that Claire is in danger. Walker is too hyped-up to focus properly on Joseph's questions - he fails to notice a new note in the younger man's voice, a new intensity in his questions.

We'll need weapons, says Walker, serious weapons. Still going at a million miles an hour, he races outside to an old well in the yard. A knotted rope dangles from a nearby tree. "Wait here", he tells Joseph. Shinnying down the rope with a younger man's ease, Walker descends into the well, into waist-deep water. He attaches waterproofed boxes to the rope and gets Joseph to raise them from above while he talks about the contents.

There's all sorts of guns in these boxes, automatic pistols, rocket launchers, grenades - enough to start World War 3. Joseph is not impressed. If anything, he seems strangely unsurprised about a horse breeder having all this stuff in his back yard.

Joseph asks Walker what the weapons are doing in his well. Again, Walker refuses to answer. All he will say is that they're from his "previous life", and he's been keeping them down here for a "rainy day". The cases look well-travelled. Many are stamped with writing from other countries, other languages. The weapons are not new. On the contrary, they look well-used.

Down in the well, Walker runs out of boxes. He asks Joseph to throw him down the rope. Joseph doesn't throw down the rope. Instead, he picks up a sub-machine gun and cocks it at Walker. Coldly, calmly, Joseph repeats his earlier question; "Who's Redback?"

Walker is completely floored by this. He asks Joseph what the hell he thinks he's doing, what about Claire? Joseph says, "I didn't come for Claire, I came for you." Again he asks who Redback is. Walker replies, "Look you crazy bastard, I'm Redback. All right? I'm Redback." Something changes in Joseph's eyes. With a soldier's instinct, his body moving before his brain, Walker sees the change. He dives. Joseph fires, spraying the well with bullets.

Underwater, Walker takes cover under a flak jacket which was protecting the weapons. He scrabbles for an underwater door as the bullets rain down around. He opens it and swims through.

Up above, Joseph stops firing. Still shaking with aggression and adrenaline, he peers down into the darkness of the well. Nothing is moving. Putting down the gun, he gets down on hands and knees to look into the water. Behind him, Walker emerges from the shed, still wet. He moves like a cat towards the guns.

Moments before he reaches the weapons, Joseph hears something, and turns. He sees Walker. With an animal cry, he lunges for his own gun and reaches it as Walker forgets the guns and scrambles for cover, running for the safety of the shed. Joseph sprays the corrugated iron with bullets.

Inside the shed, Walker is unarmed, trying to quieten his breathing, his back to an old tractor. Joseph enters the big old shed. His eyes adjust to the darkness. Fingers of light reach through bullet holes. There are big boxes and old machines all over the place. Lots of places to hide.

While he hunts for Walker, Joseph talks, trying to draw a response. He knows Walker's CV. "You were in Vietnam before you joined the Nest, weren't you Redback? A regular conscientious objector, if you can believe the records. Then what happened to you? Haiti, Argentina, El Salvador, Kashmir, Angola... Does your country know what you did in East Timor in 1974? I don't think so. You're a nasty piece of work, Walker. You don't deserve to breathe." Drawing a hail of bullets in the process, Walker asks Joseph who he is. He dives and finds cover behind an old metal shelf.

Joseph says Walker wouldn't remember him, but maybe he might remember his name: "Mbatwame". Patterson is his foster parents' name, the name of the people who looked after him in America after Walker killed his family, back in Uganda, in 1978.

Through the course of a series of tense scenes, in which Joseph hunts Walker and Walker tries to fend him off with all the ingenuity he can muster, it emerges that Walker has had a secret life as a mercenary and then as a military consultant, codenamed "Redback", with an organisation called the Nest. While maintaining a cover as a racehorse breeder, Walker worked around in the world in grubby little conflicts from Peru to South Africa, eventually retiring after losing his hearing in one ear in Chechnya in 1995. Joseph knows his entire history. He knows more about Walker than Walker does.

Twenty years ago, in Uganda, while working for Idi Amin, Walker's unit was involved in the murder of a politician which then became a bloodbath. The man's family was massacred, including Joseph's baby brother. Joseph was ten years old at the time. The politician was his father. Since then, Joseph has spent every spare hour of his life tracking down the man who killed his family. Just when he'd given up hope, he found him by chance, through his work for Citadel. Now he's convinced Walker is guilty, he's going to make him pay.

The chase moves from the shed, then through the bush, then into the house. Joseph is very inexperienced with guns, and not much of a shot, but is filled with a single-minded rage. Walker is unarmed, but knows the place better than anyone, and has plenty of desperate cunning and soldier survival skills to keep him alive.

Through it all Walker denies Joseph's allegations. He admits he was present at some of the incidents Joseph mentions, but says he was just a consultant, he never worked on the ground, Joseph has got it all wrong.

