

Not Dead Yet

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„Bloody and deceitful men shall not live out half their days.”

Psalm 55:23.

Prologue

Pedro Garcia watched Hector Morales and Tony Thompson mix lactose into the mound of cocaine on his glass-topped dining table. They were stretching eight kilos of *muestra*-quality coke to ten, though Garcia would still tell his buyers it was pure: the fuckers were too dumb to tell the difference.

Both men wore plastic aprons, surgical gloves and paper masks to filter out coke dust. An Ohaus gram-scale and large pile of polyurethane sandwich bags sat on the table so they could divide the coke into 50- and 100-gram packs.

Garcia had supervised this operation many times, but still felt nervous. He hated being close to the *perdica*. If the cops bugged his phone or got a pal to betray him, a smart lawyer might get him off the hook. They caught him with the product, he was totally fucked. But he had to be there to make sure Thompson and Morales didn't skim off any coke. They were amigos, but he wouldn't trust his own mother with that much product.

At least, if the police raided the apartment, the steel-reinforced front door would take at least two minutes to break down. Plenty of time to flush away the coke. He also had a nine-mill Glock tucked behind his belt.

Thompson put down his plastic mixing spoon and turned to Garcia. "Gotta take a piss," he said through his mask.

Garcia looked at Thompson's hands to make sure they were empty. Didn't want him slipping coke down his socks or up his *culo*. "OK, don't be long".

Thompson headed up the hallway, while Morales kept working.

Garcia stared out the window at the glittering surface of Sydney Harbour and daydreamed about how much he'd make from this shipment. His main buyers would gobble it up. In a couple of days he'd make a couple of mill. Then he'd fly to Bangkok, get high as a kite and chase *puta* up and down Pat Pong Road.

Footsteps in the hallway. Sounded like more than one person. His nerves sizzled. *Mierda*.

Thompson emerged, no mask, holding a silenced pistol. Just behind him was another guy—a big bastard with grey hair, hard eyes and a mean mouth—also holding a silenced pistol, very steady.

Dios Mio. They were going to kill him. Fuck.

Without warning, Thompson lifted his pistol and shot Morales twice in the chest. Morales flopped onto the floor, below the poster of Che Guevara.

Garcia's heart was now a big bass drum. Being a drug dealer was dangerous. But he'd always believe *he* would never catch a bullet. He was too smart, too lucky and too fucking handsome to get iced. He had a special deal with God.

This could not be happening.

But it was. Jesus. So fucking unfair. A minute ago he had the world on a string. Now he stared into nothingness.

If he grabbed his pistol, he was dead; if he didn't grab it, he was dead. Whatever he did, he was *dead, dead, dead*.

Anger flared. No begging. Not to these pricks. He'd die *machito*. But his tongue betrayed him. "Please don't shoot me," he sobbed.

Thompson said: "Sorry, Pedro, this is how it's gotta be. Don't move, or this'll hurt."

Garcia wondered why he ever came to Australia, a stupid fucking country far from everyone he loved in Columbia. He fondly remembered the huge cake his mother made for his tenth birthday, and the time his father gave him a new bicycle, a few days before he was gunned down outside their home.

His brain switched to Spanish and his time as an altar boy: "*Ave Maria, piena di grazia, il Signore e con te...*"

He tried to slow down time and ignore the pistol. There would be no bullet, no death.

Thompson shot him in the forehead. Red mist sprayed from the back. The second bullet ploughed into his chest.

Thompson considered emptying the whole clip. But Garcia was a friend. Respect made him only fire twice. That way, he wouldn't feel so bad afterwards.

The older guy said: "What crap did he say at the end?"

"Something wog."

"Yeah, crap."

Both men looked at the mound of sample-quality coke, glistening in sunlight, as if it was a pile of diamonds, which it almost was. The old guy grinned. "Wacko".

Their greed made them love the whole world and each other. But not for long—not long at all.

Chapter 1

"Listen, you moron, man-made global warming's complete garbage. It's a con-job that pointy-headed scientists invented to get more funding."

Gary Maddox sat in the back of his battered van, staring through a one-way glass panel at a street lined with dilapidated houses, broken fences and cracked pavements. A factory nearby pumped out a shitty odour. Even the weather seemed worse than anywhere else in Sydney.

His main focus was a rundown bungalow about thirty metres away. Nine-thirty. Burke usually left home about now.

Gary sipped coffee from a thermos and listened, on his transistor radio, to a shock-jock trade insults with the inane and insane. All the callers were angry, spoke in the same nasty accent and were never wrong.

"Of course the Polar Ice Cap's melting, you drongo. It's made of ice. Ice melts. Nothing weird about that. Look in your whiskey glass the next time you get drunk. You'll work it out."

The caller got feisty: "*You know nothing about global warming—you're just a blow-hard.*"

"How dare you. If you can't be civil, I'm going to cut you off. Goodbye and good riddance."

The shock-jock ditched the caller and started spruiking a toilet cleanser. Gary loved the show's energy and liked to see what was floating in the sewers beneath society.

Burke opened his front door and shuffled down a cracked pebble-crete pathway. Gary noted the time on a pad.

Burke was in his mid-thirties, slab-faced, with big shoulders and ropey arms. He claimed he hurt his back on a building site and was permanently disabled. The insurance company didn't believe him. Its solicitor employed Gary to perform "covert optical surveillance". So far, Burke's most strenuous activity was opening his mailbox.

Burke stepped through his missing front-gate onto the pavement and turned left. Gary picked up a gym bag with a concealed digital camera, stepped from the van and followed at a discreet distance.

Burke followed his usual routine. First he bought a tabloid newspaper at a kiosk and read it on a park bench. Then he drifted into a pub and downed half-a-dozen beers while vacantly staring at sport on the TV, talking to no-one. Mid-afternoon, he bought some sausages at a butcher's shop and trudged home.

A shit life - if it was a life at all! The only time Burke looked animated was when he saw a sexy woman. His eyes slithered all over her.

After a week of surveillance, Gary felt a familiar paranoia. Maybe Burke's solicitor had warned him to expect surveillance. Or maybe he noticed Gary lurking about. Had Gary been careless? Did he use the same van too often? Had he gone from watcher to watched? Burke looked too dumb to smell a rat. Or maybe that was a ruse and he was laughing up his sleeve. Shit.

Gary told himself to calm down. Such jitters were normal about now. He hadn't been spotted. If he was patient, Burke would make a mistake. Guaranteed.

Gary lived in a three-storey apartment block about two hundred metres from Bondi Beach. It was a red-brick eye-sore marooned in the middle of a bitumen car park. Looked like a factory with balconies. Yet the owner had the balls to call it *Belgravia Mews*.

The furniture in his living-room looked like the left-overs at a jumble sale: a red nuga-hyde sofa, green-laminate dining table and rickety sideboard all sat on a diseased yellow carpet. The cathode-ray TV looked prehistoric.

He'd just thrown his jacket onto the sofa when his doorbell rang. Outside stood a tall, slender woman wearing a sloppy-joe and jeans.

Robyn Parsons moved into the apartment below about six months ago and announced her presence with a series of orgasmic screams that woke him with a hard-on. Too bad they were in separate apartments.

He soon discovered she was in a tempestuous relationship with an Italian real estate agent called Rocky. Most evenings they yelled at each other for about an hour before making high-decibel love. It sounded more like torture than sex.

A month ago, she knocked on Gary's door, crying bitterly, and announced that Rocky had dumped her for another woman. He took her down to a local pub and

listened with frozen sincerity while she unburdened her soul. Because he didn't nod off, she kept saying he was the nicest man she'd ever met.

After that, she kept knocking on his door for a chat. Usually, they watched TV and downed a bottle of white. He was obviously in her cross-hairs. The next move was up to him.

He hadn't been in a serious relationship for a long time. When he worked undercover, he had no chance, and all his dates after that were disasters. If the women weren't crazy when he met them, they flipped soon afterwards. He also got tired of having to explain all his jokes. Better to watch TV or read a book.

Then Robyn jolted his complacency. She was seriously good-looking and quite amusing, in a quirky way. But he had doubts. Her relationship with Rocky was dark and volatile, and she seemed insecure and demanding. True, she'd calmed down and seemed much happier. But he hadn't adjusted to the new Robyn and wasn't sure she would stay.

Standing on his doorstep, holding a plastic bag, she said: "Hi Gary, I was hoping you'd turn up. Going to invite me in for a drink?"

He was tired and just wanted to lie on his sofa and watch crap TV. But he couldn't refuse her. "Of course. You'll find some beers in the fridge."

"Great."

She strolled into his kitchen, returned with two beers and handed one to him. They sat on the sofa.

He said: "How's your job hunting going?"

Robyn had worked as a bookkeeper until the real estate business she worked for went bust. "Not good. If things don't improve, I'll have to sell my body."

"If you do, let me know."

She raised an eyebrow. "I will. How was your day?"

She knew he was a private investigator and thought that very glamorous, though he often tried to persuade her it wasn't.

He smiled: "Well, let me see: I rescued a woman in distress, located some lost treasure and shot a couple of guys. Apart from that, it was pretty boring."

She giggled. "You shot some guys? I hope they deserved it."

"Of course they did. They were low-life scum - a waste of good bullets."

"Good. And what else did you do?"

"You mean, bread-and-butter work?"

"Yes."

Gary told her about his surveillance of Burke.

She said: "Maybe he's really got a bad back."

"If he has, you can cut off my legs and call me 'Shorty'."

"How come you're so sure?"

"I used to be a cop: I know when people are lying or faking. It's a sixth sense you develop."

She leaned forward eagerly. "Maybe, one day, you'll let me go to work with you. I won't get in the way, I promise. I might even be able to help. Please, I need some adventure."

Her offer planted a vague idea in his mind that refused to blossom. "Maybe you can. I'll think about it."

Her eyes gleamed. "Good. So, you want to watch some TV?"

"Sure."

She picked up the remote control and turned on the television. A commercial appeared on the screen.

She glanced back at Gary. "You know, you've never told me why you stopped being a cop."

"I haven't, have I?"

She hesitated. "No. You want to tell me now?"

Gary frowned. "No."

"Why not?"

"It don't want to talk about it."

A shrug. "Fair enough. Now, what are we going to watch? You decide."

He seized the remote and started channel-surfing.

She reached into her plastic bag. "I hope you don't mind; I've got some crocheting to do."

He suppressed a sigh. While he was dithering, they seemed to have skipped sex and gone straight to marriage. That made him feel very, very old.

Chapter 2

The next morning, instead of watching Burke again, Gary went to his office to keep his business ticking over. The office was a couple of hundred metres from his apartment, at the top of a flight of concrete stairs between a solicitor's office and an H & R Block franchise. The glass front door said *Bloodhound Investigations*. He already regretted that name, but wouldn't pay a sign-writer to change it.

Inside was a small room with several metal filing cabinets. Behind a solid oak desk with a computer terminal was a long window overlooking the street. On the nearest wall was his framed Private Inquiry Agent's certificate.

He'd been in business for almost a year. At first, most of his work came from other investigators, who gave him odd jobs or sent him their poorest and craziest clients. But as his reputation spread, he started attracting his own poor and crazy clients. Most of his work involved filming workers' compensation claimants, but he also caught thieving employees, recovered stolen goods, located missing persons and shadowed cheating partners. When times were really tough, he worked as a bouncer and process server.

He hung his jacket behind the door and punched the play button on his answering machine. A woman's voice: "Hello, Mr Maddox. My name's Barbara Thompson. I'm calling because you've been recommended. Please call my mobile so I can arrange an appointment. The number is..."

Gary phoned the number. After a couple of rings, a woman answered and identified herself as Barbara Thompson.

"Hello, I'm Gary Maddox, returning your call."

"Thank you. I've got a job for you."

"What sort of job?"

"I don't want to explain over the phone. Can I meet you at your office?"

"Sure. When's convenient?"

"Eleven o'clock?"

"Fine."

Gary hung up, turned on his computer and started typing up accounts. He'd finished a couple when he heard a knock on the door. George Oliveira had a ten o'clock appointment. Gary opened the door. It was him. He shook his hand and sat him down facing his desk.

Oliveira was a small man, in his mid-forties, with thinning hair, a weak chin and large paunch. He owned several Italian restaurants in Leichhardt with a business partner called Robert Zacharias. The restaurants were very successful. But Oliveira suspected Zacharias was stealing food and tickling the till. He employed Gary to set up spy cameras in a restaurant, covering the cash register and kitchen.

So far, the cameras hadn't caught Zacharias stealing anything. But they had caught him fucking Oliveira's wife several times a week. He usually bent her over a kitchen bench and made her scream with ecstasy. It was the dirtiest thing Gary had ever seen.

He wasn't sure whether to tell George about his wife's affair or not. Strictly speaking, he was employed to detect theft, not adultery. But George was paying for the surveillance and surely entitled to all the fruits of that endeavour.

Oliveira said: "How's your surveillance going?"

"I've watched hours and hours of tapes and, so far, haven't caught him stealing."

Oliveira looked disappointed. "You sure?"

"Yep. Maybe I missed something, though I doubt it."

"Well, I suppose you'd better continue, at least for another few weeks."

"Will do. But maybe he isn't stealing anything."

Oliveira shook his head: "Nope, he's up to something."

"How do you know?"

"It's a feeling I've got. I don't trust him."

"Why not?"

Oliveira shrugged. "Hard to say. Sometimes, he just won't look me in the eye."

"Maybe you're imagining that."

"Maybe, but I want you to keep going."

Gary shrugged. "OK."

Oliveira looked uncomfortable. "Umm, there's something else I want to talk about."

"What?"

"I've got another problem: I think my wife is, well, having an affair."

Gary lifted his eyebrows. "Why do you think that?"

"The way she's been acting recently: she's been really happy, which is pretty unusual for her; she's usually a total bitch."

"Maybe you should count your blessings."

"She's also dressing a lot better and she's changed in bed. Usually, she's like a dead fish. Now she's got some new moves." Oliveira leaned forward angrily. "I reckon someone's sticking his dick in a cunt that doesn't belong to him."

Gary had even seen that dick. "Maybe she's just trying to spice up your marriage?"

"Are you kidding? It died ten years ago."

"You got any idea who she might be shagging?"

"Yep. She works for a real estate agent—a real sleazebag. She's always saying nice things about him and he sometimes gives her a lift home."

The poor bastard had added one plus one and got three.

Gary said: "OK. What do you want me to do?"

"If I want her followed, will you do that?"

Gary didn't like matrimonial jobs. But Oliveira paid on time and without complaint, and Gary had all the proof he needed. The job would be a cinch.

Gary said: "Yes, I offer that service."

"Good. I'll think about it and let you know."

"OK. But think hard before you get me to follow your wife. You might find out stuff you don't want to know."

"I understand." Oliveira got to his feet. "Alright, keep up the surveillance and I'll speak to you in a few weeks."

"Will do."

Should he tell Oliveira that his wife was screwing Zacharias? He was still equivocating over that when Oliveira disappeared out the door.

He spent half an hour typing up some more accounts, including one for George Oliveira, and was slipping them into envelopes when he heard another knock on the door. Outside was a woman in her mid-fifties, wearing a navy jacket and skirt. She had a strong jaw, hard mouth and cold eyes. Not to be trifled with.

"Mrs Thompson?"

"Yes."

He introduced himself and led her over to the chair facing his desk. She sat primly, handbag on lap. He dropped into his armchair.

Looking nervous, she said: "Thank you for seeing me. I can't stay long - I've only got an hour off work."

"Where do you work?"

"St Vincent's Hospital. I'm a nurse."

Gary studied her hard features and hoped she wasn't the last woman he ever saw. "On the phone, you said someone recommended me. Who?"

"Mr Frank Calloway. I went to see him first. But when I explained what I wanted, he told me to talk to you."

When Gary left the police force, he spent a year working for Frank Calloway whose firm specialised in surveillance of workers' comp claimants. Frank didn't like assignments that were too difficult or dangerous.

Gary said: "Did he explain why?"

"Yes. Umm, he said you used to work on the drug squad and were just the sort of man I need."

Intrigued, he leaned back in his chair. "OK, what do you want me to do?"

She nervously cleared her throat. "I want you to find out who killed my son."

Gary raised an eyebrow. "How'd he die?"

"He was shot in Darlington, about two months ago. It was in the papers."

She opened her handbag, pulled out a newspaper clipping and pushed it across the desk. Gary leaned forward and studied it. He vaguely recalled glancing at it a few months before.

MAN SHOT DEAD IN STREET

A man was shot dead in Darlinghurst yesterday evening.

Tony Robert Thompson, 27, was shot twice in the chest while standing on the pavement in Lang Street.

According to an eyewitness, the killer ran into an adjoining laneway, got into a blue Ford Sigma and sped away. Police later found the Sigma - earlier reported stolen - abandoned in Redfern.

A police spokesman said the eyewitness did not see the killer's face. However, he had grey hair and wore a dark-blue suit.

When an ambulance arrived on the scene, Mr Thompson was already dead.

The police spokesman said that Homicide detectives have no strong leads. However, they believe Mr Thompson's death was drug-related.

Gary looked up at Barbara Thompson. "Why do the police think your son's death was drug-related?"

She avoided his gaze and chewed her lower lip. "Umm, they claim Tony was a drug dealer."

"What sort of drugs?"

"They mentioned cocaine and ecstasy, and a few others I've forgotten." She nervously pushed back a strand of hair. Her face quivered and sagged.

Gary said: "Did you know he sold drugs?"

She looked down. "I suspected it."

"Why?"

Her jaw trembled and big tears ran down her hard face. Gary automatically pushed a box of tissues towards her.

She took one and dabbed her eyes. "Sorry, this is very difficult for me. I keep wondering if, I'd been a better mum, Tony would still be alive. But it wasn't easy to bring up my kids. My husband left soon after Tony was born. So I had to raise three boys on me own. That was tough."

"I'm sure it was."

"They all ran wild and got into lots of trouble. Tony was the worst. He got expelled from three schools and arrested for shop-lifting when he was sixteen."

"When did you find out he was involved in drugs?"

"When he was about twenty, he got arrested for selling some ecstasy tablets to an undercover cop. A judge gave him three years."

"Where did he do his time?"

"Wagga. When he got out, he promised to go straight. But he never got a job and always had lots of money. So I suspected the worst."

"And so did the police?"

"Yes. Informants told them he was selling drugs."

"Where was he going when he was shot?"

"Don't know. He lived in Potts Point. So he must have gone to Darlinghurst to see someone - probably the killer."

"Was he armed?"

"The police say he had a pistol in a shoulder holster, but never touched it."

And he got shot in the chest. Sounded like he knew—and trusted—the killer.

Gary said: "Do the cops have any good leads?"

