

Chapter 1

As the plane continued to lose altitude on its approach to the Moree airport Peter Sharp looked out the window, his deep blue, practised eyes missing nothing. He noticed that the stock feed was almost gone and the earth dams more than half empty. He'd seen it all before, many times. On the flight from Sydney he had been contemplating how much things had changed, even in the last ten years. Little things, like this plane trip. In earlier times he'd flown this same route in the old DC3s, stinking of sick passengers and bucking like a wild bull. Today, even in this early heat, the approach was soft and effortless. He was grateful that aircraft design had moved on to the Fokker Friendships.

His mind drifted back to his earliest memories, a few years before World War II, when things to a child were simple. When huge horse-drawn vehicles loaded with wool were almost as common as motor vehicles; how he, the bush kid, had relished those years and had gone on to make two careers. One involving livestock and vast grazing properties, the other a world apart, as a talented fine art valuer and auctioneer. His fine art career was the reason he was touching down at this country airport right now.

As Sharp came down the steps and onto the tarmac the early November heat engulfed him like an oven door suddenly opened. 'I must be getting soft'; he thought. 'Too many years since I've lived out here, and in other outback places. A far cry from the bitter winters of London. It's good to be back, it really is'. As he entered the doors of the galvanized iron airport terminal the sound of his name suddenly brought him back to reality.

"You must be Peter Sharp!" The words came from a rather short man with thinning, dark, unruly hair. Despite the dark hair his skin was heavily freckled. Sharp took an

immediate liking to his engaging smile and twinkling brown eyes.

“Yes, I am,” he answered, “How did you know?”

“You’re the only one round here that doesn’t look windswept and dusty. Nice to meet you, I’m Dave Wilder. The boss sent me into town to pick up some wool-packs; and you. He tells me you’ll be staying out on *Morgan Plains* for a week or so.”

“Thanks for meeting me Dave,” said Sharp, as he grabbed his baggage and walked with his companion to the dusty, khaki Land Rover.

“Had breakfast yet?”

“Not really, just a cup of warm tea on the plane,” said Sharp. “I could do with a toasted sandwich and a pot of hot tea right now though,” he grinned.

Sitting in the grand old Astoria café with the overhead fans quietly cooling the customers, Wilder and Sharp passed the time, finding out a bit about each-other while they waited for their order.

“They tell me you’re here to value the boss’ art collection,” Wilder ventured. “Must be worth a bloody fortune!”

“Which, the art collection or my fee?” replied Sharp, a little too harshly. The truth was that Wilder had caught him off guard. He was shocked to realise that anyone working on *Morgan Plains* should know what he was up to. His employers had briefed him about this assignment. They told him that Malcolm Morgan was very sensitive about his personal life, and especially about his art collection.

Morgan’s astute grandfather had consolidated six smaller holdings back in the late 1800s. The old man’s ancestors had been successful accountants. Consequently Malcolm’s grandfather became involved in lending money to small landholders who could not attract finance from the

banks. The Morgans had nothing to lose. They had a surplus of money and were not shy about foreclosing if the small farmers couldn't meet the repayments. They waived the debts, took over the properties and left the former owners there as caretakers. The small holdings were amalgamated and became known as *Morgan Plains*. The prime pastoral property was passed on, from one first born son to the next, generation after generation.

“Forget I said that,” apologised Wilder, “Mr Morgan would have pups if he found out how much we station-hands know. He's not really a laughing and joking sort of character, but the pay is OK and the property is pretty much a status symbol. All the blokes for miles around seem to envy us because the property is so big, and owned by a prominent old family.”

Sharp already knew a lot about Malcolm Morgan, and the 84,000 acres which comprised *Morgan Plains*. It was the business of Colonial Livestock & Woolbroking Co., Sharp's employer, to know these things, especially since they financed the livestock on the property, and held a lien over the forthcoming woolclip.

They drove north-west for about fifty minutes along a narrow strip of bitumen, just wide enough for one vehicle. The coarse gravel edges were a grim reminder to Sharp of the corrugated gravel roads of his boyhood. Windscreen alley they were known as then. They made a left hand turn just past a prominent sign-post pointing westward to four properties. *Morgan Plains* appeared last on the list, 9½ miles away. The access road was highly formed natural black soil with deep, wide table-drains.

“After heavy rains it's like a bloody mud slide,” laughed Wilder. “Actually we could do with a mud slide right now. The sheep are starting to bog in the bore-drains and the

earth dams. Not much fun dragging them out only to find them going straight back in again!”