Once they're in the house, Walker finds various weapon caches and hidey-holes, but Joseph uses his mobile computer to send codes to the main computer, over-riding each security barrier Walker erects to defend himself. Trading fire and words, the men move towards the inner sanctum of Walker's useless fortress.

Both men are battered, bruised and bleeding by the time Joseph corners Walker and Walker runs out of ammunition. They're in the nerve centre of the security system. "What do you want?", asks Walker. "Vengeance", says Joseph.

At gunpoint, Walker admits that yes, he was there, yes, he was on the ground, yes he did kill people in the past, but he is adamant he was not involved in the deaths of Joseph's family. "Who was responsible then?", asks Joseph.

Walker explains that although he was technically in charge of the unit that day, he was sick back in camp with malaria, and his second-in-command was in charge. They were supposed to only frighten Mbatwame, but when one of Mbatwame's bodyguards tried to be heroic, a bloodlust took over, and led to the massacre.

Who was the second-in-command that day? Joseph demands to know. The man's codename was "The Snake", says Walker. Better known as Peter Snow. Joseph is incredulous. To save his own skin, Walker is prepared only to pass the blame on to a man who he already wants dead for kidnapping his daughter. Walker says he wouldn't believe it either in his position, but it's the truth.

Prove it, says Joseph. Walker reminds him that his father was a chief, as well as a cabinet minister. Walker asks him if it's true that all the sons of the chief wore charms around their necks as infants, to protect them from harm. Joseph says that yes, it is true, the necklaces were made from the teeth of leopards. Walker says that after the massacre Snow told him that he took Joseph's brother's charm from his neck before he killed him. Apparently Snow has worn it ever since as a bracelet, believing it made him indestructible. "When you find him, ask him yourself", says Walker. "He's proud of what he's done".

Suddenly another fax arrives: it's a map of the property with grid references. There's a circle around the house - "You are here" is scribbled - and a circle around a spot in the bush: "We are here". Below is a warning: "Come alone and come unarmed". Joseph is still skeptical. He asks what it is that Snow wants so much. "He wants the little black book", replies Walker. "What is in the book?", asks Joseph.

Walker explains that after he retired and disbanded the Nest, Snow went into business as an independent arms-dealer. Small time stuff mostly. But now he's got greedy and wants to move on to bigger things. The little black book contained personal contacts and phone numbers for all of the employers of the Nest through the years, hard information to find through legal means; classified and highly sensitive, dating back to the time of the previous Nest leader, Joe Halley. Snow wants the book so he can sell arms to these people.

Where is the book now? "Burned", says Walker. He destroyed it when he retired, but Snow doesn't know that.

In a surprising flash of violence, Joseph lays Walker out cold with a blow from the butt of his weapon, before tying him up to his chair. He checks the grid reference from the fax with 3D computer generated maps on his tiny computer. Snow is in the glow worm tunnel.

Joseph grabs the trail bike and rides to the edge of the steep, rough country below the tunnel. He climbs until he reaches the entrance. Inside, Claire is tied with her arms and legs spread like a spider's web - a human shield for the people beyond. She whimpers quietly when she sees Joseph. Wounded and filthy from the fire, she's in a bad way.

As Joseph approaches the tunnel, unarmed, Snow levels a gun at him, demanding to know who he is. His wife, Lou, jumpy and not used to this sort of thing, guards the other end of the tunnel. Snow has a battery-powered notebook computer with him, connected to a mobile phone. The latest fax is on the screen of the notebook.

Joseph explains that Walker sent him. Snow sneers. "How many black boys has Walker got? And why can't he do his own dirty work?"

Joseph says he's got what they want, and he'll give it to them if they release Claire. "How would you know what I want?" says Snow. Joseph replies that he's got the little black book. "Where is it then?"

"It's all in here", says Joseph, pulling his palm computer out of his pocket. "Times, dates, places. Business contacts. But you need a code to access it, and you're not getting it until you release Claire". Snow nods to his wife. Lou's releases the girl. Claire slumps against the wall.

Back in the house, Walker works away at his bonds. He pulls the knots with his teeth. The chair falls over. Blood drips into his eyes. But he doesn't stop.

In the cave, Joseph and Snow edge closer to one another. "What's the code?", asks Snow. "I'll tell you if you put down your weapon", says Joseph. Snow smiles at Lou. Who is this joker? But Joseph looks harmless enough. Snow shrugs and puts the gun down.

Lou covers him. “Show me your wrists”, says Joseph. “What is this?”, says Snow. “Do you think I’ve got knives up there or something?” Firmly, Joseph repeats himself. Snow eyes the palmtop hungrily.

Snow can’t work this out, but he decides there’s no harm in it, so he rolls up his sleeves. He’s wearing a tiny bracelet made of leopard’s teeth. Snow and Joseph are quite near each other now.