"No. They've reached a dead end and are closing their investigation."

Gary wasn't surprised they hadn't found the killer. Drug-related murders were always difficult to solve and got a low priority. The cops probably thought the killer deserved a medal.

Gary leaned forward in his chair. "And you're not satisfied with that?"

Her face grew fierce. "Look Mr Maddox, I know Tony wasn't a good man. But he was my son and didn't deserve to die like that. Nobody does. I want to find out who killed him and make sure he's punished. That's why I need your help."

He couldn't blame her for wanting justice. Tony Thompson sounded like someone only a mother could love. But that was the whole point: she was his mother.

Gary said: "Mrs Thompson, I'd love to help. But I'm sure the police have conducted a thorough investigation. There's no point repeating it, particularly now the trail's cold. You'd be wasting your money."

She leaned forward, looking determined. "I know. That's why I don't want you to repeat what they've done."

Gary looked mystified. "Really? What do you want me to do?"

"Find Tony's girlfriend."

"His what?"

"Girlfriend, Trixie Powell. I bet she knows who killed him."

Gary raised his eyebrows. "Have the police spoken to her?"

"No. She disappeared the same day Tony got killed."

He hunched forward and put his elbows on his desk. "Really? Tell me more."

"According to the cops, they went to Tony's apartment after he got killed and she'd already left. Most of her clothes were gone. So it looks like she packed her bags and ran."

"Why?"

"I'm only guessing. But I reckon she knew who killed Tony and didn't want the same treatment."

"Why do you think that?"

"She lived with Tony for three years. They were very close. She musta known what he was doing and who'd want to kill him; she probably even knew who he went to see in Darlington. That's why she ran away: she's afraid the killer's after her."

"OK. That makes sense. Did the cops try to find her?"

Barbara Thompson snorted. "All they did was put her name in their computer. So, unless she gets arrested for something, they'll never find her."

Gary felt his excitement grow. This job sounded a lot more interesting than the mundane crap he'd been doing recently, and Barbara Thompson looked far more solvent than most of his clients. Still, he didn't want to give her false hope.

He said: "This is a big country, Mrs Thompson. There are lots of places to hide. If Trixie doesn't want to be found, she'll be hard to locate."

"I know. That's why I've come to you. Mr Calloway said you're very resourceful. He said you were on the drug squad, so you know the scene."

He leaned forward. "OK. Let's assume I look for Trixie and I find her. Why would she talk to me?"

"I don't want her to talk to you. I know her, and Tony was my son, so she'll probably talk to me. And if she won't, well, at least I tried."

"OK. But, if we find out who killed your son, it might not be a pretty story. You might find out stuff about him you don't want to know. Sometimes, we've got more to fear from the past than the future."

"Mr Maddox, Tony was my son, so I don't care what he did. I just want to find his killer, understand? I want the bastard to pay; I want justice." She looked ready to execute the guy herself.

"OK. But this won't be cheap. Looking for people can take a lot of time."

"I'm not poor. I've worked hard all my life and saved quite a bit. I can pay your fees."

"Really? I charge \$500 a day plus expenses. Also, for a job like this I expect \$10,000 up front."

Gary waited for her to blanch. She didn't even bat a heavily lacquered eyelash—just wrote out a cheque for \$10,000 and handed it over.

She said: "That should get you started. I'll spend \$20,000 to find Trixie. And, if you find her, you'll get a \$5,000 bonus."

Gary thought about the huge amount of work he *didn't* have and decided to tilt at windmills for this woman. He casually slipped the cheque into the top drawer of his desk. "Mrs Thompson, you have a deal."

"Good."

"Do you have a photo of Trixie?"

"Yes." Barbara Thompson reached into her handbag, took out a photograph and handed it over. "I took it last Christmas, when they came over to my house for lunch."

Trixie Powell looked quite attractive, with frizzy blonde hair, a delicate face and large unstable eyes. Several deep lines suggested she was a druggie of some sort.

Gary put the photo on his desk. "So tell me. What sort of woman has a name like Trixie?"

Barbara Thompson giggled. "A real weirdo."

After his new client left, Gary strolled around to the post office and mailed off the accounts he'd just prepared. Then he ducked into to the office of *Fraser & Co, Solicitors & Attorneys*. The firm's principal, Terry Fraser, employed about half-a-dozen lawyers who were always frantically doing whatever they did.

He told the receptionist he wanted to see her boss. Before she could answer, Terry emerged from his office and steamed towards them. He was in his early fifties, with silvery hair, chubby features and a prosperous gut.

Gary first met Terry when Terry was a macho cop on the Armed Robbery Squad. Then Terry realised that the scum-bag lawyers acting for guys he arrested made a lot more money than him with far less risk. So he got a law degree. Now he was wealthier, fatter and a lot more stressed. It was tough having assets he could lose.

He once traded shots with a bank robber in a city street. Now he panicked every time the stock market got the jitters.

Terry often employed Gary to do workers' comp surveillance—like the Burke job—or serve legal process. He said: "Hello Gary, follow me."

He led Gary down a short hallway into an office with a wide mahogany desk and huge leather couch on a parquet floor. A whole wall was festooned with licences, commendations and certificates, including one for swimming 50 metres freestyle at the age of six.

Behind the desk was a large photograph of Terry during his glory days on the Armed Robbery Squad, leading a handcuffed bank robber into court. It told clients that Terry always got his man.

As Gary sat down, he noticed some changes. On a small bookshelf behind to the desk were several self-help books: Wayne Dyer, Anthony Robbins, Depat Chopra, Bruce Dirk. Mellow music—played on a sitar, flute and tambourine—softened the air. Terry's life had obviously taken a new direction.

Gary said: "What's the music?"

"Indian stuff. It's to helps me meditate."

"What?"

"Meditate. I've been reading Bruce Dirk. Have you heard of him? American guy. Says that through meditation you can connect with your Higher Self and find peace and happiness."

"Why the hell do you need to find peace and happiness?"

"Because I'm under intense pressure. Every time I look at my payroll ledger, I want to cry. Then I look at my debtors' ledger and feel even worse."

Jesus. Terry used to bounce hardened crims off the walls of interrogation rooms. He once got a bank robber to lay down his shottie without drawing his pistol. Now he worried about paying a few lousy bills.

"Listen, Terry, if you really want peace of mind you should give away all your worldly possessions—including this business—and live in an ashram."

Terry leaned back in his chair and sucked his teeth. "That is not a constructive suggestion. Now, why are you here? How's the Burke surveillance going?"

"Not great. Burke's almost too lazy to breath."

"Well, keep after him. He's claiming big bickies; the insurance company really wants to nail him."

"Sure thing."

Terry sighed, reached behind him and turned off the music. "I need a break. Let's go to Angelo's for a cup of coffee."

"Sure. But only if you leave your mobile here."

Their last few times they were in *Angelo's*, Terry spent most of the time on his mobile phone. Gary was sick of it.

Terry frowned. "What if a client's got an urgent problem?"

"He can fix it himself."

Terry grimaced. "I feel sorta naked without my mobile."

"I don't care. It's fucking bad manners. Didn't your mother ever tell you that? It also stops you finding your Higher Self."

Terry sorrowfully slipped his mobile into a desk drawer. "I hope you appreciate the sacrifice I'm making."

Angelo's cafe had black walls, polished floorboards, and metal tables and chairs. It was crowded with mobile-toting businessmen, trophy wives, day-trippers, Nordic backpackers, struggling writers, wannabe film-makers and other middle-class bohemians.

Sitting near the door were two catwalk models called Rose and Ivy, drinking soy lattes, nibbling iceberg lettuce and talking drivel to fill their empty days. Gary had stuck his head into their chatter a few times and almost died of boredom.

Near them was a gay couple, Jeff and Rick, wearing matching fishnet singlets, leather pants and suntans, as if nobody had told them gay chic was passé. They argued a lot, because Jeff wasn't even sure he was gay and they were trying to get a camp musical off the ground. Gary nodded in their direction and they waved back.

He also passed two muscular men in dark suits and vaguely recalled arresting one when he was on the Narcotics Strikeforce. Was the guy still dealing? Their eyes met and the guy glanced away. Yep, still dealing.

Gary and Terry sat at a table near the kitchen. Their usual waiter took their usual order.

As he departed, Terry said: "How's business?"

"OK. Just talked to a woman who wants me to find out who topped her coke-dealing son. That means finding his kooky girlfriend."

"Sounds interesting. Tell me more."

Gary described his conference with Barbara Thompson.

When he'd finished, Terry whistled. "Wow. Sounds like the killer was a real pro."

"Agree."

"Who deserves a vote of thanks for rubbing out such a low-life."

"You approve of what he did?"

Terry leaned forward aggressively. "Bet your arse."

"But you're a lawyer. What about due process and all that shit?"

Terry frowned. "Look, because I'm a lawyer I *know* the legal system doesn't work. Real bad guys never get punished. That's why citizens should take the law into their own hands. I believe in vigilante justice—an eye-for-an-eye. I know I'm not supposed to talk like that, but I don't give a fuck. That's how it is."

Hard to believe that, a few minutes ago, Terry was talking about finding his Higher Self. He obviously had a long way to go.

Gary said: "Well, Barbara Thompson doesn't want to give the killer a hug - she wants revenge. Mothers are amazing, aren't they? Doesn't matter how awful their kids are, they still love them."

Terry sighed. "I know. That's why my life's a mess right now. Margaret's going through hell because of Alison."

Terry had a chequered marital history. His first wife was an alcoholic and his second a shopaholic. Despite that, he recently married Margaret, who already had two children: Alison, thirteen, and Angus, nine.

Gary said: "What's happened?"

"Alison recently got sick of living with us and ran off to stay with her dad, in Gosford."

"What's he like?"

"A prick. Doesn't even like Alison. Just using her to hurt Margaret."

"Can't you get Alison back? I thought Margaret got custody."

"She did. But that doesn't mean much, because Alison's a teenager. Judges don't enforce custody orders against teenagers. No point: the little buggers will do whatever the hell they want."

"Has Margaret tried to get her back?"

Terry rolled his eyes and sighed. "Of course. Keeps ringing up the little brat and begging her to return."

"That hasn't worked?"

"Of course not. She's just giving her even more power: the kid knows she's got her mum over a barrel and loves all the attention."

"What should Margaret do?"

"For a start, stop begging Alison to come back. In fact, she should tell her to stay with her dad. When the kid realises she's going to be stuck with her dead-shit dad in the boondocks, she'll race home."

"Margaret won't take your advice?"

"Of course not. So, at the moment, a spoilt thirteen-year-old is ruining our lives. Take my advice: don't have any kids—they cause nothing but pain."

The waiter put a couple of cappuccinos and friands in front of them. Terry poured a satchel of sugar into his cup. "Anyway, enough of my problems. I hope your new client paid in advance."

"Of course."

"Good. I always demand money upfront. I tell my clients that the presumption of innocence doesn't start until they've put money in my trust account."

"And it ends when the money runs out?"

"Of course. You've studied law, have you?"

Chapter 3

Gary left *Angelo's* and went to his bank to get a special clearance of Barbara Thompson's cheque. As the money slid into his account, he promoted the search for Trixie Powell to the top of his agenda.

Barbara Thompson had given him the key to her son's apartment in Potts Point. He drove over there and caught a lift to the top floor of an expensive four-storey block.

While fishing around in his pocket for the key, he noticed the door was slightly ajar and jamb splintered. Shit. Barbara Thompson didn't mention a break-in. So it must have happened recently. Who'd have broken in? A burglar who discovered the apartment was vacant? Someone looking for Trixie? Was the intruder still inside?

Gary wasn't armed. But curiosity overruled caution. He pushed open the door and slipped into a large living area with a high ornate ceiling and polished pine floor. Scattered around the room were white leather couches, art deco lamps and a black onyx coffee table. The far wall had a long window overlooking the harbour. All quite tasteful. They obviously paid a decorator who knew what he was doing.

Everything looked neat and tidy. No signs of an intruder.

Gary eased over to the marble fireplace, picked up a metal poker for protection and slowly prowled around the apartment, looking for a trespasser. It took him twenty minutes to search all the rooms and encounter no one.

Back in the living area, he looked for clues where Trixie went. Barbara Thompson knew little about her background, but suspected Trixie was a hooker before teaming up with her son. She said Trixie was heavily into New Age beliefs. So Gary wasn't surprised to find the small corner bookcase was stuffed with books on aromatherapy, animism, shamanism, witchcraft, numerology, astrology and naturopathy.

Further, in the large kitchen the cupboards and fridge were stuffed with seaweed, garlic, ginger, cheese and yoghurt, and a variety of herbal teas. He went into the main bedroom. On top of the dresser were numerous bottles of oil: lavender, peppermint, chamomile, eucalyptus, yarrow, camphor.

The wardrobe was almost empty, except for women's shoes and handbags strewn across the bottom. Gary rummaged through the handbags, finding some spare change and a few old ATM receipts that he slipped into the back pocket of his jeans.

Finally, he wandered back into the living area and stared out over the harbour. Almost dark. The dancing lights of a Manly ferry passed in front of Fort Denison.

These days, it was hard to disappear completely. Almost everyone left an electronic trail. He had to find Trixie's.

When he became a private investigator, he asked a colleague to recommend a good computer hacker.

The colleague said: "Information broker, mate. We call them information brokers."

"OK. Know a good one?"

"The best are hot-shot kids still in high school. Smart, enthusiastic and bloody cheap. But using them is kind of unethical. So I use a young guy called Vincent Drew. He's a dickhead and charges a bit, but knows what he's doing. Let me give you his phone number."

Gary then telephoned Drew and arranged to meet him at his run-down terrace in Redfern. Like most computer nerds, he looked nerdy. He was a scrawny guy with frizzy hair, pimples, discoloured teeth and a far-off expression. Without embarrassment, he introduced himself as "Lone Wolf".

His geeky appearance wasn't a professional mask. Gary soon discovered he had almost no social interface. He'd stared too long into a computer screen and it had stared back into him. His eyes kept shifting and he fidgeted with his hands.

Lone Weirdo, more like it.

Drew led Gary into a dusty lounge room jumbled with cheap furniture. "You used to be a cop, huh?"

"How do you know?"

"After you called, I looked you up on-line." Drew outlined Gary's police career, credit history and present financial commitments. "You're usually late paying the rent. That's OK. So am I."

"You can access the police computer system?"

"Most of it. Still a few areas I haven't cracked. But I will. For instance, I haven't found out why you resigned from the force. Want to tell me?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"You don't need to know."

A shrug. "OK."

"What other databases can you access?"

"You name it: banks, credit card companies, telcos, data info companies, airlines..."

"Are those databases hard to crack?"

"Not if you know what you're doing. Most companies don't really care if people like me access information about their clients—they just don't want the clients to know that's happening."

"And the clients don't usually know?"

A smile. "I don't tell them."

"Any chance you'll get caught?"

"Nope. Before I access anyone's system, I use a couple of VPNs to bounce my signals around the world. Don't worry. The Lone Wolf stays in the shadows."

Gary shook his head. "Amazing."

Drew smiled. "Listen, privacy is dead. There are no secrets left. You leave an electronic trail from birth to death, and it sits around waiting to be accessed."

After that, Gary often used Drew to check criminal histories or credit card records. Though the guy never failed, he wasn't easy to deal with. He claimed to have an IQ of 160, but needed a lot of stroking.

Gary phoned him from Tony Thompson's apartment.

A tired voice answered: "Hi, Lone Wolf here."

"Wolfie, this is Gary Maddox. How're you going?"

"Tired man. Been up all night chatting on the internet to a chick in China. She wants to come out here and marry me. She sent me her photo. What a babe."

"Hah. I bet she's a grandmother. Don't be stupid."

A love-sick sigh. "You're probably right, man. What do ya want?"

"I've got a job for you."

"What?"

"To find a woman called Tracey Powell, a.k.a Trixie Powell. Her boyfriend was murdered a couple of months ago and she's disappeared without a trace. I want to find out where she's gone."

"Maybe she's dead."

"Maybe. But I think she's alive and kicking."

"Where do you want me to start looking?"

Gary took the ATM slips from his back pocket. "She's got an account at the Metropolitan Bank. Find out if she's made any withdrawals during the last few months and where from."

"That's a tough one man. The Metro's changed its access codes. Hard to get inside."

"Wolfie, I'm very disappointed. I thought you were the best. You telling me I was wrong?"

"No, no. You were right. It'll just take a bit longer than usual, and cost a bit more."

"Don't worry, I'll pay. Maybe she's also collecting unemployment benefits or some other sort of welfare payment. Have a look in the Department of Social Security's system. Oh, and find out if she's been admitted to any hospitals recently, or made any Medicare claims."

"Sure. That'll take a while. You're not my only client."

"I know. But I'm the only one who respects your talent."

"Hah. Bullshit. I'll do my best."

Gary re-holstered his mobile and left the apartment.

Chapter 4

Detective Sergeant Michael Stubbs headed the Homicide Squad investigation into Tony Thompson's death. The next morning, Gary called him and explained that Barbara Thompson had employed Gary to find her son's killer.

Stubbs sounded unhappy. "Is she claiming we haven't done our job properly? We've been very thorough - explored every lead."

"I'm sure you have. That's why she doesn't want me to repeat your investigation. She just wants me to find Trixie Powell, because she thinks Trixie can identify the killer."

"Oh? Then what do you want from me?"

"I want to have a brief chat so you can tell me what you've found out and what you've done to find Trixie."

"I think that would be a waste of time."

"I'm sure you're right. But I've got a job to do and I'd appreciate some help. You should see this as a public relations exercise: a chance to humour Mrs Thompson. Otherwise, she might get angry and complain about your investigation."

"She's got no grounds to complain."

"I know. But if you don't co-operate, she might think you're hiding something. Why not talk to me and keep her happy?"

A long pause. "Alright. I can spare half an hour, no more. When do you want to talk?"

"Three o'clock?"

"OK."

Police Headquarters was near the southern tip of Hyde Park, well away from the harbour at the brown-suit end of town. Just before 3 p.m., Gary told the constable on duty he had an appointment to see Stubbs. The constable phoned and announced Gary's arrival.

A few minutes later, the lift doors opened and a tall man with a large gnarled nose and receding chin emerged. He wore a tired blue suit with heavy creases and fraying cuffs, which made him a walking fashion crime scene.

A dull expression and limp handshake. "Hello, I'm Detective Sergeant Stubbs. Follow me."

They got into a lift and travelled up to the 15th floor, dead air between them.

The Homicide Squad occupied a large cubicle farm with glass-walled offices around the sides. Lots of detectives were moving about wearing .38s in shoulder-holsters.

Stubbs led Gary into an office with a white-Formica desk. Grey filing cabinets lined the walls. A pale man in his early thirties was already seated. Thinning blond hair garnished his mottled pate.