As they travelled the next nine miles, Wilder gave Sharp a concise history on the three neighbouring properties, the size of the holdings, the owners, and whether they were successfully managed or not. As they crossed a cattle grid Wilder announced: “Welcome to *Morgan Plains!*” and gestured to an impressive wrought iron sign proudly bearing the property’s name. Just past the sign they came to a T-intersection. The now private road had a good gravel surface which, to the left, led to a collection of machinery sheds, a tool shed, tack room, and a bank of seven grain silos. Sharp got a view of an excellent set of timber cattle yards, partially obscured by the nearby buildings.

Further on was a timber and galvanized iron fuel shed on the other side of the road, standing alone, for obvious reasons, from any other buildings. Single men’s quarters were some 100 yards away, a rough-sawn hardwood structure with its own separate kitchen and cook’s quarters. Although quite attractive, it signalled to Sharp that the property still functioned on the old formal system more in keeping with the turn of the century.

Another 300 yards further on an overseer’s cottage could be seen. About a mile away, a massive shearing shed shimmered in the sunlight. It was obvious to Sharp that Old Man Morgan had made a good decision all those years ago in locating the homestead, and all these other structures, on a low ridge of sandy loam. This was flood country when big rains fell. Only the sandy ridges were visible when the floodwater made its way down the channels and creeks to the vast water-course, which formed the south-western boundary of *Morgan Plains*. The rest was water, as far as the eye could see.

To the right, the road led to the homestead. Sharp was impressed with the formal rows of shade trees leading to the entrance ramp and gateway. The gardens, too, were mature and manicured, featuring two massive kurrajong trees which hinted at the likelihood of a vast water supply below. The homestead setting was greatly enhanced by buffalo grass lawns which seemed to laugh at the drought stricken landscape of the surrounding paddocks.

Wilder drove to the side of the homestead gate and parked under the shade of the pepper trees. They walked the twenty yards along a freshly raked gravel path that led to a vast semi-circular gauzed verandah. Wilder stopped at the entrance door and rang a brass bell to announce their arrival.

A few moments later Sharp observed a tall man emerging through the door of a nearby room bearing a prominent brass sign with OFFICE heavily engraved on it. He made his way along the side verandah to the gauzed door where Wilder and Sharp stood. The man stood quite erect, except for a slight tilt of his head. Sharp later learned that this tilt was not the result of some injury, but rather a form of affectation which many men from prominent families adopted as a badge of importance. A vision of a particular leading member of Parliament immediately came to Sharp's mind. The face of the tilted head bore a somewhat pained expression, which was probably almost constant, for the lines to his cheeks and chin were deeply furrowed, with no signs of humour to the corners of his eyes. The hair had a strong wave to it, and was now a dull brown, turning grey, combed over reasonably successfully to compensate for much of its disappearance. The nose was straight, and a little prominent, below eyes which were steely grey; almost a perfect match for the unruly eyebrows.

Malcolm Morgan opened the door and Wilder led Sharp up the few steps and onto the verandah.

“This is Peter Sharp, Mr. Morgan,” Wilder announced.

“It’s good to meet you Mr. Sharp. Thank you for collecting him Wilder.” Morgan’s friendly greeting rested somewhat at odds with the stiff referral to Dave as Wilder. A bit ‘English Public School’ thought Sharp. The strong, dry handshake was a bonus though.

“Nice to meet you too Mr. Morgan. Peter does me,” said Sharp. Morgan took no notice of the offer, and turned to Dave.

“Have Mary show Mr. Sharp to his room please Wilder. Then you can get back to the shearing shed so that it’s all ship-shape for Monday week, when crutching starts.”

“Thanks for your help, Dave,” Sharp called, as Wilder turned in search of Mary.

“Nice to have had some time with you Peter,” Wilder replied, and walked away. A brief, but awkward silence followed, while Morgan watched a workman digging in a vast vegetable garden adjacent to what was obviously a pump-house, where a huge water tank on a tall steel stand stood nearby.

“Ah, here’s Mary now,” exclaimed Morgan. “Mary, please show Mr. Sharp to his room, and also the dining room, so that he can join Mrs. Morgan and me for lunch at 12.30.” Having given this instruction he turned in the direction of his office.