Very coldly, Joseph asks Snow where he got the bracelet. Snow thinks is a great joke. “You can’t get one like it, if that’s what you’re thinking. I had to kill a boy for this bracelet. And then I had to kill his family.”

Joseph explodes. In fury, he grabs Snow and smashes him against the wall. Snow is surprised at the ferocity of this unexpected attack, but he fights back as best he can.

The gun is knocked away and the men spin around furiously. Lou can’t get a clear shot. Seizing her chance, Claire sets on Lou as well. She loses her gun as Claire fights like an animal. Then the younger woman reaches the gun. It’s jammed.

As Claire grapples with the gun, Lou sees that Joseph seems to be gaining the upper hand. She loses her nerve and makes a break for it. Claire raises the gun to shoot her in the back, but Lou reaches the front entrance and disappears from sight. Suddenly there’s a huge bang as Lou steps on a mine in the bush nearby. Claire is splattered with blood. There’s not much of Lou left.

Claire turns back inside to see the two men on the ground locked in deadly combat. Suddenly Snow’s on top, and Snow has a gun at Joseph’s head. Claire raises her own gun and points it at Snow, commanding him to stop. It’s not clear whether she has the nerve to fire. The gun is wobbling slightly in her hands.

Snow’s face is inches from Joseph’s. The bracelet dangles from the wrist of his gun hand.

Snow ignores Claire. He stares at Joseph. “Who the hell are you?” Joseph pauses before replying. “I’m Joseph Mbatwame. You killed my family.”

At last, realisation dawns on Snow. “You were the little kid that day, weren’t you? The one who got away?” He smiles at the craziness of it all, and gestures to Claire. “Do you think she’s going to save you? She wouldn’t have the nerve to kill a wounded rabbit. Would you darling?”

Claire is still aiming the gun at him, but this is all a bit much for her. She’s silently crying as the gun shakes violently in her hands Snow smiles at Joseph again. “I’ll tell you what I’m going to do, Mr whatever-your-name-is. I’m going to pop you like I popped your little brother, and there’s nothing... anyone.. can do about it.”

Snow begins to squeeze the trigger... Joseph grabs the bracelet... The bracelet snaps from Snow’s wrist... And there is a shot.

For a moment everything is suspended. Then Snow falls, dead, on top of Joseph. Claire hasn't touched the trigger. At the far end of the tunnel, smoke rises from Walker's rifle. He's saved Joseph's life...

The next morning, as Joseph prepares to drive away, we find out that Claire knew all along what her father did for a living. For his part, Walker accepts responsibility for his actions at last. He promises to write a book and set the record straight. In a way, he's grateful to Joseph for forcing him to deal with it all, instead of allowing it to continue growing like a cancer inside him.

Joseph asks if that means he's sorry. Walker says yes, he's sorry. Joseph says that's all he wanted to hear. He kisses Claire goodbye. Walker and his daughter hug each other as Joseph drives away.

In his rear view mirror, Claire and Walker recede, framed by the ancient cliffs.

ADDENDUM

Harry “Redback” Walker’s CV:

- Born Sydney 1949
- Conscripted to Vietnam 1967
- Left Vietnam and army in 1970
- Joined “The Nest” 1971 - brought in by mentor figure Joe Halley
- first job in Haiti 1972, working for Jean Claude Duvalier shortly after the transfer of power from his father “Papa Doc”. Involved in retraining of secret police Tonton Macoute for para-military duties
- East Timor 1974-75. Worked for Indonesian government. Indirectly involved with deaths of Australian journalists
- met and married first wife Rebecca late 1975. Walker keeps his profession a secret from her
- Argentina 1976-77. Worked for military government to eliminate opponents
- Claire born 1977
- Uganda 1978. Worked for Idi Amin. During his time there, was involved in an incident where mercenaries under his command (including his lieutenant Peter “The Snake” Snow) went crazy in a My Lai style massacre, which Joseph Mbatwame, then ten, survived. Walker’s mentor Joe Halley killed in this incident - Walker became the new Nest leader
- El Salvador 1980. Worked for military junta
- Peru 1983. Worked for military government
- South Africa 1985. Worked for government at time of state of emergency
- Australia 1985. First wife Rebecca dies in a car accident while Walker’s away in South Africa
- Angola 1987. In employ of South African government, training soldiers
- 1988. Meets and marries second wife Lou. She knows he’s a mercenary
- Kashmir 1989-90. Worked for rebels to undermine Indian government
- Peru 1992. This time working for Shining Path guerrillas
- Chechnya 1994-95. Working for Yeltsin. Lost hearing in one ear at this time
- Australia 1995. Lou leaves Walker when he decides to give the game away and break up the Nest. She thinks he’s lost his nerve, and goes off with Snow instead