Stubbs said: "Mr Maddox, this is Detective Constable McGrath. He's been helping me with the Thompson investigation. I've asked him to sit in on this chat."

McGrath was obviously there to corroborate any version of the meeting Stubbs later wanted to propound. After giving Gary a suspicious look, he half-rose to shake hands. Gary braced for a bad cop, bad cop routine.

Stubbs sat behind his desk and Gary dropped into a chair next to McGrath.

Stubbs said: "Your name sounds familiar. You related to George Maddox?"

The question didn't surprise Gary. His father had a stellar career in the force until he retired five years ago. "Yes, my dad."

"Really? Never met him. But he had a big reputation. Everybody said he should have made Commissioner."

Gary smiled. "So did he."

No laugh. "I bet. You were a cop too, right?"

"Yes. For eleven years—last five on the Narcotics Strikeforce."

"Working UC?"

"Yes."

"Ever come across Tony Thompson?"

"No, didn't have the pleasure. What do you know about him?"

"Well, whoever killed him was just taking out the garbage: guy was a total scumbag. Our intel is that he sold lots of clubber drugs—mostly coke and speed—around the Eastern Suburbs."

"Who were his customers?"

"Barmen, bouncers, DJs, brothel-owners, rave organisers - even a few celebs."

"Any you want to name?"

"No."

"Who supplied him?"

"We don't know."

"Was he a PI?"

"Don't think so. I mean, he's not on the Register of Informants, and nobody in the Narcotics Strikeforce has claimed him."

That didn't mean much. Drug cops never put their good informants on the register. "OK. Let's talk about the day he got shot. Any idea what he was doing in Darlinghurst?"

"No. But we reckon he went there to meet someone—probably the killer."

"He was carrying a pistol right, and didn't even get it out?"

"Correct."

"So he probably knew—and trusted—the killer?"

"Looks like it."

"But nobody got a good look at the guy?"

"Correct. We've only got one eyewitness and the killer was wearing dark glasses. But one thing's clear: the killer stayed very calm; obviously a pro."

"What about the getaway car? Did you find that?"

"Yep, a couple of suburbs over. It was stolen the day before. I'm afraid the killer left no prints or DNA on it."

"And the murder weapon—found that?"

"Nope. But Forensics says the bullets came from a nine-mill."

"OK. Now tell me about Thompson's girlfriend, Trixie Powell? I understand she disappeared on the same day he was killed. You looked for her?"

"Yes. But she's dropped off the face of the earth. We've logged her name into COPS. So, if she's picked up for any reason, we'll find out. Until that happens, there's nothing we can do."

"What about her family? Spoken to them?"

"Her father's dead. But we spoke to her mother. Claims she's got no idea where Trixie's gone."

"Do you believe her?"

Stubbs said: "No. I think she knows more than she's saying. But I can't prove that."

"Why do you think Trixie disappeared?"

"Isn't that obvious? She thinks she's next in line for the chop."

"You think she knows who killed her boyfriend?"

"Yep. She's no babe in the woods: she was a hooker and has a conviction for cocaine possess. She probably helped Tony sell his shit and knew who his enemies were."

"How much longer will you continue your investigation?"

"Not long. McGrath here is reviewing the file, to see if we've missed anything. Then we'll put it to bed."

Gary wasn't surprised they were wrapping it up so fast. There was no pressure from the police brass or media to solve the murder of a drug-dealer.

Gary said: "You're giving up pretty quick, aren't you?"

"Look, we've done our best. But it's damn hard to solve these sorts of murders. Drug dealers are always running into bullets and we never find out why. Maybe he ripped off the wrong guy, welched on a debt or got fingered as a snitch. We'll probably never know." Stubbs sounded surprisingly embarrassed about his lack of success.

Gary said: "OK, thanks for your help."

Stubbs leaned forward and stared hard. "You know, if your client really wants to blame someone for her son's death, she should look in the mirror."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, if there was a competition to find the World's Lousiest Mum, she'd get first prize. She told you about her other two sons?"

"No."

"The oldest, Clint, isn't too bad. He's a car mechanic and stays out of trouble. But the next oldest, Alex, is a first-class scumbag: he's twice done time for armed robbery. And Tony, of course, sold drugs for a living. So two of her kids turned out to be total dead-shits."

"So what?"

"Being a cop's taught me that arseholes beget arseholes. Always have, always will. It's that simple."

Though Gary agreed with him, he felt obliged to defend his client. After all, she was paying his bills. Stubbs was also easy to dislike. He said: "I can understand why you want to blame her for her son's death."

Stubbs looked startled. "What do you mean?"

"You haven't found the killer. So, to make yourself feel better, you blame her. Some would call that pretty cheap."

Stubbs looked like he'd been slapped. His eyes narrowed. "Fuck you."

Gary got to his feet. "Go on, poke your tongue out—it'll make you feel better."

"Piss off."

"I take it this meeting is over?"

"Yeah, get out of here."

"Thanks for your help." Gary turned to go.

"Hey Maddox, just remember this: if you find Trixie Powell, or find out anything about Tony Thompson's death, you'd better tell me, understand? You don't, I'll come down on you like a tonne of bricks."

Gary smiled. "Did you get that from a movie?"

Stubbs' face detonated. He stood and pointed at the door. "Get the fuck out of here."

Gary hoped he didn't need any more help from Stubbs, because it would not be forthcoming.

As Gary drove back to his office, he got a call from Vincent Drew a.k.a. Lone Wolf.

Gary said: "Yes, Wolfie, what's cooking?"

"I've been all over the net looking for this chick. Not much luck. I got into the Metro Bank's system and looked around. She's got an account alright. Balance of \$125. Hasn't been touched for months."

"No ATM withdrawals?"

"Nope."

"No Eftpos?"

"Nope."

"OK. Where else did you look?"

"Like you asked, I checked to see if she's getting any welfare payments or made any Medicare claims. Nothing doing."

"OK. Anything else?"

"Yep. I checked Facebook and MySpace. Nada. Also looked to see if she's got any credit cards."

"And?"

"Got a Mastercard with about \$700 in credit, but hasn't used it for about three months. Weird, huh? This chick has really disappeared into thin air—gone right off-grid. Maybe someone's crashed her hard drive, if you know what I mean. Total shut-down."

That looked like a real possibility.

Chapter 5

Gary hadn't followed Mick Burke for several days. Driving home from Potts Point, he pondered how to show the bastard was a malingerer. While sitting at some traffic lights, inspiration struck like chained lightning. The genius hiding in his brain had finally popped out. He started giggling and only stopped when the cars behind him started beeping.

It was already dark when he parked under his apartment block. He climbed the stairs and knocked on Robyn Parsons' door. She opened it and looked surprised. "Hi".

"Hi. Ah, do you still want to help me, one day, with the surveillance I was talking about?"

Her eyes gleamed. "Of course, I'd love to. What do you want me to do?"

It took Gary about five minutes to explain his plan. By the time he'd finished, she looked dubious.

"I don't know," she said, biting her lip.

"Of course, you'd be paid for your efforts."

"How much?"

"Oh \$500, in cash."

Her unemployed eyes glittered and she nodded determinedly. "OK. Count me in. When do you want to do this?"

"Tomorrow morning?"

"Fine. So, umm, what do you want me to wear?"

"Whatever you like, but not much."

Gary woke the next morning feeling oddly pleased and couldn't understand why, until he realised he'd be spending the day with Robyn. Christ, did he like her that much? He was on dangerous ground. But this was no time to analyse his feelings or get distracted. He had a job to do. Stay focused. Be professional.

That attitude lasted for fifteen minutes, until Robyn knocked on his door and he saw how little she was wearing: a green halter-top and a ridiculously short skirt, with plenty of midriff on display. No hint of mystery there. Her legs were long, firm and fantastic.

She looked nervous. "What do you think? Am I dressed alright?"

He dragged his incredibly heavy eyes up from her legs to her cleavage, and finally looked her in the eye. "Yes, just right."

"You think your plan will work?"

"My confidence is growing."

They got into his battered Nissan Pulsar. He drove over to Burke's house and parked out the front. They both got out. Gary stuck a key into the valve of the curb-side rear tyre. Air hissed out.

He popped open the boot and tossed the spare wheel, jack and tyre wrench onto the grassy verge. He slid the jack under the rear axle and raised it until the flat tyre hung in the air.

He turned to Robyn. "OK, you're in charge. You know what to do?"

She looked nervous. "Yep. How long do you think I'll have to wait?"

"Not long. He usually leaves home at about nine-thirty."

"OK. Where'll you be?"

"Behind that tree." Gary pointed to a large eucalypt about thirty metres down the street. "Don't worry, if there's any trouble, I'll come running."

"Don't fall asleep."

"I won't."

He reached into the car boot and took out a gym bag containing a video camera with telephoto lens. Then he strolled down the street and stood behind the eucalypt. Through the lens he saw Robyn already trying to change the tyre, without success.

Ten minutes later, Burke emerged from his bungalow and Gary started filming. Halfway down his pebble-crete pathway, Burke saw Robyn bent over, trying to unscrew a wheel-nut, and actually licked his lips.

Robyn glanced over her shoulder and saw him. She stood and forlornly tried to pull down her skirt.

Gary wondered who was hornier: Burke or himself.

Robyn and Burke started talking. She kept pointing towards the flat tyre, looking helpless. Gary hoped she wasn't overacting. But Burke's thought processes all passed through his groin. He puffed out his chest, picked up the wrench and started unscrewing wheel-nuts with robotic power. In less than five minutes, he'd removed the flat tyre and replaced it with the spare. Then he scooped up the flat and nonchalantly slung it into the boot like a discus. He was like a one-man Formula One pit crew.

He closed the boot and leered at Robyn.

Gary muttered to himself: "That's right, you frickin' goose—smile for the camera."

Burke now had a hand on Robyn's arm and was trying to guide her towards his house. She shrugged him off and shook her head.

Gary slipped the camera into the gym bag and sauntered along the pavement. Burke was still trying to persuade Robyn to enter his house.

Gary and Robyn hadn't prepared for this situation. He hoped she could improvise. "Hi Robyn, fancy meeting you here."

Their heads spun around. Burke looked puzzled and Robyn relieved.

She took his cue. "Hello Gary, you live around here?"

"Yep. Just around the corner. What're you doing here?"

"I was on my way to work and got a flat. This kind gentleman changed it for me."

Gary turned to Burke, whose eyebrows had joined like magnets above the bridge of his nose. This didn't compute.

"Very decent of you," Gary said affably.

Burke grunted.

Robyn said: "Well, I'd better get to work."

"I'll come with you," Gary said quickly.

Before Burke could say anything, Gary slipped into the car and started the engine. Robyn climbed in beside him.

Gary stomped on the accelerator, leaving Burke with nothing to show for his trouble except a fast disappearing bulge in his pants.

Chapter 6

Five minutes later, Robyn was still tripping on adrenalin. "God, that was the most exciting thing I've ever done."

"Why did Burke want you to go into his house?"

"To make me a cup of tea. But I bet he wanted a lot more than that. What a creep. Do you think he's worked out what really happened?"

"Yes, unless he's as dumb as plankton, which is possible."

"What'll happen to the film you took?"

"It'll be used in court."

"How?"

"Well, if Burke's case goes ahead—which I doubt—he'll be cross-examined along the following lines: 'Mr Burke, can you use a shovel?' No. 'Can you push a wheelbarrow?' No. 'Can you change a car tyre?' No. 'Are you sure about that Mr Burke?' Yes. Then the jury will be shown my film. And that will be it: game, set and match."

"I almost feel sorry for him."

"Don't. The poor bastard will just have to work for a living."

"Have you played this trick before?"

"Not this one."

She laughed. "You mean you've played others?"

"Yes."

"Like what?"

He told her about the time he followed a worker's comp claimant into a gym and they competed to see who could bench-press the most. "We even made a small wager. Eventually, he yelled: 'I win—I bench pressed 10 kilos more than you.' And I said: 'No, I win, because I work for the insurance company and this has all been filmed'."

Robyn laughed. "You're kidding, right?"

"No. Boy he was pissed—tried to clobber me with a barbell."

"I'm not surprised. What other tricks have you played?"

"Oh, I recently got a Rottweiler to attack a guy in a wheelchair."

An uncertain laugh. "You're serious?"

"Yes."

He explained how, a couple of months ago, he did surveillance of a rugby player called Dennis Oakley who fractured his spine in a scrum and claimed to be a paraplegic. Eventually, while Oakley was out in his wheelchair, Gary sooled a Rottweiler onto him. As the ferocious pooch bounded forward, Oakley leapt up and hurdled the nearest fence.

Robyn laughed hard. "You're making that up, right?"

"No, I've got it all on film. It's my prize possession."

"I think you're a very dangerous man. Do you sometimes find people really are injured?"

"Sometimes, though surveillance is expensive, so insurance companies are usually pretty sure someone's faking before they use me."

"What if the guy in the wheelchair really was a paraplegic?"

"If he was, he wouldn't have connected me with the dog."

They were silent for a while, until Robyn said quietly: "Gary, you know I've never thanked you."

"For what?"

"Being so nice after I broke up with Rocky."

"Forget about it. You were no trouble."

"Yes I was. I was a mess. I mean, I don't know why, but in that relationship, I sort of lost perspective and went crazy. Then, when he dumped me, I got pretty hysterical, I know that. I just hope you don't think I'm always like that. I'm not like that at all."

"Don't worry. We all lose our balance sometimes. It just happens."

"You have too?"

He smiled. "No, I'm an exception."

Gary parked in front of their apartment block, cleared his throat and stared ahead. "Umm, thanks for that. You did a fantastic job." He took \$500 out of his wallet. "Here's your money."

She took it gratefully. "Thanks, I need it."

"Well, you know where I live. Drop in and see me, OK?"

"Will do. But not tonight—I'm going out with a girlfriend."

"Sure."

She got out and strode into their apartment block. Though there was a strong breeze, her skirt wasn't long enough to stir.

Gary drove away, heart thumping. Their friendship had reached a point where it would evolve or dissolve. He'd worried she was too high-strung and possessive. But she'd calmed down a lot and showed plenty of guts outside Burke's house. Yep, probably time to evolve.

He spent the rest of the day in his office, doing paperwork. Nailing Burke put him in a good mood. Indeed, that evening he arrived home feeling so good he cleaned up his apartment. First, he wandered around tossing rubbish into a garbage bag. Then he went into the kitchen and washed the pile of dirty dishes in the sink. As he did, a swarm of cockroaches broke from cover and dashed for safety. He granted them safe passage.

Later, in bed, he dreamt he was driving along a barren highway and got a puncture. He pulled over and opened the boot. No spare. A car approached with Robyn behind the wheel. He waved for her to stop. As she drove straight past, he noticed she had a passenger—Mick Burke—who put a very friendly arm about her. Shit.

He woke and didn't sleep again.

Chapter 7

The next morning, Gary pondered the best way to find Trixie Powell. Like most fugitives, she was probably lonely, scared and desperate to contact her mother. So he might as well watch her mum for a few days.

Roberta Powell lived in Lakemba, a dusty suburb halfway between the coast and Blue Mountains, in a two-bedroom bungalow within wailing distance of the Lakemba Mosque. A rusty carport jutted from one side. Underneath sat an old Torana. The mangy front lawn looked mortally ill.

Shortly after 8 a.m., Gary parked his surveillance van just down the road from the house. He climbed into the back and sat on a plastic garden chair, peered through the rear window.

By nine, most of Roberta's neighbours had left for work or school. But it was almost eleven before she appeared. The front door swung open and a woman in her mid-fifties shuffled out. She had a large helmet of dyed-brown hair and thin features reminiscent of Trixie.

She drove the Torana to Parramatta Leagues Club, a huge pokies palace with a glitzy façade that offered a counterfeit experience. Only its fakeness was real. Inside, dozens of grind gamblers fed their pay-packets and pension cheques into shiny poker machines.

Roberta spent two hours playing a pokie machine, while consuming a several beers and half a pack of fags. She didn't even look happy when she won, because she realised it would now take her longer to lose. When she'd finished robbing herself, she sourly shuffled out.

Gary followed her home and waited around until midnight in case Trixie visited. No such luck.

The next morning, Roberta left home a little earlier and visited a shopping centre. After mall-walking for two hours, without spending a cent, she had her hair permed and returned home. Gary dozed in his van until dawn, but Trixie didn't show.

Gary followed Roberta around for the rest of the week as she trekked, like a suburban zombie, through supermarkets, pubs and pokie palaces. He also had to sit in a near-empty cinema and watch a re-run of *Pretty Woman*. The longer he watched her, the more depressed he became.

Unfortunately, Trixie didn't turn up to brighten his mood. Maybe she hated her mother or was too cautious to contact her; maybe, as Vincent Drew suggested, she was dead. Or maybe—just maybe—she was talking to her mum on the phone. Gary decided to bug Roberta's house, and knew just the man for the job.

Chapter 8

Ray Boland spent twenty years in the Police Surveillance Unit—known as the Dog Squad—learning how to spy on his fellow citizens. He was a wizard with surveillance equipment, could concentrate for hours on a target, go for days without sleep and tail suspects like a ghost.

After he got sacked for playing golf when he should have been on a stakeout, he set up a business that advised companies on how to counter electronic eavesdropping. However, deep down, he was still a watcher and listener.

Gary drove over to Cremorne and knocked on his front door. Anne Boland answered it. Like many of his friends' wives, she thought he was a bad influence. Maybe they held an annual convention.

She eyed him suspiciously. "Hello Gary. You want Ray?"

"Yes. Is he in?"

"We're having dinner."

She obviously hoped he'd come back later. But nothing he did would win him brownie points. She felt she should have chosen a better husband than Ray, and Ray should have chosen a better friend than Gary.

He said: "Can I come in anyway? I won't grab anyone's food."

She scowled and stepped back. Gary strolled down the hallway to the dining room, where he found Ray spooning mash potato onto the plate of his eight-year-old son, Scott.

Ray resembled a Thunderbird with his close-cropped hair, chiselled features, regular teeth, little ears and a small frame. Scott looked like a shrunk version of his dad.

Gary said: "Evening boys."

Ray smiled. "Hello Gary. What're you doing here?"

"Thought I'd drop in and see how you're getting on. I might also have some work for you."

Anne looked wary. "What sort of work?"

He had to lie. "Oh, nothing much: I want Gary to do some worker's comp surveillance, if he's got time."

Ray said: "OK. You eaten yet?"

Gary hadn't and was quite hungry, but wouldn't accept Anne's grudging hospitality. "Yep, I'm fine thanks. I'll just watch."