Sharp followed Mary as she crossed the semi-circular verandah area and then along another narrower verandah to the left. She extended her left arm, “There is the living room, and the dining room is next door,” smiled Mary, a small, rather chubby lady in her early fifties. “Make sure you’re at lunch on time, Mr. Sharp. I’m afraid Mr. Morgan is a stickler for punctuality,” she said, looking embarrassed.

They passed a bathroom and three guest bedrooms, all with access to the verandah which, at this point, had taken a

right hand turn. At the end of the verandah they stopped at another bedroom with an en-suite bathroom. Once inside Sharp noticed that the room was spacious, with old, wide cyprus pine floor boards on which attractive Oriental rugs were placed. A matching Edwardian writing desk and chair added a pleasant and useful touch. A floral upholstered arm chair filled one corner of the room. The double bed was a typical 1920s iron-framed piece, with an immaculate white damask bed spread. A dressing table and large wardrobe completed the furnishings.

“Thank you Mary, I’m sure I’ll be very comfortable,” smiled Sharp as the house maid turned and walked back toward the dining room. He placed his baggage on the luggage rack, and his brief case on the desk, before gazing out the rear window.

What he saw was impressive. The immediate gardens were mature and inviting, and beyond them Sharp could make out the painted brick walls surrounding a somewhat oval in-ground swimming pool. To either side of the entrance gate a shower nozzle was fixed to the wall. Concrete paving appeared to encircle the pool, and to the western side was a timber pergola, covered in masses of wisteria. A perfect place for a quiet evening drink, thought Sharp, as he wondered who was, and who was not, allowed access to the pool area.

He then turned to the eastern window which offered a view of the tennis court and the paddocks beyond, dotted with red box and wilga trees. Sharp walked out onto the verandah again, and looked to the south, where the property probably stretched for miles.

The timber here changed to leopard-wood, white-wood and some belah, with isolated rosewood, commonly referred to as boonery trees. All these trees were a true indication, to his experienced eye, that the country, beyond the sandy ridge, had changed. Here lay deep, rich, black, self-

mulching soil; magnificent in good seasons, but a maze of deep cracks in drought years when young lambs could get trapped, shoulder deep in them.

By the time Sharp had finished his window gazing and unpacked his baggage he noticed that the time was nearly 12.30. He washed and neatened his appearance while contemplating how the lunch meeting with the Morgans might pan out. He decided that he must take care not to form any pre-conceived impressions or opinions of Morgan, before getting to know him better. Nonetheless, he had some difficulty coming to terms with the imbalance between the good manners and arrogance, which Morgan had displayed in a single sentence. He also had a nagging query as to why *Morgan Plains* had such a significant livestock mortgage to Colonial Livestock & Woolbrokers, when a high indication of affluence was so obvious, wherever he looked. He made his way to the dining room and as he did, encountered Morgan on his way from the office. Sharp stood and waited for him.

“After you,” Morgan gestured, as they entered the large and superbly furnished dining room. The table was made from solid Australian cedar, probably from the Richmond River area of New South Wales. Its lines were not the traditional style of English furniture, but rather austere and practical. The six simply turned legs supported an ample D-ended top with plain chamfered edges. A central extension leaf gave comfortable dining for eight, and another two extensions were probably stored away somewhere nearby.

A matching sideboard stood proudly behind the main table end, tastefully decorated with two heavily plated meat helmets and a Georgian silver drinks tray in the centre. Eight dining chairs were placed around the table, and four others stood against the two side walls. The softness of cedar chair frames had always been at odds with traditional Victorian styles. These chairs had an Edwardian look, more sturdy and

practical, but still they complemented the simple lines of the table and side-board.

Sharp complimented Mrs. Morgan on the quality and attractiveness of the furniture, and quickly learned that each piece had been custom made for Malcolm's father by a master craftsman from Grafton in northern New South Wales, back in 1915.

Lunch was a simple fare of cold mutton and a good salad, fresh from the well tended garden near the pump house. Sharp was grateful for Mrs. Morgan's ready and interesting conversation, which mostly stemmed from her endeavour to learn about his experience and qualifications. Malcolm Morgan said little, sitting quietly but attentively, with his head characteristically tilted to one side. Eventually, after Mrs. Morgan's questioning had revealed enough about Sharp's background, Morgan made his move. When his wife left to prepare the tea tray in the adjoining kitchenette Morgan fixed Sharp with a severe look through narrowed eyes.