He sat and enviously watched them wolf down lamb chops and vegies. Scott scooped up some peas and put them in his mouth.

Gary noticed the boy had a black eye. "What happened to your eye?"

"A big kid in my class keeps hitting me."

"Then hit him back."

Scott's eyes widened. "He's lots bigger than me; he's the biggest kid in the whole class."

"So what? He's probably a big bag of wind. Most bullies are. I tell you what. The next time you see him, walk straight up to him and punch him in the gut. No warning - just bang. That's how to deal with him."

Scott looked dubious. "He might not like that."

"Betchya he cries like a baby."

Anne spoke sharply. "Please don't put silly ideas in his head."

"I'm doing him a favour."

"I've spoken to his teacher. She's going to do something about it."

The school was obviously teaching the kid cowardice, but Gary didn't want an argument.

After dinner, Gary suggested to Ray that they go out to his shed. Ray glanced at his wife for permission and she reluctantly nodded.

The shed had a long bench, stacked high with gardening tools and an assortment of electronic surveillance equipment. Parabolic mikes. Contact mikes. Radio bugs. Laser bugs. Infinity and drop-switch bugs. Hook-switch blocks. Homing devices. Radio scanners. An infra-red camera. If Ray ever went over to the dark side of surveillance and became a Peeping Tom, he was well equipped.

Gary said: "Jesus, where'd you get all this stuff?"

"I've been collecting it for years. Some I bought; some I made myself."

They both sat on stools.

Gary said: "How's work?"

"Fantastic. Businessmen are paranoid about bugs, so I'm always doing sweeps."

"You ever find bugs?"

"Sometimes."

"And who planted them?"

"Nope, that's usually impossible," Ray said with a wicked smile.

"In other words: you've never turned yourself in."

Ray giggled. "Let me just say: if I find a bug, there is always repeat business."

"I bet there is."

Ray picked up a parabolic mike and fiddled with it. "Anyway, you said you want help with a surveillance job."

Gary coughed nervously. "Not exactly."

"Then what do you want?"

Gary told him about Tony Thompson's death and how he'd been employed to find his girlfriend, Trixie Powell.

Ray said: "Yeah, and how can I help?"

"I've been following Trixie's mum around and got nowhere. So I want to bug her phone in case Trixie gives her a call. Will you do that for me?"

"You mean, break into her house?"

"Yep."

Ray would find that easy. At the Police Academy, a master burglar on day-release taught him everything worth knowing about illegal entry. But he shook his head. "No fucking way. You must be kidding."

"Why not?"

"Because—correct me if I'm wrong—breaking into people's homes is illegal. So's planting bugs."

"True, but, in this case, the ends justify the means."

"Why?"

"I get a bonus if I find Trixie."

"Hah. What if I end up in prison?"

"Don't worry, you won't get caught."

"Bullshit. Prisons are full of people who thought that."

Gary shifted to flattery. "You know, I hate it when a guy like you—a genius at his craft—lacks confidence. You should enjoy your talent and try to express it. Let me help you do that."

Ray looked unimpressed. "Self-confidence won't help me in gaol. I've got a wife and kid."

Gary sighed and rolled his eyes to the heavens. "Jesus, you're frustrating."

Ray frowned. "Sorry, the answer is no."

"Come on Ray, I need your help, please."

"No, no, no. Anne keeps saying I shouldn't listen to you, and she's right. You'll just get me into trouble."

Gary said: "She's really cut off your balls, hasn't she? Maybe I should go and ask for them back. I'll put out my hand and say: 'Anne, I know they're small and useless, but Ray needs them.'"

Ray crossed his arms. "Do what you like. I won't plant the bug. I've given you my answer, and it's final."

Gary played his last card. "Don't you want to know how much I'll pay?"

Ray's eyes gleamed slightly and Gary knew he had him. "How much?"

Gary wondered how much of the ten thousand dollars he could spare. "Oh, a thousand, for an hour's work."

"That's not much for breaking into someone's house. What if I get caught?"

Gary shook his head sadly. "There you go again, being negative. God I hate it when you get down on yourself like this."

"Sorry, it's not enough."

"Fifteen hundred?"

The gleam grew brighter. "I'll do it for two."

"No, I said fifteen hundred. I have to make some money out of this gig. When do you want to plant the bug?"

Ray frowned and sighed. "What about Tuesday?"

"Good. We'll do it then. It'll be a pleasure working with you again."

Ray rolled his eyes. "I must be mad. Anne always says I don't think before I act."

Anne was undoubtedly right. That was the only possible explanation for why Ray married her.

Chapter 9

At home that night, Gary opened his fridge freezer and contemplated the slim pickings inside. He'd have to zap some frozen leftover takeaway curry. He was prising it free with a knife when his doorbell rang.

Shit. He just wanted to watch some mindless TV and collapse into bed. However, instead of playing possum, he trudged over to the door and opened it. Robyn stood outside, wearing a tight skivvy and short skirt. His heart fluttered.

"Hi there," she said, holding up a bottle of red wine. "Want some company?"

He didn't but, not wanting to appear rude, forced a smile onto his face. "How'd you guess? Come in."

As she strolled past him, he admired her long legs and the slight—almost subliminal—wiggle of her bottom. His pants got crowded and heart beat faster.

She said: "We can watch some TV. A new cop show starts tonight."

"I don't like cop shows."

"Why not?"

"I can't follow the plots."

"Then we can watch something else."

She sat on the lounge, still clutching the wine. Her skirt rode higher. His gaze skidded off her breasts and clung desperately to her face.

She said: "What did you do today?"

"Not much: only disarmed a thermonuclear warhead; I'm getting slower every time. What about you? Did you look for a job?"

"No, stayed home and took it easy. So I got to meet your visitor."

"What visitor?"

"About noon, I saw him coming down the stairs from your place."

"What did he look like?"

"About fifty. Grey hair. Wore a suit. Carried a brief-case. Very tough looking."

"Did you speak to him?"

"Yep. I said you were out, but I'd give you a message. He told me not to worry, he'd call back later."

"Did he say when?"

"No."

Gary shrugged. "Probably selling insurance. Make yourself comfy while I electrocute my dinner."

"What're you having?"

"Re-heated takeaway."

She grimaced. "Don't you ever cook?"

"Only when I boil the flesh off my victims. I'll be with you in a moment. Turn on the tube."

As Gary ducked back into the kitchen, Robyn picked up the remote control. He'd just opened the microwave door when he felt a hot gust of air. His feet left the floor and he slammed into the fridge.

Chapter 10

Gary dreamt that a tall, bald man in a white coat was leaning over him and kept saying: "Lucky boy—very lucky boy."

He slowly floated up towards consciousness and his vision shifted into focus. Though he couldn't move his head, he could swivel his eyes. He lay in a small white hospital room. Alive, at least.

His brain throbbed and ears ached. A drum machine was pounding in his head. Strobe lights flashed behind his eyes. Every breath made his chest hurt.

He glanced down and did an inventory. IV tubes sprouted from arms covered in bandages. A sheet covered the rest of his body. There were two large bumps where his feet should be. He tried to wiggle them. They moved. Great. But his groin felt sore and he prayed he still had his meat and two vege.

What happened to him? Memories flickered and faded. He vaguely recalled being stretchered to an ambulance. But how did he get injured? Next to his bed was a green button marked "Attention". He hit it on his third attempt.

Twenty seconds later a female nurse, built to throw drunks out of pubs, strutted into the room. "You're awake? How do you feel?"

Stiff jaw. "Lark hull."

"I'm not surprised," she said brusquely. "You have some broken ribs and lots of cuts and bruises."

"Anyfin' else?"

"No."

Thank God. His jaw loosened. "What happen to me?"

She looked surprised. "You don't remember?"

"No."

"There was an explosion in your apartment. You're lucky to be alive."

Explosion? Jesus, of course. He remembered standing in his kitchen, opening the microwave, a blast of hot air, everything disintegrating.

Robyn was in the living room! Oh God, surely she didn't survive. His chest compacted. "The woman I was with—is she alive?"

A furrowed brow. "What woman?"

"The woman in my apartment."

She looked annoyed. "So far as I know, you're the only person they brought in. But I've just started my shift. I could be wrong."

"Will you find out, please?"

She frowned. "There's a policeman outside. I'll get him."

The nurse left.

Soon afterwards, a semi-obese uniformed constable in his early twenties entered and looked at Gary as if he might bite. "Hello, I'm Constable Hawkins. I've been assigned to guard you."

"The woman I was with—what happened to her?"

His vacant smile made the pistol on his hip particularly menacing. "What woman?"

"Robyn Parsons. She was in my apartment."

He shook his head. "I haven't heard anything about a woman. I'll call the detectives."

"Please do."

The constable left.

While worrying about Robyn, Gary tried to work out what caused the explosion. A gas leak? All of the apartments in his building were connected to gas. Maybe a rupture.

"I've been assigned to guard you."

Shit. The cop wouldn't be guarding him if a gas leak caused the blast. Someone must have planted a bomb. Who the hell would do that, and why? His thoughts grew fuzzy. Motes danced in front of his eyes and then dissolved into darkness.

He awoke looking up at three blobs that slowly turned into faces. One was the nurse. Next to her was a tall man in his forties with reddish hair and freckles. Opposite him was a woman in her early thirties, with a strong face and blonde hair pulled back.

Ginger-nut said: "Mr Maddox."

"Yah, whatya want?"

"We want to talk to you."

"Who're ya?"

"I'm Detective Inspector Marks; this is Detective Constable Phillips. We're from the Homicide Squad."

Gary remembered the explosion. Robyn. Oh, God, what happened to her? Was she dead? Must be if the Homicide Squad was involved. Hell.

Fear cleansed his brain. "What happened to Robyn?"

Marks said: "You mean, the woman who was in your apartment?"

"Yes," he croaked.

Marks frowned. "I'm afraid I've got bad news: she's dead—died in the blast."

Gary felt numb and stared blankly at the ceiling. Poor Robyn. He closed his eyes and tried to carve out a private space in which to grieve.

Detective Constable Phillips intruded. "Could you give us her surname?"

They obviously couldn't identify Robyn because she was now a bag of body parts. "Parsons," he croaked, "Robyn Parsons—lived in the apartment underneath."

Phillips noted that on a pad. "Knew her well?"

"Quite well. We were friends."

"Just friends?"

"Yes, she often came upstairs for a chat."

"Where was she when the bomb exploded?"

"In the living room, about to turn on the TV."

Detective Inspector Marks nodded. "That makes sense. We think the bomb was attached to the TV. When she turned it on, boom. It was very powerful. Lucky you were in the kitchen. I'm afraid your apartment—maybe even the building—is a write-off."

"What about my neighbours? Any hurt?"

"No, but we've moved them out while the engineers check for structural damage. That'll probably take several days. Got any idea who did this?"

Gary had already decided not to co-operate, because he wanted to find the bomber and dole out his own justice. The cops could only put the bastard behind bars. He would put him in a box. There was something dark and bitter in his chest that only pain and violence could dislodge.

Still, he answered honestly: "No."

Marks stared hard. "You sure about that?"

"Yes."

"Has anybody threatened you recently? Have you trodden on anyone's toes?"

"Don't think so."

The detective rubbed his brow, obviously annoyed. "You used to be on the Narcotics Strikeforce?"

"Yes, mostly undercover."

"I bet you made plenty of enemies back then."

"Of course."

"Maybe one of them planted the bomb?"

"Possible, but nobody springs to mind."

The detective cleared his throat and leaned close. "Still got any contacts in the drug trade?"

He obviously suspected Gary was dirty and the bombing was part of an underworld feud.

"You want to know if I've been buying and selling shit?"

Golden freckles gleamed. "Yes."

Gary was too sick and tired to look insulted. "No, I don't deal in drugs."

Marks look unconvinced. "I understand you're a private investigator?"

"Yes."

"Licensed?"

"Of course."

"What sort of work do you do?"

"Nothing exciting: workers' comp surveillance, preventing employee theft, finding missing persons—stuff like that."

"What are you working on at the moment?"

Gary wondered if the bombing was related to his search for Trixie Powell. Maybe someone didn't want him to find her. So he decided not to mention it. "Nothing. I'm between jobs. But nobody would try to kill me because of my work. It's penny-ante shit."

Looking unhappy, Marks straightened up and sighed. "Alright, we'll let you get some rest. But we'll be back tomorrow. Think hard about who might have planted the bomb."

"I will."

The detectives turned to leave.

Gary said: "Haven't you forgotten something?"

"What?"

"My protection. Someone's trying to kill me and I'm laying here waiting for a bullet."

"Don't worry. There'll be at least two officers outside this room at all times. I don't want anyone coming in or going out."

The guards would be too unfit for patrol and too stupid for a desk job. "Tell them not to fall asleep."

"Don't worry. You'll be safe, *because* I want to talk to you again."

The detectives left and Gary realised the painkillers were wearing off. He looked at the nurse. "Can you give me something for the pain?"

"I'll get the doctor."

She left the room and soon returned with a doctor in tow. He was a tall, bald man in a white coat. His name-tag said *Dr Hamilton*. Gary had seen him before, in a dream.

The doctor said: "How do you feel?"

"Like shit."

Dr Hamilton smiled. "I'm not surprised. You're a lucky boy."

"*Lucky boy—very lucky boy.*"

"What's the damage?"

"Three broken ribs and numerous superficial wounds."

"How long will I be here?"

"I'll probably let you go in three or four days. But it'll take a lot longer for your ribs to heal. You'll have to take it easy."

Gary shook his head. "Sorry Doc, I'm leaving tomorrow."

"That would be unwise."

"Listen. I'm sure this is a fine hospital. But someone's trying to kill me. Hanging around here is bad for my health."

"There are guards outside."

"Jesus, the one I saw couldn't guard an empty building."

The doctor shrugged. "Not my area of expertise. I can only advise you not to leave; I can't stop you."

"Good. My clothes—what happened to them?"

"They were rags—we had to throw them out. But we kept your shoes. And your wallet and keys are in a plastic bag in the bedside cabinet. Anything else you want?"

"Yes, some painkillers."

"The nurse will attend to that."

The doctor and nurse left together. A few minutes later, the nurse returned with a couple of pills, which he swallowed and washed down. As the pain subsided, he stared at the ceiling, wondering who tried to kill him. He'd made lots of dangerous enemies during his life. It was hard to sort through them all.

He also recalled that someone broke into Trixie Powell's apartment. Maybe the intruder was looking for her and tried to stop Gary joining the hunt.

Robyn said a man visited his apartment a few hours before the explosion. About fifty. Grey haired. Tough looking. Wore a suit. Carried a suitcase. Her description was fairly vague, but might be important.

He thought about Robyn. She could be annoying and had her share of problems. But she was very nice and he kept seeing more and more that he liked. She certainly didn't deserve to be blown to bits in his apartment.

Guilt flooded through him. She made plenty of mistakes where men were concerned, going out with some real pigs. But her biggest one was befriending him. The other guys hurt her feelings. He got her killed.

Tiredness crept over him. He didn't want to sleep, because he didn't trust the guards. But darkness spread its arms.

Chapter 11

The next morning, Gary woke up feeling like he'd been too close to a bomb explosion and soon realised he had. Someone was using a sledgehammer to bury a spike deep into his brain. He didn't want to move, but his bladder was about to erupt.

He painfully climbed out of bed and rolled his IV stand over to the en-suite bathroom. When he pissed, his ribs hurt and urine had a reddish tinge. Apprehensively, he looked in the mirror. Only a few cuts and scratches.

He gingerly climbed back into bed and pushed the "Attention" button. A nurse arrived: a roly-poly Chinese woman with a big smile. He got her to bring some more painkillers. After he'd downed them, she started to leave.

He said: "Out of curiosity, is anyone outside this room?"

"Yes, two policemen."

"Awake?"

"Of course."

"Good. Keep an eye on them. If they fall asleep, jab them with the biggest needle you've got."

She smiled. "OK."

The pain receded and he slept. When he woke, someone sat in the corner, reading a newspaper: Detective Inspector Marks, alone.

"Hi," Gary said.

Marks folded up his paper and came over to the bed. "Hello. How do you feel?"

"Like shit on a stick. How's your investigation going? Any arrests?"

"Afraid not."

"What's Forensics told you about the bomb?"

"They say the bomber used top-quality ingredients: no petrol or fertiliser for him. He used Semtex-H. It's a high-explosive that blasters use in mines and quarries."

"Can you trace it?"

"Unlikely. Forensics also found fragments of the electrical blasting cap used as the detonator."

"How did the bomb work?"

"It was radio-activated. The TV's remote control device emitted a signal the detonator picked up. The moment Robyn Parsons tried to turn on the TV, boom."

"Very sophisticated."

"Yes. But these days any dickhead with access to the internet can learn how to make a radio-controlled bomb."

"Still, the bomber's obviously bright."

"I agree."

"How'd he get in?"

"We're still not sure. Most of your apartment was incinerated. There are some scratches on the lock of your front door. Maybe he picked it."

"That wouldn't be easy. It was a Yale deadbolt."

"I know. But, like you said, he's obviously no dummy."

"Have you spoken to my neighbours?"

"Of course. They weren't helpful."

"Did they say nice things about me?"

"You must be kidding. The bomb blew most of them out of their beds and they're all homeless until the structural engineers give the OK. I'm worried one of them might try to kill you."

"I hoped you explained that I'm an innocent victim."

A cold stare. "That's yet to be established."

"What else have you been doing?"

"We've pulled out the files of your police investigations. I want you to look through them. You might notice something important."

"Sure, as soon as I get out of here."

"We've also created a list of everyone you arrested. We'll find out who've got alibis."

"Good."

Detective Marks sat on the end of the bed. "So you've got no idea who tried to kill you?"

"Correct. I'm not lovable. In fact, lots of people hate me. But I can't think who'd want to blow me to bits. That's deranged."

The Detective Inspector looked cunning and suspicious. "Mr Maddox, I hope you're being co-operative."

Gary spent five years as an undercover cop and knew how to lie. So he didn't overdo the indignation. "Of course I am. Why wouldn't I be?"

"Because I've looked through your personnel file: several complaints of using excessive force and twice reprimanded for insubordination."

"So what? That's got nothing to do with this case."

The Detective Inspector pursed his lips. "Yes it does, because you're a loose cannon. I'm very worried you're holding something back."

"Why would I do that?"

"Private retribution."

Gary admired Marks' perspicacity, while shaking his head. "Don't worry, if I work out who bombed my apartment, I'll tell you straight away."

"Alright. And just one last thing: because a bomb was used, I keep getting calls from the counter-terrorism loonies in Canberra who want to know if there's a terrorism angle. I keep telling them there isn't. Is that right?"

Gary's chuckle hurt his ribs. "Of course there isn't. I've never been to the Middle East."

Marks frowned and got to his feet. "Alright, I'll let you rest. How long does the doctor say you'll be here?"

"He wants me to stay three or four days. I plan to leave sooner."

"That's up to you. Just make sure you come in and look through your old files. And if the bomber tries to kill you again, let us know, huh?"

Very fucking funny.

As soon as the detective had left, Gary cadged a couple more painkillers from the nurse and rang Ray Boland on his mobile.

Ray got excited. "Gary, where the fuck've you been? I've been trying to contact you for 24 hours. Your phone's out of order."

"My whole apartment's out of order. Someone blew it up. Killed my neighbour."

"Shit. You're joking?"

"Afraid not."

"Christ. Any idea who's responsible?"

"Zero."

"Where the hell are you?"

"Staining the sheets at St Vinnies."

"How badly you hurt?"

"I'll live. But I need help."

"What do you want?"

"For a start, I need some clothes. When you've finished work, could you buy some and bring them here?"

"Sure. What're your measurements?"

Gary provided them and his room number. Ray promised to visit just after six.

Gary dozed fitfully for the rest of the day. One of the cops on guard—a thin guy who looked like he should be admitted to hospital—came in and tried to chat about the explosion. Gary bluntly told him to go outside and do his job. The cop shambled out.

Just after six o'clock, the same cop returned. "There's a guy outside called Ray Boland. Says he wants to see you. Should I let him in?"

"Yes, he's a friend."

The cop left and Ray entered, holding a large plastic shopping bag. "Wow, you look like a punching bag."

"Don't worry, I'll survive."

Ray put the plastic bag on the bedside table. "I bought you some socks, undies, jeans, a shirt and a denim jacket. I hope you've still got your shoes."

"I have. Thanks. You're a good mate. I'll pay you back later."

"Forget it. On the way over here, I cruised past your apartment block..."

"How did it look?"

"Like it's in Beirut. There's no way you'll get your rental bond back. I'm amazed you survived."

Gary explained how he was in the kitchen when Robyn from downstairs set off the bomb.

Ray said: "Poor woman. Were you close?"

"Getting friendly, but not in a relationship."

"And you've got no idea who planted the bomb?"

"Nope."

"Then how're you going to find the bastard?"

"I don't know. I'll probably have to wait until he tries again, and hope he doesn't add to his score."

"I'm glad I won't be starting your car every morning. What about your search for Trixie Powell? You still want to bug her mum's house?"

Gary wanted to continue that search because it might lead him to the bomber. But he wasn't fit enough to break into a house and plant a bug. First he had to heal.

He said: "Give me about a week to get better. Then we'll do it."

Chapter 12

The next morning, Doctor Hamilton spent a long time pushing and prodding Gary's ribs, and listening to his breathing.

Gary yelped and gasped. "Jesus, you're supposed to stop pain."

"Sorry, can't be helped. You know, your condition's very interesting: I don't see many bomb victims. It's just too bad you weren't closer to the epicentre of the explosion."

"Sorry. Next time I'll stand right on the bomb."

The doctor looked ready to nod and then smiled. "Hah. That won't be necessary."

"What's my prognosis?"

"You can leave here in a couple of days."

Gary shook his head. "No, like I said before, I'm leaving this morning."

"I strongly advise against that. You're not ready to go."

"Maybe. But sometimes you've gotta play hurt. Don't worry, I'll be OK."

The doctor sighed. "Alright, I'll get the nurse to change your bandages. Then you can be on your way. But take things easy for a while."

The nurse changed his bandages and he painfully put on the clothes Ray bought for him. After fishing his wallet and keys out of the bedside cabinet, he shuffled out, surprising the two cops on guard duty. The senior one, an overweight sergeant, battled gravity to rise from his chair. How on earth did he pass his annual physical? He made his bullet-proof vest look tiny. Too bad Gary couldn't borrowed it.

The Sergeant said: "Where the hell are you going?"

"Out for a stroll."

"You coming back?"

"No."

"You're not supposed to leave."

"Well, unless you're going to arrest me for something, you can't stop me."

"How'll we contact you?"

"I'll give Marks a call as soon as I find somewhere to stay - promise."

That seemed to mollify the cop, who stood back and wished him good luck.

Gary slipped out through the delivery bay and hit the pavement feeling incredibly vulnerable. Someone was trying to kill him, though he didn't know who or why, his ribs were busted and he had no weapon. He was a big bullseye any fool could hit. So he jumped at sudden movements and kept looking around for a tail.

Only one thing would lift his spirits: a pistol. However, if he bought one legally it would take at least a month to cut through the red tape; and if he bought one illegally from a US dealer, using the internet, it would take at least a week to arrive, if it got through customs.

So he drained his ATM account and visited a gun shop in Redfern. The owner, Victor Dragovic, once belonged to the same pistol club as Gary.

Gary found him standing behind the counter, showing a customer a Remington shot-gun. After the guy left, without buying, Gary approached.

The Serb was in his early fifties, bald and heavyset. Whenever there was an ethnic conflict in the Balkans, he went back to visit his family in Serbia. However, when he returned, he looked even more haunted than usual and never showed any holiday snaps. Gary reckoned any photos he took would show him in fatigues next to freshly-dug graves.

He smiled. "Hi Gary. What you want?"

"A pistol. But I've got a problem."

Dragovic's face clouded. "What?"

"I don't have time to get a permit."

Dragovic shook his head. "Sorry Gary, can't help."

"Victor, I'm desperate. Someone tried to kill me, and my life means a lot to me."

"Even more reason not to give you a pistol. You shoot someone and I'm in deep shit."

"Come on Victor, you can trust me. I won't involve you."

Dragovic hesitated and sighed. "OK. Come out the back. I've got something you'll like."

They went into Dragovic's office, where he opened the safe and took out an object wrapped in an oily cloth. He pulled back the cloth and spoke reverentially. "Tokarev, nine mill. Twelve shot. No licence number. Untraceable. Has two clips. You know, these were very popular with Stalin's secret police. They use them for the *coup de grace*." Dragovic demonstrated how an NKVD officer would aim at a captive's head. "Bang."

"How much?"

"\$1,200."

Very pricey, but his life was worth more. "OK, I'll take it."

Gary also bought a shoulder holster and two boxes of bullets. He left the store with the Tokarev under his arm, feeling ten feet tall and bulletproof. He pushed back his shoulders and walked down the middle of the pavement, heart-rate and breathing normal. Time to make other people jumpy.

That evening, he checked into a backpackers' hostel in Kings Cross and got a tiny room near the communal bathroom. Sleep came fast.

Chapter 13

The next morning, Gary decided to visit what was left of his apartment. In case the bomber was lurking about, waiting for him to return, he paid off the taxi driver a hundred metres away and strolled about doing a threat assessment. Nothing unusual caught his eye.

He approached the apartment block. Ray Boland was right: he wouldn't get his bond back. His small balcony was now a gaping hole blackened around the edges. All the surrounding windows were blown out. Broken glass crunched underfoot.

The fire brigade had placed a wooden barrier across the main entrance and erected a large sign forbidding entry. Gary gingerly climbed over the barrier and slowly mounted the stairs, chest aching, to the top floor. His shredded front door lay half-way along the corridor. Crime-scene tape criss-crossed the charred opening.

Gary tore off the tape and entered. The living room was a blackened cave with bits of burnt furniture. The firemen's hoses had turned the ash-laden carpet into a soggy mess. Its stench was terrible. Fire and water had expunged all traces of Robyn Parsons. Not even a drop of dried blood.

His bedroom was the only room the fire didn't reach. But it still had extensive smoke and water damage. All of his clothes were ruined, which had to be a good thing.

Leaving the bedroom, he heard feet squelch through the front door. He ducked into the kitchen shell and drew his pistol.

A short, fat man in a light-grey suit came around the corner. Though he looked harmless, Gary stepped out and aimed at his head. "Who the fuck're you?"

Colour drained from the guy's face and Gary realised he couldn't be the bomber: he was a sheep, not a goat.

The guy's eyes locked on the pistol. "I... umm... ahhh... own this building."

Gary had always dealt with a real estate agent. "Got a card?"

"Umm... ahhh... yeah. Sure."

Still staring at the pistol, the man fumbled around inside his jacket and took out a wallet. He extracted a business card and handed it to Gary, who glanced down.

*Robert Fredericks
Managing Director
Paradise Properties*

Paradise, my arse. Wasn't before and certainly wasn't now.

Gary had dealt with lots of landlords and hated them all. He tucked away his pistol and smiled. "Mr Fredericks, I'm sorry I frightened you. I'm Detective Connolly from the Homicide Squad. What're you doing here?"

Fredericks licked his lips. "Trying to find the tenant, Gary Maddox. I understand he's still alive."

"That's right."

"Do you know where he is?"

"No. Why do you want to find him?"

Fredericks rolled his eyes and frowned. "Are you kidding? Look what he's done to this fucking apartment."

Gary looked around sympathetically. "It's a bit of a mess, isn't it?"

"It's a disaster. I've been a landlord for a long time and had lots of lousy tenants. Some are like animals: they piss on carpets, dig holes in walls, start fires, shit in bins. But nobody ever blew up his apartment. Jesus, what a catastrophe."

"We don't think Mr Maddox planted the bomb."

"I don't care. He was the tenant - he's responsible."

"What'll you do when you find him?"

"Sue him of course. By the time my lawyers have finished with him, he'll be begging on the streets."

"Aren't you insured?"

"Yes, but the policy doesn't cover man-made explosions."

Gary frowned. "Well, I'd think twice before suing Maddox."

The landlord scowled. "Why?"

"Because he's a very dangerous man. In fact, we think he's committed several murders. That's why his apartment was bombed. Someone wanted revenge. If I was you, I'd leave him alone."

The landlord's Adam's apple did a nervous jig. "Are you telling me that, if I sue him, the police won't protect me?"

Gary shrugged. "Oh, we'll do our best. But we're under-resourced and can't give guarantees. Like I said, he's a *very* dangerous man. In fact, the guy's a *psychopath*." Gary loved stretching out that last word.

The landlord rose onto his tip toes and puffed out his chest. "I'm going to sue him anyway."

"Good on you. Now, I have to ask you to leave, because this is a crime scene."

The landlord frowned and stomped out of the apartment, Gary on his heels. "Fucking tenants—scum of the earth."

Outside, the landlord turned to Gary and snapped: "What'd you say your name was?"

Gary reckoned the guy should show more respect to someone he thought was a cop, and felt offended. "Detective Connolly."

"If you find Maddox, let me know, OK?"

"Sure, I'll give you a call."

The landlord hopped into a late-model BMW and drove off.

Gary's battered Pulsar was the only car left in the car park. Were the big dents in the hood due to the explosion or were they there before? He couldn't remember.

He crawled underneath and checked for a bomb. Everything looked factory installed. Despite that, when he turned the key in the ignition, his hands sweated. The engine coughed a few times before idling roughly.

He drove over to his office and parked outside. While climbing the concrete steps, he realised the door to his office might be booby-trapped. It had a heavy Yale deadlock. But the bomber was very resourceful.

Gary closely inspected the lock, looking for scratch marks, and saw none. Gently, he turned the key and nudged the door open. The hinges squeaked. No shattering explosion.

Warily, he slipped inside, closed the door behind him and searched the whole office for a bomb. He even took the cover off his computer monitor to look inside and found nothing.

He phoned Detective Inspector Marks at the Homicide Squad.

The detective's grumpiness was a health hazard. "You should have called me before leaving the hospital. Why'd you leave so soon?"

"Because I wanted to keep breathing."

"I gave you some guards."

"You kidding? When I looked at them, I just knew I was gonna die. How's your investigation going?"

"Not much progress. When can you come in and look through your old files?"

Gary didn't intend to help the Homicide cops, because he alone would exact vengeance. But he wanted to look co-operative and tap them for information. "Any time you like."

"Good. Come in today. When you get here, ask for Detective Constable Phillips."

Gary didn't take the Tokarev to Police Headquarters, because the metal detector at the entrance would have a heart attack. Instead, he left it in a filing cabinet in his office.

He reached Police Headquarters just after noon and, after passing through the detector, asked to see Phillips. The constable on duty phoned her and said he'd arrived. Five minutes later, she emerged from a lift. The last time he saw her, he lay in a hospital bed. Now he could examine the whole package. She was quite stocky, with a strong face and slightly broken nose. Most women would have had it straightened. She obviously didn't follow the herd. He liked that.

A firm handshake. "Thanks for coming. Let's go upstairs."

They strolled over to the lifts. While waiting, she said: "Have you been back to your apartment since you got out of hospital?"

Best to lie. "I drove past it, but didn't stop. Why?"

"I spoke to the owner this morning. He claimed he met a Detective Connolly from the Homicide Squad at your apartment, and Detective Connolly pointed a pistol at him."

Gary raised his eyebrows. "So?"

"We don't have a Detective Connolly."

Gary shrugged. "Not my fault."

She frowned. "So I got him to describe Detective Connolly. Funnily enough, he described you."

"I have very common features."

She scowled. "Hardly. You claimed you were Detective Connolly, didn't you?"

"Of course not."

"I don't believe you."

"I can't help that."

She looked at him sternly. "Listen to me very carefully, Mr Maddox. Don't ever impersonate a police officer again. If you do, I'll have you arrested, understand?"

"Like I said, I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't treat me like a fool."

Gary was tired of lying and shrugged. "OK. Maybe I did impersonate a cop. So what? Most of the people in this building do that every day. In fact, they get paid to do it."

A smile flitted across her lips. At least she had a sense of humour. "The landlord was threatened with a pistol. I hope you're not carrying it right now."

He raised his arms. "You can search me if you want."

To his surprise, she pulled back the lapels of his jacket and glanced inside. Obviously, his credibility wasn't high.

They left the lift on the fifteenth floor. Instead of taking him into the Homicide squadroom, she led him down a side corridor to a small office. In the middle was a large metal table, piled high with files.

She said: "These are the files of all investigations you were involved with on the Narcotics Strikeforce. Look through them and tell us who might still have a bad grudge against you."

"There'll probably be quite a few."

She put her hands on her hips. "That doesn't surprise me one bit. Make a list anyway. I'll be back in a couple of hours."

"Could you bring me a cup of coffee?"

She frowned. "No."

"Thanks."

The detective disappeared. Gary thumbed through the files and recalled his years working undercover, when he feasted on the big jolts of adrenalin you don't get in normal life. To do his job, he befriended drug dealers by listening to their problems, laughing at their shit jokes and massaging their fragile egos. He often became the best friend they'd ever had. So, when he arrested them, they got a huge kick in the guts. They were less upset about going to gaol—that was an

occupational hazard—than the fact their best mate sold them out. That made them feel cheap and used.

The only dealer who didn't blame Gary for his arrest was a Gypsy Joker bikie called Ugly Tony, who claimed he'd never get caught because his scrawny Labrador could smell cops. But the dog loved Gary, who took it for long walks. So, when Ugly Tony got arrested, he kicked the shit out of the dog until Gary stopped him.

Most of the dealers he arrested were either too spineless to plant the bomb or already dead. But several whackos, whose only emotion was hate, would have done it for kicks. Gary didn't have the time or energy to track them down and check their alibis. Best to let the detectives do the leg work and keep an eye on them. So he put their files on a separate pile.

By the time Phillips returned, two hours later, he'd gone through most of the files and put half-a-dozen on the wacko pile.

She said: "How's it going?"

"I forgot I had so many enemies. Most are harmless. But those bastards would plant a bomb in a kindergarten." Gary pointed at the wacko pile.

"OK. We'll check out their alibis."

"Good." Time for lunch. He reached for his jacket and considered inviting her along. Yes, why not? He liked her directness and throaty voice. She didn't act like a woman, she was one. "I'm going to get some lunch. Want to join me? I'll pay."

She hesitated and shook her head. "I'm sorry, I've still got a lot of work to do ..."

"Listen, you should have lunch with me and pretend to be friendly. Then I might let down my guard and blurt out something I shouldn't. You never know what might slip out."

A tight smile. "I get the impression, Mr Maddox, that you're always on your guard."

"You'd be surprised. I'm quite a blabber-mouth."

"I doubt that."

"There's only one way to find out, isn't there?"

She frowned and glanced at her watch. "Alright, but I don't have long."

"Sure."

At her suggestion, they went to a cafe under the building, where they sat and ordered focaccias.

He said: "Why'd you become a cop?"

"I know it sounds ridiculous, but for some reason I thought it would be a great adventure."

"Hah. And it didn't turn out like that?"

"No. I feel like I'm wading through a sewer every day, up to my neck."

"I know what you mean. Tell me, you working full time on this investigation?"

"Yes. Marks is in charge, but I do most of the running around. A few junior detectives are helping me."

The focaccias arrived. As she took a bite, a heavy vein popped out on her forearm. He wondered how much she could bench-press. Probably quite a bit.

She said: "But let's talk about you—why'd *you* become a cop?"

Gary decided to throw her a scrap. "That's easy: my dad was a cop for 41 years."

She looked surprised. "You mean, your father was George Maddox?"

"You've heard of him?"

"Of course. He was a legend."

She was right. His father had a brilliant career, winning numerous commendations for bravery and excellence, before retiring as head of the Major Crime Squad. Gary was often told they didn't make cops like him anymore. "He sure was."

"And you decided to follow in his footsteps?"

"Correct. Never really considered doing anything else."

"When did he retire?"

"About five years ago."

"Is he still alive?"

"No, died a couple of years ago."

"Sorry to hear that. Do you miss being a cop?"

He smiled. "I don't miss the backstabbing, arse-kissing and mountains of paperwork. But I liked working undercover. I really enjoyed seizing drugs and arresting scumbags."

"Tell me about that."

So he told her about his time on the Narcotics Strikeforce: the buys, the raids, the busts. He told her stuff that he'd never told anyone. It just spilled out. He even told her about the time a dealer pulled out a gun and patted him down for a wire.

She said: "Did he find one?"

"Yep. It was taped to the middle of my chest."

"Christ. What did you do?"

Gary smiled. "I told him it was a pacemaker. Said I had a bad heart and if he touched it, I'd die."

She laughed. "You're kidding?"

"No, and the dumb bastard actually believed me. Kept apologising and got worried about my health."

"What an idiot."

"Well, you don't have to sit an exam to be a drug dealer, do you?"

"No. What happened to him?"

"As soon as he put the pistol away, I arrested him. Felt kinda bad about that. I mean, he really cared."

"Sounds like you made a lot of arrests."

"I sure did, because I was a damn good cop."

"But not a modest one?"

A languid smile. "I'm trying to be honest."

"Lots of drug cops go dirty, don't they?"

"Yes."

She leaned forward and stared hard. "Did you?"