"No doubt your firm has briefed you about my request for a valuation of my art collection, Mr. Sharp?"

"Yes, they have, Mr. Morgan. However, they have left it to me to speak with you about the basis upon which the valuation is established. I also need to know as much as possible about the provenance of each piece, and how long they have been in your possession. I'm sure you understand that the more information you can give me the more precise the valuation will be."

"The only information I will give you, Mr. Sharp, is this: the paintings have been in my possession for quite some time; where they came from previously is none of your business. You are to value each piece on the assumption that they are what I tell you they are. The basis of the valuation is to be for insurance replacement, though I would hope that your assessment is closely linked to market value, for I object

to paying high insurance premiums resulting from optimistic valuation. Do I make myself clear?" Morgan leaned back in his chair, his body language reflecting considerable intimidation.

"Quite clear," said Sharp, not showing any sign of the alarm bells ringing furiously in his mind as a result of Morgan's stipulations. "When will I be able to inspect them?"

"I'll let you know," drawled Morgan, "but in the meantime I want you to prepare a valuation of all the major pieces of furniture, silverware and objets d'art. The basis of this valuation is to be for insurance replacement also."

"Do you mind if I get started on that part of the valuation this afternoon, Mr. Morgan?"

"That would be appropriate. I'll see you at dinner tonight Mr. Sharp", Morgan said, and promptly left the room. No sooner had he done so than Mrs. Morgan entered the room, carrying a tea tray with all the necessary items, but only two cups and saucers. It was quite obvious to Sharp that she had remained in the kitchenette until she heard her husband leave the room. The tea was to be shared, quite deliberately, between just the two of them. It quickly became apparent that it was a deliberate ploy by Morgan and his wife. Was she to be the friendly, persuasive interrogator? Or did she want to confide something to Sharp in Morgan's absence? Sharp made a mental note to be careful, very careful indeed!

"I'm sorry I kept you waiting Mr. Sharp. There was a problem in the kitchen which the cook needed to resolve. Do you mind if I call you Peter?"

"I'd prefer that you did, Mrs. Morgan. I always feel that someone is referring to my father when I hear Mr. Sharp; and I'm afraid I lost him many years ago!"

"My name is Catherine," Mrs Morgan smiled, "but it's probably best if you refer to me as Mrs. Morgan when Malcolm is about. He's quite stiff about formality. An

aftermath of his days at Marlborough, I'm afraid! It's rather quaint that his father sent him to an English Public School. The Morgans have always seen themselves as being upper class; still, I suppose there is no sin in that is there?"

Sharp made no comment, but simply informed Mrs. Morgan that her husband had requested he start on the valuation of furniture and objets d'art that afternoon. Catherine Morgan took her time over tea, showing genuine interest in the fact that Sharp had commenced his working life as a young trainee with the English-based Company, Colonial Livestock & Woolbroking Co. The firm was one of several English based firms who saw a profitable future in establishing similar Pastoral Houses in the fledgling colony of Australia.

The transaction of livestock, produce and property became a necessary arm of their business, as did the financing of clients in need of short-term assistance. Some of these clients, for one reason or another, became long-term debtors of the firm. *Morgan Plains* was one of them. Catherine was fascinated as to how or why a young country agent became a respected valuer in the fine art business, and then returned to stock and station agency again. Sharp promised to continue the story over tea when the opportunity arose, explaining that he needed to make a start with the valuation that afternoon.

As he moved around the homestead that afternoon Sharp came across Mary attending to the setting of the dining table for dinner that evening. She informed him that he should be ready to dine at seven o'clock. He noticed with interest that Mary had set an extra place at the table. 'So, we have a guest tonight', he thought, 'I wonder who I will encounter this time'?

Pleased with the valuation's progress that afternoon, Sharp shaved and enjoyed the luxury of a shower under a very large, old-style shower nozzle, thinking to himself that there

must be a tremendous subterranean water supply under *Morgan Plains*. What a wonderful asset in countryside that could be so dry much of the time. He changed into a freshly laundered pair of moleskins, his favourite clothing. In a clean shirt and freshly polished boots Sharp felt ready for what he hoped would be a hearty meal. With luck he might even enjoy some light conversation with the guest, whoever that may be.

As Sharp approached the dining room he heard voices coming from the adjacent living room. He took the few steps further and as his silhouette was framed by the doorway he caught Catherine Morgan's eye, and she beckoned him.

"We're just having a drink before dinner, Peter. Please join us! What would you like?"