He locked eyeballs. "You want the truth?"

"Of course."

"Then I admit it: I'm a drug king-pin."

She looked startled and frowned. "Hah, very funny."

He shrugged. "I knew you wouldn't believe me."

"I don't. So tell me: why'd you quit the force?"

Gary joined the force because of his father... and quit because of him. The event that made him quit occurred a couple of years ago. A hospital phoned to say his father had a heart attack and was in Intensive Care. He raced over there and was shown into a sterile room with white walls, white curtains, white blankets and sheets. His father always looked like he'd swallowed an extra pint of life. Now he breathed through a respirator. All the vitality had been sucked from his unshaven face, leaving a flaccid mask. It was as if he was dead, but didn't realise that.

Gary held his father's hand and said all the right things: that he'd get better and everything would be alright. But his father knew he was dying and weakly shook his head. "No, not this time... don't have long... something I've got to tell you."

In a disembodied tone, his father explained how, while a cop, he "put aside" some money and buried it in a corner of his backyard. There was still about \$300,000 left. "Dig it up and spend it".

Gary didn't have to ask his father how he got the money. It was obviously dirty. All his life he fought to win his father's respect. That was why he became a cop. So, when his father told him about the money, he felt betrayed. If he stayed a cop, he'd be competing with a lie. He wouldn't do that, and quit. After his father's funeral, he also dug up the money and gave it away to a couple of charities.

How could he explain all of that to Detective Phillips in a way she'd understand? He couldn't. Anyway, it was none of her business. He shrugged. "I'd rather not say."

She leaned forward. "Why not? Did you do something wrong?"

"No."

"Then tell me."

"It's none of your business."

She arched her eyebrows "OK then, tell me about Robyn Parsons."

A lump formed in his throat. "What do you want to know?"

"Did you have a relationship?"

"No, we were just friends."

She raised an eyebrow. "Really? You mean, you didn't sleep with her?"

"Correct. Never got around to it."

"Why not?"

"Because we ran out of time. Have you spoken to her parents?"

"Yes. They're shattered, of course. Can't understand how their daughter got blown to bits."

Gary felt sick with remorse. "I bet they can't. I suppose I'll have to talk to them at some stage. I don't know what I'll say."

"Well, that reminds me: the funeral's tomorrow."

"Where?"

"Eleven o'clock at St Agnes in Darlinghurst. Will you be there?"

Robyn's funeral was the last event in the world he wanted to attend, but he had no choice. "Of course."

"OK. I'll be there too, so if you spot anyone who might be the bomber, let me know."

"Sure."

After eating their focaccias, they went back upstairs and he kept looking through the files.

An hour later, after putting a few more files on the wacko pile, he phoned Detective Phillips and said he'd finished. A minute later, she entered with Detective Inspector Marks behind her.

She said: "Finished?"

"Yep. If the bomber's someone I arrested, he's probably in in that pile." Gary pointed at the wacko pile.

She said: "Thanks. We'll start checking on them as soon as possible. What're you going to do now?"

"Keep a very low profile."

Marks said: "Where'll you stay?"

Gary shook his head. "Can't tell you."

"Why not?"

"Someone's trying to kill me, so I won't even tell myself where I'm staying." He got to his feet. "See you around."

"Make sure you stay in touch."

"Of course."

After Detective Phillips led Gary out of the building, she strolled around to Marks' office and found him seated behind his desk. She said: "Do you think he knows who the bomber is?"

"Not sure. But one thing's certain: he intends to deal with the guy himself; he doesn't want him arrested, he wants him dead."

"Agree. And I bet the bomber still wants him dead. It'll be an interesting contest, won't it? Who do you think'll win?"

Marks smiled. "Don't know and don't care. We've just got to be at the showdown and arrest the survivor."

"If there is one."

"Yes. So keep Maddox under surveillance."

"Surveillance? Are you kidding? We can't even afford a coffee machine. Where would I get the bodies for surveillance?"

"True. Then you'll have to keep an eye on him yourself."

"I'm already flat out."

"I'm not interested in excuses."

Chapter 14

For the first time in several days, Gary thought about his search for Trixie Powell. He'd done little to earn the \$10,000 advance that Barbara Thompson gave him. It was also possible the bomber was searching for Trixie. So he decided to visit Barbara Thompson to explain his lack of progress and see how she reacted to news of the bombing.

She lived in Maroubra, a beach-side suburb to the south. It was a blue-collar enclave until twenty years ago, when hordes of yuppies arrived in their baby-Beamers, waving wads of cash and did some socio-economic cleansing. However,

some working class residents, like her, stayed put. She lived in a small Californian bungalow about two blocks from the beach.

Gary turned into her street as the light faded. He hadn't rung ahead. So when she opened her front door and saw him, she looked surprised. "Mr Maddox. What are you doing here? Have you found Trixie?"

"No, I'm afraid not. Can I come in?"

"Of course."

A man loomed up behind his client. He was in his late twenties, with a long boney nose, tight mouth, heavy jaw and close-set eyes. His leather vest was open wide to reveal corrugated abdominals covered with a rough tattoo of a naked woman. It was the sort of tatt you could only get in prison.

Barbara Thompson nodded towards him. "This is my second son, Alex."

Gary knew Alex had done two shifts in prison for armed robbery. They shook hands.

Alex stared at him. Whatever happened behind his eyes didn't happen often and didn't happen fast. "You're the private eye, right?"

"Yes."

"Found Trixie yet?"

"No. That's what I've come to talk about."

Barbara Thompson turned to her son. "Alex, I want to talk to Mr Maddox alone. Go away."

Alex bit his lip. "But Mum..."

"Do what you're told?"

"Mum..."

"I said, go."

She obviously called the shots, because Alex reluctantly nodded and disappeared back up the hallway.

She looked at Gary and sighed. "Sorry about that. Alex is still upset about Tony's death. They were very close."

The living room had a 1960s décor. Above the fake-brick fireplace was a wooden mantelpiece lined with family photos. Two green vinyl couches faced each other on a worn tartan carpet.

Gary sat on a couch and rested his left arm on a frilly white antimacassar.

His client sat on the couch opposite, looking unhappy. "So, you haven't found Trixie yet?"

"That's right. I'm afraid I've had some misfortune."

"What?"

"Someone planted a bomb in my apartment. When it exploded, I was very lucky to survive. I've spent the last few days in hospital."

Gary studied her closely. Her surprise seemed genuine. "My goodness, do you have any idea who was responsible?"

"No. But it's possible—just possible—it had something to do with my search for Trixie."

"Why?"

"I think someone else is looking for her."

"Really? Why do you think that?"

"When I went over to your son's apartment, I found someone had already broken in."

"Maybe a burglar."

"Maybe. Or maybe someone else is looking for Trixie and that person planted the bomb to stop me finding her. Did you tell anyone I'm looking for Trixie?"

"Only my sons and they wouldn't tell anyone."

It occurred to Gary that, if someone else was looking for Trixie, that person might have bugged this house, including the room they sat in. He got up, went over to the phone and picked it up.

"What are you doing?"

"Do you have a Phillips screwdriver?"

"Yes," she said uncertainly.

"Please get it."

She went into the kitchen and returned with a Phillips screwdriver, which he used to take the base-plate off the phone. He was no expert, but the little device attached to the wires inside definitely looked like a bug. He pulled it out and held it up.

A nervous frown. "What is it?"

"A listening device. Someone bugged your phone."

"My goodness. Why?"

"I'd love to know. Just wait here. I'll be back soon."

Most bugs send a signal to a relay transmitter hidden nearby. So Gary strolled out onto the patio and casually looked up and down the darkened street. Parked cars lined both sides. But a Ford Falcon, about fifty metres away on the other side, caught his attention because someone sat behind the wheel.

He stepped off the patio and strolled up his side of the street. When parallel with the Falcon, he darted towards it. But he'd forgotten about his broken ribs, which exploded with pain. He screamed and slowed to a hobble.

The Ford Falcon roared into life and sped off down the road with its lights off. It was too dark to identify the driver or get the licence number.

Gary limped back to the house and found Barbara Thompson standing on the patio.

She said: "Who was in the car?"

"Don't know. But someone else seems very keen to find Trixie."

"Why?"

"You tell me."

"I have no idea."

Chapter 15

Robyn Parsons' funeral was the worst experience of Gary's life.

To avoid meeting her parents and his neighbours, he arrived five minutes late and sat in the last row. There were about fifty mourners. The presence of half-a-dozen neighbours made him nervous. But what really stung was the old couple

sitting together in the front row—obviously Robyn's parents. Hell. What had he done? What had he done?

A neighbour saw him and nudged another. Soon they were all giving him dirty stares. He couldn't blame them. He kept his head down and avoided eye contact.

Sitting across the aisle were Detectives Marks and Phillips, and a couple of their colleagues. They glanced at him with a mixture of curiosity, distain and pity.

He hadn't prayed since he was a kid. But he prayed for Robyn and her parents. Then he considered praying for vengeance and dismissed the idea. He wouldn't need God's help. In fact, he wanted God to stay out of the way.

The service lasted thirty minutes, which seemed like an eternity. Afterwards, he considered approaching Robyn's parents. But he could only tell them their daughter was an innocent bystander and he didn't know the killer. That would be no comfort at all.

He slipped out of the church, angry with the killer, God and - most of all - himself.

That night, he wandered into a pub just off Macleay Street, King Cross. Three hours and twelve schooners later, he'd achieved the oblivion he sought. He staggered back to his hostel and fell onto his bed.

A dark dream flooded his brain. He saw Robyn torn to pieces by the explosion. Then her parents stood in the middle of his bomb-gutted apartment, screaming that he was a murderer. Their faces spun around him, screaming louder and louder.

He awoke with sharp-edged fragments of the dream whirling around in his head. His anger at the killer was more than just an emotion: it was black molten lava, roiling around in his chest, which he had to let out before it consumed him.

He lay on the bed for several hours, while his aching brain blamed himself and blamed the bomber, looping endlessly. Eventually, his stomach demanded food. He crossed the road and joined several other burn-outs in a café. He ate sweet pastries, washed down with strong coffee.

His mood lifted a notch and he pondered his next move. There was a good chance the bomber was also searching for Trixie Powell. So the closer he got to her, the closer he'd get to him. Maybe, if he was lucky, Trixie could name the bastard.

But how could he find Trixie? He decided to return to his original plan and use Ray Boland to bug her mother's house in Lakemba.

Before he could call Ray, his mobile beeped. He put it to his ear. "Gary Maddox."
"Hey dude," a sunny voice said. "It's Lone Wolf."

Gary's brain was so mushy it took a few moments to identify his information broker, Vincent Drew. He croaked: "What do you want?"

"You don't sound too good."

"I feel like shit, but that started before you called."

"Good. Where the hell have you been?"

"What do you mean?"

"I've been trying to call you."

"Why?"

"I think I've found her."

Gary's brain was still in reverse gear. "Who?"

"The chick, of course: Trixie Powell."

Gary felt a surge of adrenalin. His head cleared miraculously. "Jesus, where?"

"Buy me a beer and I'll tell you."

"Tell me now," Gary yelled.

"No. First I've got to explain what a brilliant job I've done. So you've got to buy me a beer."

Drew obviously wouldn't change his mind.

"OK, I'll meet you in a pub, but only so I can strangle you."

Drew laughed. "Hey dude, when I tell you what I know, you'll kiss me."

"In your dreams."

Gary arranged to meet Drew at a pub in Redfern. He caught a taxi over there and found the hacker already sitting at the bar, looking smug.

Drew said: "God, you look like shit."

Gary realised he was still half-pissed and suppressed a burp. "I feel worse. Where the hell is she?"

Drew raised his eyebrows, enjoying Gary's desperation. "Beer first."

To pamper the bastard, Gary got the barman to give him a schooner of beer, but didn't order one for himself. Then he led him over to a corner table.

As they sat, Gary's nerves were at breaking point. "Where the hell is she?"

Drew sipped his beer and leaned back, looking pleased with himself. "Remember I hacked her credit card company and found out she hadn't used her card for months."

"Yes."

"There's been a development."

"What?"

"Yesterday I did another check and guess what?"

Murder was definitely back on the agenda. "What?"

"Last Tuesday she made a purchase."

"Shit. Where?"

"Would you believe, Byron Bay? A shop called *Holistic Health*. Must sell alternative medicines."

"What did she buy?"

"Some therapeutic oils. Cost her \$74."

Gary felt his excitement grow. Trixie had just made her first mistake - a big one. He looked at Drew's beaming face. "You've done very well."

"I know."

"Drink your beer and I'll buy you another."

Finally, something was going right. Trixie Powell was at the centre of a lot of mysteries. If he found her, he could start unlocking them.

Chapter 16

Forty years ago, Byron Bay was a small seaside hang-out for hippies and bohemians. Now its sandy beaches were lined with the million-dollar homes of jaded professionals and rich retirees.

But the invading urbanites didn't crush all of the local inhabitants. The town still had plenty of surfies, dropouts, New Agers and struggling artists barracooned in the worst real estate away from the coast. Thus people who'd worked and saved all their lives mingled with many who'd done neither.

Gary wasn't surprised Trixie went to ground there. It was a great place to shake off the past and re-invent yourself.

His Pulsar whined and moaned for the whole ten-hour drive to Byron Bay. He started out listening to CDs of the Ramones and Black Sabbath. Half-way, he downshifted to Split Enz. Then he rattled into Byron Bay listening to Johnny Cash sing *Folsom Prison Blues*, his fingers going clickety clack, clickety clack on the steering wheel.

The tourist season was over, so he got a cheap room at a small motel near Main Beach. The next morning, he strolled up Main Street where shops sold everything from high fashion to surfboards and New Age crystals. Several vegetarian restaurants offered low-taste food to those driving through life in a low gear.

Holistic Health was near the end of the street. The front window was festooned with leaflets advertising classes on yogic dance, naturopathy, meditation and massage.

He went inside. The shop was small and cluttered. The shelves were laden with jars of essential oils and herbal cures, and books on alternative medicine. Incense clogged the air.

A tall blonde in her early thirties, with a weather-beaten face and a nose-ring big enough to moor a ship, approached him. She wore a purple and orange sari. "Can I help, sir?"

Gary considered showing her a photo of Trixie. But, if she knew Trixie, she probably wouldn't admit it and might warn his quarry he was sniffing about. He abandoned that idea.

He said: "Yes. A friend's very interested in aromatherapy. She suggested I buy some essential oils."

"Why do you want them?"

"To relax."

"Well, roman chamomile and mandarin help release anxiety."

She took a jar from a shelf, unscrewed the cap and held it under Gary's nose. "This is roman chamomile. Many people find it very calming."

Gary sniffed a pungent though not unpleasant odour. "How much?"

"\$20."

"Fine. I'll buy a jar."

At the counter, Gary handed over his money. The woman recommended he use the oil either as a lotion or pour it into his bathwater.

He said: "Do you, umm, hold any classes on aromatherapy?"

"No. But I might soon. If I do, I'll put a sign in the window."

"Great. Does anyone else in town sell essential oils?"

She looked surprised. "Don't think so. The closest shop is in Lismore."

She put the jar in a paper bag and handed it to Gary, who left the shop. To find Trixie, he now had to wait until she returned to shop on Main Street. He might have to wait a long time, with no guarantee she'd turn up.

He wanted to watch Main Street without attracting suspicion and looked around for a good observation point.

Across the street from *Holistic Health* was a pub with a *Rooms Vacant* sign. He went inside and asked the barman for a vacant room overlooking the street. The barman checked him into one. Then Gary shifted his gear from the motel where he'd been staying to the pub.

His new room had a lumpy mattress, peeling walls and a mangy carpet. But it was clean and, despite being above the bar, fairly quiet. At night, the loudest noises came from trucks rumbling up the street.

His vigil for Trixie Powell soon developed into a routine. After eating breakfast in a café, he retired to his room and watched the street with binoculars for a few hours. Then he strolled up and down the street for about an hour, before lunching in an Italian restaurant. After another stroll, he sank a few beers in the pub before retiring to his room for another session with the binoculars. The whole day, *Holistic Health* was rarely out of his sight.

A fascinating cross-section padded up and down the street: wealthy retirees and holidaymakers with Rolexes, Ray-Bans, perma-tans and face-lifts, mingled with riff-raff of all kinds.

The ferals—who lived in isolated communities without electricity or running water—were particularly interesting. The rail-thin men wore shorts and T-shirts and the women wore everything from tie-dyed sarongs to dark crinoline dresses. Most had dreadlocks.

They didn't stay in town for long. Just picked up their dole cheques, bought supplies and puttered off in dilapidated vehicles. Parking tickets were casually flicked into bins.

Gary's ribs slowly healed, he got a tan and started growing a beard. But after two weeks he wondered if he was on a wild goose chase. Maybe Trixie visited *Holistic Health* while driving through the town to a far-off destination.

Then he saw her.

Just before noon, as he strolled along Main Street, two women headed towards him. Both wore black crinolines and heavy black boots. One was in her mid-thirties, with raven dreadlocks and dark-brown skin. The other was a little younger, with blonde dreadlocks, a pale complexion and haunted eyes. She carried a box of groceries.

Gary suddenly recognised the blonde one. She'd tamed her frizzy hair and lost some weight, but her big round liquid eyes were unmistakable. Seeing Trixie was a huge shock. With great difficulty, he looked away and kept walking.

They strode past and climbed into a rust-streaked Volkswagen Kombi van which backed out and headed north, spluttering loudly and belching smoke.

Gary had parked his Pulsar behind the pub. Heart thumping, he dashed around to it and jumped in. His anxiety made him flood the engine. It took a couple of minutes of sweating and cursing before it farted roundly and roared into life.

Terrified he'd lost Trixie, he tore off after her, ignoring all side streets, gambling she'd stay on the main road until it reached the Pacific Highway.

Approaching the highway, his panic grew. If he didn't catch up with the Kombi before the highway, he wouldn't know which way it turned. Then he took a corner and saw the Kombi tootling along, about a hundred metres ahead, belching smoke

like a fleeing battleship. His heart clattered joyfully. After a few deep breaths, he relaxed his grip on the steering wheel and eased his foot off the accelerator.

As the Kombi turned north at the highway, Gary got close enough to read its rusty licence plate and scrawl the number on a map lying next to him. He followed it at a safe distance, pondering what he'd just seen. Trixie's clothes suggested she'd gone feral. Why? Who was her friend? And where were they going? His pursuit of Trixie kept getting curiouser and curiouser.

After about twenty minutes, the Kombi turned onto a narrow bitumen road. To avoid detection, Gary hung back on straight stretches and sped up when the Kombi approached a corner or brow of a hill.