"A beer would be fine, thank you," smiled Sharp, noticing that Morgan was in deep conversation with a strikingly pretty, tanned young woman. 'So this is our dinner guest', he mused.

"Mary has just arrived with the dinner trolley," announced Catherine Morgan. "It's time we went in!"

Once inside Morgan stood behind the carver chair at the end of the table, his wife stood near the chair to his right while she introduced Tracey to Sharp.

"Tracey, this is our valuer, who arrived from Sydney this morning. Peter, I'm sure you will enjoy Tracey's company while you are here. She visits us from time to time, and always likes to come and help at crutching time."

A mischievous smile came from Tracey. "Great to meet you Peter. I hope you had a good trip this morning," she said, as Sharp attended to her chair. "Thanks, nice to meet a gentleman."

The apparently serious conversation in the living room, between Morgan and Tracey had temporarily dried up. The talk had become somewhat trivial and a little stilted. Sharp decided to wait a while rather than bother asking

general questions just for the sake of talk. The presence of a good bottle of French wine soon sparked the conversation starting with compliments on the quality of the wine, and also of the chicken and fresh garden salad.

“Malcolm, would you mind if I took the trail bike across to the Cameron’s after dinner? Diana wants me to come over and see how her watercolours are coming along. She’s a bit lonely with Angus away at their Walcha property this week”, Tracey said.

“Not at all,” said Morgan pleasantly, “it’s basically for your use while you’re here; I appreciate the work you do on it. While I think of it, I may need you to take Mr. Sharp with you to check all our cattle later in the week. I realise that you and Wilder need a few days more before you finish your work at the shearing shed. I will discuss it with both of you at breakfast tomorrow.” The pleasant side of Morgan again.

“Tracey, Peter,” Catherine Morgan looked from one to the other, “on Thursday Malcolm and I have business to attend to in Moree. It will involve us dining with friends in the evening, so we will stay overnight in town. Friday evening we will be celebrating a fortieth wedding anniversary with old friends near Narrabri, and staying two nights with them. We should be back here mid-afternoon on Sunday. If it suits you both I will speak to ‘cook’ and have him leave a variety of food in the ‘fridges to tide you over the three days we will be away. He can just cater for the men on Thursday and Friday nights in their own kitchen. He and the station hands will have the weekend off, but our overseer will be available if you need any urgent help. Perhaps a few barbecues by the pool might suit you. Feel free to use the pool whenever you like Peter, I know Tracey does. Malcolm and I rarely swim these days. We must be getting old and lazy,” she laughed.

With dinner over, Sharp was sitting at his desk, deep in thought. ‘What a contrast! Catherine seems to thrive on

friendliness, while Malcolm seems to lurch from moments of friendliness to long periods of cynicism and arrogance. ‘Must find out more about him, if ever I’m to be of much use to both of them, or to my employers’. Sharp’s curiosity was getting the better of him. ‘Maybe spend some time with Tracey tomorrow. Need to find out more about this fascinating woman too’. His mind was running madly in every direction:

‘What’s with Morgan? Why is Tracey here? Where does she come from? How come Morgan readily tolerates her calling him Malcolm? Where in the bloody hell is the Morgan art collection? All he had seen during his contents inspection that afternoon were fairly pedestrian pictures some only prints, and a few interesting lithographs. What was the comment about me inspecting all the cattle? How many more matters need my attention? I think I’d better phone Cowper tomorrow’.

Cowper was the New South Wales State Manager of Colonial Livestock & Woolbroking Co. He had his finger on the pulse of every one of his Category A clients. These were influential ones who, sadly, had incurred massive debts. He had acquired these clients either through family influence, business clubs or old school contacts. A few who, in Head Office, London, said: Just look after them, give them whatever they want, their influence is important to expanding our business. Poor Cowper! He was a top man, badly hamstrung by influential Directors here, and in London. Well, tomorrow must surely reveal at least some answers. Maybe he should simply do what he had been asked to, as best he could, with or without the background he so desperately felt he needed.

“Well, it’s only Monday,” he muttered to himself, “let’s see what the rest of the week reveals.” And with that Sharp decided it was time for bed.

Much later, on the edge of sleep, Sharp heard the trail bike return, the scrunch of foot-steps on gravel, and moments later Tracey padding along the verandah to her room on the other side of the bathroom he had passed with Mary that morning. 'Sweet dreams girl', he thought.