For ten kilometres, the only signs of habitation were a few farmhouses set back from the road. Then the Kombi turned through a gate and parked near a small group of dilapidated buildings. As Gary drove past, he saw a farmer's cottage, several rusting tin sheds, two corrugated iron humpies, an old caravan, a canvas tent and a tee-pee. It looked like a third-world slum that a strong wind could blow flat. Half-a-dozen ferals were moving about.

The road circled around behind a hill. Gary parked behind it, climbed to the top and observed the community below. For thirty minutes, ferals washed clothes, repaired cars, chopped wood and chatted in groups. Several kids played hide-and-seek. He counted about twenty adults and children. But he didn't see Trixie, who'd disappeared into a building. How did she end up in this commune? Did she know someone already there? Or did she just turn up one day and ask to stay?

One thing was sure: she'd found a brilliant place to hide. This place was almost on another planet. He only found her because she got sloppy with her credit card.

There was a good chance that whoever bombed his apartment was also looking for Trixie. So before he told Barbara Thompson where she was, he wanted to find out why she was in the feral commune and who was chasing her.

He went back to his car and used a knife to cut his fan-belt. Then, when it was dark, he trudged up the road towards the commune. He turned through the main gate and saw six adults sitting around a large log fire that was heating a cooking pot. Several small children danced around, yelling and screaming.

The flickering firelight illuminated sun-scorched faces, shaggy beards, nose-studs, nose-rings, nose-bones, dreadlocks and ear feathers. The air was cool, so most wore tattered football jumpers or pullovers. No Trixie. But her shopping companion now wore a football jumper over her black dress.

Gary, now bearded, wore a black pullover, chinos and running shoes, and didn't feel too out of place. Many faces turned to watch him approach.

He said: "Hi there. Sorry to bother you, but my car broke down just over the hill. Fan-belt's stuffed. I need a lift to the nearest garage. Can anyone help?"

A blond guy in his mid-thirties, with a goatee beard and ponytail, looked up at Gary. He wore an old grey pullover and canvas trousers. "Nearest garage is in Byron, about 45 clicks away."

"Really? Well I need a lift there and back. I'll pay. Would a hundred bucks be enough?"

The guy's eyes glinted in the firelight. "Sure, man. But I can't tonight, I'm afraid. I'm going to town tomorrow morning. You can come along. My name's Rick."

"Thanks, mine's Gary."

They shook hands.

Rick said: "You had anything to eat?"

"No."

"We're cooking lentil stew. Be ready in about twenty minutes. Want some?"

"Sure, thanks."

Gary sat on a log.

Rick said: "Where you from?"

"Sydney."

"What're you doing up here?"

"Heading towards Brisbane, to visit some friends. I was cutting across towards Nimbin when my car conked out."

"Well, you picked a bad place to break down. What do you do in Sydney?"

"I'm a high school teacher, though right now I'm on holiday." Gary glanced around. "Who owns this place?"

"A farmer who lives over the hill. It's only about 10 hectares, so it's too small for him, but perfect for us. We all chip in to pay the rent."

"How long have you been here?"

"The community's been here for about ten years. But I've only been here about five. I used to be an advertising exec in Sydney and got sick of that. You know, city people think we're strange. But people in suits and ties are the weirdos. Human beings aren't meant to live in cities. We're tribal animals. We're supposed to live together peacefully, in nature. That's what we're doing."

This guy had obviously never heard about tribal warfare. "Sounds smart to me. You guys follow any particular religion?"

A woman interjected: "We believe in all sorts: Buddhism, Animism, Voodoo, American Indian folklore. Take your pick. We've even got a few witches."

Rick looked at Gary. "What do you believe in?"

"I'm a Jedi Knight. I believe in the Force."

Rick laughed. "That's cool. There are so many different realities. You've just got to choose the one that suits you best."

Gary chatted for a while about their community, trying to sound interested. They were remarkably friendly and talked incredibly slowly. He tried to sound laid-back, but his vocal gearbox didn't go that low.

They served him lentil stew with a thick slice of damper baked on the coals. It tasted excellent and he wolfed it down.

He didn't want to seem too anxious to join their group. After eating, he stood and thanked them for the meal. He said he'd sleep in his car and be back in the morning. No one offered him a bed for the night, so he stumbled back to his car, lay down on the back seat, and slept uncomfortably.

A tapping noise woke Gary after dawn. Bleary-eyed, he looked up.

Rick was staring through the car window, wearing the same pullover as the night before. "Get up man, we're going to town."

Gary sat up. A Ford van was parked across the road. Painted on its side in radioactive colours were whales, porpoises, fluffy white clouds and smiling suns.

He stiffly climbed out of his car and locked all of the doors. Then he followed Rick across to the van. In the front passenger seat was a cute woman in her late twenties, with beaded hair, wearing a purple T-shirt and Afghan shorts.

In the back seat were a boy, about eight, and a girl a few years younger. Both wore khaki school uniforms. Compared with their parents, they looked remarkably neat and tidy, though the girl had snot leaking from her nose.

Rick told Gary to climb into the back. As Gary opened the back door, the kids giggled and scrambled over to the other side.

"Hi there," Gary said, provoking more giggles.

Rick got behind the wheel and turned to Gary. "Let me introduce everyone". He nodded towards the woman sitting next to him. "This is Jedda, the love of my life. And these are our kids, Pegasus and Jocasta. I hope you don't mind, but we've got to drop them off at school on the way to town."

"Sure."

Rick slipped the van into gear and it rattled up the road.

The kids opened their lunch boxes and complained about the sandwiches inside. Jedda eventually solved the problem making them swap sandwiches. Then the kids demanded to be taken to the beach after school. Rick said he'd take them, if there was enough time.

The school was on the outskirts of Byron Bay. Rick pulled up next to a playground full of screaming kids. Pegasus pushed opened the door and jumped out with his sister hot on his heels. They dashed off without a backward glance.

Gary said: "They look keen."

"They love school," Rick said proudly. "In fact, they're both near the top of their classes. I think it's because they don't spend all their time watching TV or playing video games."

"What do they want to do when they grow up?"

He grinned. "You mean, do they want to drop out like their folks?"

"Yes."

His weather-beaten face creased into a smile. "Don't know. Whatever they do is OK with us. Hey, we rebelled against society. Maybe they'll rebel against us and go straight. That would be a laugh, huh?"

Rick put the van in gear and headed towards town. He glanced at Gary over his shoulder. "Umm, I hope you don't mind giving me the hundred bucks when we get to town. I've got to buy a few things and I've only got Australs."

"Australs?"

"That's the currency we use around here. When someone does something for you—like fix your car—you give him a note saying how many Australs you owe him. It's like an IOU. You can trade them."

"Does everyone honour them?"

"Most do. But sometimes people hand out lots of Astrals and disappear."

"How do you make real money?"

"You mean, the stuff the Government prints?"

"Yes."

"I sell pottery and beads, and get the dole. I know a lot of people reckon I'm a bludger for claiming it. But I work for it."

"How?"

"I clear non-native vegetation from the forests, on my own initiative. That's hard work."

Gary pulled out his wallet and proffered a hundred dollars. Rick snaffled it.

As they turned into Main Street, Gary felt a twinge of embarrassment about being in a technicolour van with two ferals. He was obviously a lot squarer than he thought.

Rick parked in front of the post office, next to a big gold Merc and turned to Gary. "OK, we'll be here for about an hour. See you later."

Gary went off to a garage and bought a fan-belt for his car. On the way back, he did some window-shopping and saw Jedda emerge from a health-food store carrying a couple of bulky grocery bags. He strolled over and asked if she needed help.

"Yes, thanks."

He took the bags and followed her towards the van. Sitting in front of a pub, drinking, were a couple of beefy guys in check shirts and jeans. Both leered at Jedda.

"Hey luv," one said. "Can I crawl into your tent one night? What about it?"

Jedda ignored him and kept walking. But Gary trod hard on the guy's foot.

The guy yelped and jumped up. "Hey, what the fuck do you think you're doing?"

Gary smelt beer on his breath. "Sorry, didn't see your foot."

"Then keep your eyes open."

"OK." Gary moved up close to the guy and spoke softly. "But if you ever insult that woman again, I'll rip off your head and spit down your neck. Understand?"

The guy looked like he'd just seen a cat bark. "Don't threaten me."

Gary feared the guy would throw a punch while he held the groceries. He was lining up a head-butt when the guy's friend spoke up.

"Forget about it Ted. It's not worth it."

The man stared at Gary and shrugged. "Yeah, let's get another beer."

They both disappeared into the pub.

Jedda gave Gary a strange look. "Thanks for that. But it wasn't necessary."

"Yes it was. I'm a teacher—I like good manners. Who were they?"

"Loggers. They hate us. Think we're scum. But they're the ones destroying the earth."

When they reached the van, Rick was waiting. Jedda told him what had happened outside the pub.

Rick looked at Gary. "Thanks man."

Gary shrugged. "It was nothing."

Rick drove them back towards the commune. As they approached Gary's car, Rick turned towards him. "We're having a festival tonight. Why don't you hang around? There'll be lots of people. Maybe a hundred or more."

Jedda said: "Yeah, come along."

Gary said: "What sort of festival?"

Rick said: "For the autumnal equinox. We make a big bonfire and do lots of dancing. It's how we affirm we're all part of a tribe. We move our egos out of ourselves and into our clan."

Sounded like a good chance to meet Trixie. "OK, count me in."

Chapter 17

After replacing the fan-belt, Gary drove over to the commune and parked just inside the front gate. Rick sat outside his tin shack, under an awning, smoking a hand-made cigarette. Gary strolled over to him.

Rick looked up. "Glad you came. Want some lunch?"

"Thanks."

Rick led him through a rusted fly-screen door into the living room. Two couches, covered with tie-dyed sheets, sat on a collage of rugs and carpet strips. A large bookshelf, made of bricks and wooden slats, held texts on animism, shamanism and witchcraft. Everything was neat and tidy, and dusty.

Gary said: "Where's Jedda?"

"In the National Park, looking for some herbs. Won't be back for a few hours."

Rick took him into the kitchen where he re-heated some lentil stew on a primus stove. When it was hot, he spooned some onto two plates and handed one to Gary.

They sat at a rickety table and started eating. The stew didn't taste as good as the night before.

Gary said: "You said you were an advertising executive. Why'd you quit and come up here?"

"It's a long story."

"I've got all day."

Rick explained that, in his twenties, he was a hot-shot creative director at a big advertising firm in Sydney. He poured his energy into making commercials for dog biscuits, toilet paper and washing powder. Then after work, he hopped between nightclubs, drinking heavily and ingesting copious quantities of drugs. Many mornings he woke with no idea where he'd been the night before or who was sleeping next to him. "I thought I was happy."

But one morning, Rick got into his BMW coupe and couldn't bring himself to start the engine. A huge wave of depression swept over him. He cried for fifteen minutes. His life, he realised, was empty and meaningless. "I finally understood that money and success don't set you free. They just weigh you down."

So he chucked in his job, sold most of his worldly possessions, and spent two years travelling around Asia, talking to priests and gurus, connecting with the poor, looking for spiritual enlightenment. "Asia was a revelation. I realised that we've lost touch with ourselves—with our inner beings—and with nature. So, when I returned home, I joined this commune."

After joining, he tried to find himself through spiritual healing, herbalism, firewalking, pottery and jewellery making. But what really rocked his Casbah was shamanism. About six months after he arrived, he took all of his official papers—birth certificate, passport and driver's licence—and burnt them. Then he went into the forest and built a circle of stones, which he sat inside, chanting and meditating. After a few days, a great eagle circled overhead. Rick felt his soul leave his body and enter the bird, which became his power animal. The eagle gave him energy and connected him with nature. Through it he saw the future.

Gary reckoned Rick really got lost when he stopped hopping between nightclubs. Still, he feigned interest: "So, are you happy now?"

Rick's sun-brown face crinkled into a smile. "As Einstein said, happiness is for pigs. But I'm a lot happier than most people, I think."

"Are you the leader here?"

"We don't have a leader. But people listen to what I say and often take my advice, probably because I talk the most. Never have been able to shut up."

A woman opened a wire-screen door and entered the kitchen. Gary felt a jolt of excitement. She was with Trixie in Byron Bay. In her mid-thirties, she had dark dreadlocks, smooth brown skin, large eyes and a lithe body. She'd replaced her widow-weeds with a green gypsy blouse and long orange skirt.

Rick said: "Hi Rachel."

"Hi."

"This is Gary. He's the guy whose car broke down yesterday. I just took him in to town for a fan-belt."

She looked casually at Gary. "You staying long?"

"Only for the festival tonight."

"Well, you should enjoy it." She turned to Rick. "Did you get me any milk in town?"

"Of course. It's in the grocery bag, on the couch."

Rachel disappeared and came back a minute later, holding two cartons of long-life milk.

Rick said: "Take a seat."

She sat facing Gary, who said: "Where do you live?"

"Next door."

"Been here long?"

"About four years. Before that, I lived in Sydney. Then I became a witch and moved up here."

Gary had never met a witch before. He'd always pictured them as old crones stirring vats of boiling liquid while chanting witchy things. She shattered that image.

He said: "Really? What do witches believe in?"

"We believe in the Earth Mother Goddess and use her energy to cast spells."

"What sort of spells?"

"Depends on the witch. I'm a white witch, not a black one. I only cast good spells. I channel the power of the Goddess and open up an astral doorway to whatever reality I want."

Gary was the first kid in his class to stop believing in Santa Claus, and hated this sort of mumbo jumbo. But he accepted that some people had to suck on spiritual lollipops to ease the hell of life.

He said: "Sounds interesting. Do your spells work?"

"If I concentrate hard enough they do. Like, only last month, Tony was in hospital for an appendix operation. I cast a healing spell and he got better."

"You mean, the doctors didn't have to operate?"

"No. They cut out his appendix. But my spell guided their knives and helped him recover."

There was obviously an alternative interpretation.

Rick said: "Rachel also paints. Her stuff's really good. She sells some of it down in Byron."

Gary had no interest in art, but wanted to get closer to Rachel and therefore Trixie. "Really? I like art. Will you show me some of your work?"

It was a request no artist could refuse. Her face brightened. "Sure. Let's go over to my place."

They all strolled over to Rachel's shack, built around a large eucalyptus tree that stood in the centre of her living room. Attached to the tree was a pine shelf, holding a sword, wand and chalice. Painted onto the tree was a large pentagram. The living room also had a worn-out sofa and two rickety armchairs covered with tie-dyed sheets.

Gary's heart thumped and hands trembled when he saw Trixie Powell sitting in one of the armchairs, reading a book. She glanced up and smiled tentatively.

He smiled back. "Hi, I'm Gary."

"I'm Trixie."

To his disappointment, she resumed reading. He tried to think of a way to draw her out. But Rachel interrupted him.

"My paintings are over there," she said, pointing at the far corner of the room. Reluctantly, he left Trixie and went over to the dozen-or-so paintings stacked against a corrugated-iron wall. He crouched and thumbed through them. Some were on canvas, others Masonite.

Rachel peered over his shoulder. "What do you think?"

Gary didn't need any art expertise to know they were rubbish. They showed witches, druids, wizards and Greek goddesses cavorting around in technicolour landscapes or under lurid skies sprinkled with stars and planets. His eyeballs started to hurt. He needed sunglasses.

He turned to Rachel. "Wow, they're really good. You've got a gift."

She smiled. "You really think so?"

"Yes. Any for sale?"

He knew that would please her. For an artist, a cash purchase is the sincerest form of flattery.

A broad smile. "Of course."

After some negotiations, he purchased two paintings for \$30 each. She took his money with glee.

When she offered to make them a cup of tea, Rick shook his head. "Sorry, we've got to collect wood for the bonfire."

Gary wanted to stay and chat with Trixie, but there was no polite way to do so. He told Rachel he'd pick up the paintings later and followed Rick out the door.

As they left, he glanced at Trixie, still reading. She didn't even bother looking up.

Once outside, Gary turned to Rick. "Is Trixie also a witch?"

Rick shrugged. "Don't know. She's an old friend of Rachel's. Arrived a couple of months ago. She's not very friendly - keeps to herself. Bit stuck up, actually."

Rick led him down a gentle slope to a wide clearing beside a narrow stream. Beyond the stream was a lush old-growth forest. Several ferals carried dead wood out of the forest and threw it onto a large pyre in the middle of the clearing.

Rick led Gary across the stream and into the forest, where magnificent carabeen and booyong trees arched over a forest floor carpeted with orchids, ferns, mosses and vines.

Gary said: "Is this National Park?"

"Yep. Nice backyard, huh?"

Rick introduced Gary to several other ferals. For the next hour they all collected firewood, until the pyre was about three metres high.

A feral called Billy, with a Mohawk haircut, ran from the forest towards Rick, looking excited.

"The militia," he yelled, pointing back towards the forest.

"How far?" Rick asked.

"Just over the hill."

Rick turned and grinned at Gary. "If you want to have some fun, keep quiet and follow me. You'll enjoy this."

Rick and Billy headed back into the forest, with Gary and several others on their heels. After about a hundred metres, they climbed a small hill. Near the crest, Rick and Billy dropped to their bellies. Everybody else fanned out and did the same. Gary lay next to Rick and looked down into a narrow gully.

Sitting in a small clearing were about twenty men in combat fatigues carrying a wide assortment of rifles. A paunchy guy with a pistol on his hip swaggered about talking loudly. The breeze carried his voice up the hill. "Alright, listen up. I want to remind you exactly why we're here: it's because the faggot-liberal elite in Canberra want to hand over this country to the United Nations, and a bunch of wogs, slopes, dinks, towel-heads and Jews. They want to take our guns so we can't stop those bastards taking control. Well, they're not taking my fuckin' gun. You gonna let them take yours?"

The weekend warriors screamed "*No fuckin' way*" and "*Over my dead body*."

The paunchy guy, who really did have a red neck, said: "That's right. No fuckin' way. One of these days, we're gonna have to fight for what's ours. That's why we're out here—to get ready. Alright, on your feet. Let's get moving."

Everyone slowly rose and put on their packs.

Gary whispered: "Who the hell are they?"

Rick said: "The local Freedom Militia. The fat guy's their commander. Owns a farm near here. This is where they hold their manoeuvres."

"What the hell's the Freedom Militia?"

"A weirdo extremist group. They think God gave this country to the white man, and it's their job to keep everybody else out; they also think gun-control laws are a conspiracy to leave them defenceless."

"They sound crazy."

"They are. They even claim Martin Bryant had nothing to do with the Port Arthur Massacre."

"Then who shot all the tourists?"

"The gun-control lobby: it massacred 35 people so the Federal Government would ban automatic weapons."

"That's pretty wacky."

"Not to these guys."

"Where do they come from?"

"Most are rural hicks. A lot were in the army. Some even claim they're Vietnam vets, though they must have been child soldiers."

The Freedom Militia formed a ragged line and marched off.

Billy interjected. "Jesus, what shit soldiers. They're louder than elephants. With a couple of claymores and a rifle, I could wipe them out."

Gary was surprised at his militant tone and technical know-how.

Rick smiled. "Billy used to be in the army."

Gary rolled over and looked at Billy. "What unit?"

"SAS."

"I'm impressed. How long?"

"Seven years. I quit after Iraq Two."

Gary decided not to annoy Billy in any way. He looked back at Rick. "Do those guys ever cause you trouble?"

"Nah. They're only dangerous to themselves. Last month, thirty of them got lost and almost starved to death. Stumbled into our community looking like hell. They were all very polite."

"Interesting area."

Rick nodded. "You're right. I reckon it's a basic law in Australia that, the further North you go, the wackier people get. Then you cross the Queensland border into a big wide technicolour land beyond."

Gary sensed Rick still had plenty of the street smarts he had needed to become an advertising executive in Sydney. He was part of the feral scene and detached from it. As soon as another big opportunity came along, he'd grab it.

It was late afternoon when they got back to the commune. Dozens of decrepit vehicles were parked just inside the front gate. More than a hundred ferals of all ages had arrived. Numerous men were painting their bodies, or donning costumes and masks, to turn themselves into eagles, owls, bulls or tribesmen. Many women wore flowing white saris or sarongs, and garlands of flowers and leaves. The ferals were all slim, he noticed. No fatties need apply.

Rick took Gary back to his shack, where Jedda was vainly trying to get the kids to do their homework. Eventually she gave up and let them go out and play.

The three of them ate a vegetable stew. Then Gary watched Rick put on a costume with long feathers down both arms.

As Rick put on his eagle mask, and tightened the straps behind his head, he laughed: "Hey Gary, we all wear masks—at least mine is real." Rick flapped his wings. "This is how I get in touch with the Great Eagle. He's entering me now."

Soon after dusk, they strolled outside and watched someone light the pyre. Flames shot high into the air and created a wide pool of light. Most adults were toking roaches or drinking red wine from large flagons.

The music started: a mixture of didgeridoos, bongos and sticks. Dozens danced around the fire, whirling, leaping, stomping and chanting. Many shook firesticks and medicine rattles. Rick was one of the most energetic, flapping his eagle feathers as if hoping to fly. "Let the Great Eagle enter you all," he kept screaming.

Gary strolled around the fringe, looking for Trixie. Eventually, he saw her, standing by herself, and casually approached.

He had a whole list of questions to ask, including "Who killed Tony Thompson?" and "Who else is trying to find you?" But he had to gain her trust first.

"Hi there," he said.

A flat stare. "Hi."

"Been to many of these?"

"Not many. This is only my third."

"Really? How long have you lived here?"

"Not long."

She obviously didn't want to talk. And if he got too pushy, she might get suspicious. So he reluctantly said goodbye and moved on.

A few minutes later, he ran into Rachel, her sweaty face gleaming in the firelight. She wore a loose sari and held a large joint.

She said: "Enjoying the festival?"

"Of course."

"Want a toke?"

It would be bad manners to refuse, so he took a couple of big drags. The dope had a real kick and made him giddy. When he worked undercover, he sampled some fantastic dope. This stuff was better.

"Wow," he squeaked.

"Good huh?"

"Excellent. Where does it come from?"

She grinned. "Let's just say it's grown locally."

"How locally?"

"*Very* locally."

"What's it called?"

"*North Coast Gold*. Totally organic. Want to dance?"

"Sure. Why not."

Gary took a few more tokes and felt his head start to float. He joined the dancers and stomped around like an American Indian warrior, imagining he was Crazy Horse on the night before Little Big Horn. After shooting Yellow-Hair he was going to scalp the bastard.

After about twenty minutes, his head cleared and legs grew heavy. He staggered off and sat on a log. Rachel sat next to him, still holding a large joint.

She said: "Very impressive. Want another toke?"

He hungrily eyed the joint. "Why not?"

Just before dawn, Rick climbed into bed next to Jedda, fell asleep and dreamed he was the Great Eagle, perched on top of a high cliff. He spread his wings and threw himself into the void. An updraft caught him and pushed him towards the sun. But doubts crept in: he wasn't the Great Eagle; he was just a man wearing feathers. His wings trembled and shook. He plunged towards the earth. Just before impact, he woke, heart pounding.

He'd never had a dream like that before. It seemed a portent of disaster. He looked at the half-smoked joint lying next to him. Maybe he smoked too much dope.

Now wide-awake, he recalled the previous night's festival. He had a great time and the new guy, Gary, also seemed to enjoy himself. Just before midnight, he saw Gary and Rachel head off to her shack, holding hands. Lucky guy. Rick had always fancied Rachel, but never got to shag her.

Rick was suspicious of visitors, because he was cultivating about 100 marijuana plants in a small gully in the National Park. Soon he would harvest them. Was Gary here because of them? Shit. Maybe he was an undercover cop, and that was why Rick dreamed about falling to earth: the Great Eagle was warning him about an impending disaster.

Rick knew he was being paranoid, but reckoned he was entitled to be. It was time for Gary to move on.

Chapter 18

Gary woke the next morning, laying on a mattress, pressed up against Rachel's back, a hand on her hip. Sunlight streamed through a large gap in the corrugated iron wall.

The dope had obliterated most of the night before. He couldn't even remember if they had sex. They both wore T-shirts and underpants, so he guessed not.

"You awake?" he mumbled.

"Yeah," she said, and rolled over so their eyes met.

"Umm, did we do anything last night?"

She smiled. "I don't think so. But we can now, if you want."

He kissed her on the lips. She responded, briefly, before pulling away.

"Wait," she said and rose from the mattress. As she did, he admired her firm body. Obviously, not all witches were old haridans who rode broomsticks.

She opened a small cabinet and took out a jar. After removing the lid, she dipped her fingers inside and covered them with oil. Then chanting quietly, she rubbed the oil into a red candle. After lighting the candle, she stood it on a plate next to the mattress and lay down beside him.

He said: "What were you doing?"

"Casting a love spell."

While they kissed, her roughened hands slowly stroked his penis. Then she replaced them with the soft texture of her mouth. Gary saw her spell was definitely working.

After a long bout of frenetic sex, he slept for a while. He woke to find her, still naked, running her hands over his body. "What're you doing?"

"Taking an aural reading of your energy field." She looked concerned. "Mmm."

"What's wrong?"

"I'm not an aural mechanic, but I think you've got a build-up of toxins in the liver and congestion in the lymph glands."

"Is that bad?"

"It can make you aggressive and hostile."

Maybe he did have a build-up. "What should I do about it?"

"Drink liver tonic and sleep on your left side."

"Why?"

"That will stimulate the right side of your brain that controls the liver and lymph glands."

"Aren't you worried my bad liver might make me angry?"

"Don't worry, you're sending out good vibrations." She stood up. "Do you want to go for a swim in the creek?"

"Won't it be cold?"

"Of course. But don't be a wimp."

He sighed. "OK."

While they dressed, he thought about Robyn and wondered whether, if she was still alive, they'd have experienced this sort of happy moment. Sadness overcame him and he sighed.

Rachel said: "You OK?"

"Yes, why?"

"You just sighed."

"I was just clearing my chest."

"OK."

They finished dressing and left the shack. Outside, Gary looked around for Trixie and didn't see her. The bonfire was now a small heap of dying embers surrounded by trampled grass. Smoke curled lazily into the sky.

About a dozen adults, and a similar number of kids, splashed about in the creek. All were naked, including Trixie, who, he noted, was very well put together.

As they strolled towards the creek, he turned to Rachel. "How long has Trixie lived with you?"

"Not long. She's an old friend. We used to work together in Sydney. She came up here a couple of months ago."

"Why?"

Rachel shrugged. "Wanted a change, I guess. She's had a rough time recently. Her boyfriend died."

Gary felt a surge of excitement. Now he was getting close - really close - to the information he wanted. He tried to sound disinterested. "What happened to him?"

Rachel shook her head. "I'm sorry, I can't tell you. She told me not to talk about it. Forget I even mentioned it, OK?"

"Why? What's the big secret?"

She shook her head again. "Sorry, I can't talk about it."

Trixie obviously told Rachel what happened to Tony Thompson. Maybe she even revealed who killed him. But Rachel wouldn't reveal that information, at least for now. Best to drop the issue and return to it later.

He shrugged. "OK. Is Trixie also a witch?"

"Not yet, though I'm working on her."

"Think you'll succeed?"

"Yep, she's pretty interested in the whole thing."

Gary stripped naked and plunged into the icy water. Air exploded from his lungs. It was great to wash the sweat and grime off his body. He just wished he had a bar of soap and a razor.

A naked Rachel jumped in behind him and was soon introducing him to the other swimmers, whose names sounded like they came from a herbs & spice rack. Some he'd already met. Others came from neighbouring communities. All were friendly, except Trixie, who as usual kept to herself.

Nobody was curious about his background or what he was doing with Rachel. That didn't surprise him. Many were obviously wounded souls who'd crawled away

from some life-wreck. They came here to escape their pasts and build new lives. So they only wanted to know his star sign. He said he was an Aries and they nodded knowingly, as if that explained everything.

While Gary floated on his back, the others gossiped about the previous night's festival: who slept with whom; who threw up; who got badly stoned; who fell into the fire ...

After a while, Trixie left the water, put on her clothes and strolled back up to the shack. Soon afterwards, Rachel told Gary it was time for lunch. After hopping about for a while to dry off, they got into their clothes and returned to the shack.

Trixie had already laid out fruit, bread and pesto salad on the table. While they all ate, Rachel asked Gary about his life in Sydney.

He'd already said he was a high school teacher on holiday. Now, to win some sympathy and for the sheer joy of acting, he said his wife recently left him. "I got really depressed and decided I needed a break. So I headed for Brisbane to see some friends."

Trixie spoke up. "I know what it's like to lose someone close. My boyfriend died recently."

Gary's heart pounded. "Really? How?"

A violent shake of the head. "I'd rather not say."

"You sure? Sometimes it helps to talk about these things—get them off your chest."

She shook her head even more vigorously. "No, no, I'd rather not."

"You sure?"

"Yes."

Gary felt a wave of disappointment. He'd had a tantalising glimpse of his goal, only to see it disappear around a corner. But there was no point pressing her any harder for the moment, so he dropped the subject.

For the rest of lunch, Rachel explained to Gary the finer points of witchcraft - the beliefs, customs and paraphernalia - while Trixie picked at her food and said little. Eventually, she said she was going for a walk. She tossed her leftovers onto the compost pile outside and disappeared.

Rachel said: "When do you have to be in Brisbane?"

"No fixed time."

She leaned forward and looked him in the eye. "Then maybe you should stay around here for a while."

Gary wanted to stay until he got Trixie to spill the beans, but didn't want to look too keen. He shrugged. "I'll hang around for a few more days, if you'll let me. Then I'd better get moving. I get itchy feet."

She smiled. "A few more days would be nice."

After lunch, Rachel gave Gary a massage, which turned into another bout of torrid sex on her mattress. They'd just put their clothes back on when Rick strolled into the bedroom without knocking. He looked a little tired.

After they all exchanged greetings, Rick asked Gary if he enjoyed the festival.

"Had a great time."

"Yeah, it looks like it," Rick said, smirking at Rachel, who rolled her eyes. "We've got another ceremony planned for tonight. You want to join in?"

"What is it?"

"We're going to bury a few guys."

Gary furrowed his brow. "How'd they die?"

Rick smiled. "They're not dead. We're going to bury them up to their necks and leave them like that overnight. It'll help them connect with nature: take them back to the earth, the foundation of their being. You interested?"

Though Gary didn't want to be buried up to his neck, he was keen to fit in. "OK."

"Good. I'll come and get you around sundown."

Gary spent the rest of the afternoon helping Rachel replace some sheets of corrugated iron on the roof of her shack. He did most of the heavy lifting. But she drilled the holes with a brace and bit, and screwed the sheets in place.

He soon realised that he really liked her. True, she was very flaky and there was a lot of hidden pain in her eyes. But she meant well and wouldn't hurt a fly. So he daydreamed about dropping out and settling down with her. They could bring up some little witches and warlocks of their own.

Deep down though, he knew it wouldn't work. After a while, her weird beliefs would grate, and he didn't want to give up the amenities of modern life. She couldn't compete with hot showers, internet access, cooked breakfasts and watching test cricket on the TV.

That evening, Rick returned with half-a-dozen men carrying shovels and torches. He had several sheets of plastic under his arm, and handed one to Gary. "Here, take this. The soil will probably be damp, so you'll have to wrap yourself up in it."

Gary took the plastic sheet and followed the group out to a large open area behind Rachel's shack. They divided into three small groups and started digging holes in different parts of the field.

Gary and Rick took turns digging his hole. The soil was quite loose and it only took them half-an-hour to dig a cavity about the size of a bath-tub.

Gary wasn't anxious to lie down in it. "How long do I have to stay buried?"

"Most people stay until dawn. But I'll check every couple of hours to see how you're going. If you're not happy, I'll dig you out."

Gary wrapped the plastic sheet around himself and lay down in the hole, with only his head exposed. Rick used the shovel to pile dirt on top of him.

Rick said: "As I put on more dirt, you'll have some trouble breathing. Just try to relax. You'll adjust."

As the hole filled up, Gary felt his chest constrict and breathing grow shorter. After a surge of anxiety, his breathing turned shallow but steady.

When Gary was buried up to his neck, Rick smiled. "How do you feel?"

"Is there room service?"

"Afraid not. Just relax and feel yourself become part of the earth."

"What if it rains?"

"Hey man, rain's part of nature too. I'll be back in an hour to see how you're going."

Rick dropped the shovel and strode off. Gary could only turn his head a few centimetres, so Rick quickly disappeared from view.

The sun expired and the stars popped out. A half-moon let Gary see the dark outline of a few trees and a fence bordering the field.

He lost track of time. After at least an hour - maybe two - his body started to cramp. He fought down an urge to scream for help and prayed Rick would soon return.

Another long period elapsed. Still no Rick. The cramping grew worse. Then, to his intense relief, he heard footsteps approach from behind. He tried to swivel his head and couldn't.

Rick stepped in front of him. "How do you feel?"

"Cold and tired; my muscles ache."

Rick crouched. "You want to get out?"

"Definitely."

"OK. But first you've got to answer a few questions." His voice had an edge Gary didn't like.

"What sort of questions?"

"Like: what the fuck're you doing here, man?"

Fear made Gary's numb toes tingle. "What do you mean?"

"You're a cop, right?"

Gary groaned inside. This guy was obviously suspicious for all the wrong reasons. "What the hell are you talking about? Why would I be a cop?"

"You're full of shit. We both know why you're here."

"I'm a teacher. My car broke down."

"Bullshit. I think you're a cop."

"This is crazy. You're crazy."

Rick's shovel glinted in the moonlight. He used the edge to tap Gary on the side of the head and spoke savagely: "You know, I could take your head off right now, and nobody would know it was me."

Gary stopped worrying about cramp. "I'm not a cop, believe me."

"Maybe you are; maybe you're not. I don't care. You're a stranger, and I don't like strangers around here. So I want you to piss off."

Gary considered yelling for help, but there was no point. The only people within earshot were buried up to their necks. He said: "Sure. If that's what you want, I'll go. Just dig me out of here, man. I'll get in my car and disappear."

Rick stood and tossed away the shovel. "Good. But I won't dig you out. You'll have to wait until morning. Then you've got to go, OK?"

"Sure, no problem."

"And we won't tell Rachel about this little conversation, will we?"

"Of course not."

On that note, Rick strode off.

The next ten hours were hell. The cramp got worse and made it impossible to sleep. So Gary had plenty of time to ponder, when the pain wasn't too intense, why Rick suspected he was a cop. Rick must be doing something illegal. What? Gary remembered the plentiful supply of dope at the festival. Maybe Rick was growing dope somewhere, and that made him skittish.

Whatever Rick's motive, Gary intended to obey his order to leave. If he hung around and made a scene, Trixie would get suspicious and disappear. Then he'd be back to square one.

When the men returned, at dawn, Rick wasn't among them. By that time, Gary was in excruciating pain and totally sick of nature.

Chapter 19

Rachel first met Trixie in a brothel in Darlinghurst, Sydney. They soon became close friends and realised they shared a similar ambition: to get out of prostitution.

Trixie was the first to escape. She teamed up with one of her customers, a drug dealer called Tony Thompson. Rachel, on the other hand, studied witchcraft and moved to the North Coast, where there were plenty of covens.

They stayed in touch through letters. Then, one morning, Trixie appeared outside Rachel's shack, looking upset. She said Tony had been murdered, though she refused to say who killed him or why, and she needed somewhere to hide. Rachel agreed to let her stay.

A couple of months later, Gary Maddox turned up. After Rachel became a witch and committed herself to the Goddess, she lost interest in men. But Gary stirred something deep inside her. He was a big, attractive man who reminded her of the Horned God.

So she was very upset when he returned from the burial ritual and said he had to leave for Brisbane. He looked a little spooked, but didn't say why.

"OK," she said, feeling as if she'd just turned up the death card. "Maybe, on your way back from Brisbane, you'll call in?"

"Of course I will. Thanks for letting me stay."

He kissed her lightly on the lips, got into his car and drove off. She knew she'd never see him again.

Chapter 20

As Gary drove away from the commune, he decided it was time to tell Barbara Thompson that he'd found Trixie. Hopefully, she would get Trixie to reveal who killed Tony Thompson and who was following her. And when she did, Gary would listen in.

He booked into a small motel a couple of kilometres north of Byron Bay. From his room, he called Barbara Thompson at work.

She sounded irritated. "Where have you been? I've been calling your office for almost two weeks and keep getting your answering machine."

"Sorry, I got a lead on Trixie and I've been following it."

"Have you found her?"

"Yes."

"My goodness, where?"

"Near Byron Bay."

"Where exactly?"

Gary didn't want to reveal Trixie's precise location, because he wanted to be present when Barbara Thompson talked to her. "It's hard to explain. When you get up here, I'll tell you."

"Umm, alright. I'll be there tomorrow afternoon. Where are you staying?"

Gary gave her the name of his motel and its telephone number.

"Fine, I'll be there by tomorrow evening."

While waiting for his client, Gary slept, read newspapers and went for a couple of long beach walks. The following afternoon, he stayed in his room and watched a John Wayne western on TV. Wheel of Fortune had just started when he heard a knock on the door. His watch said it was 4:35 p.m.

Barbara Thompson stood outside, dressed in a T-shirt with a sequin pattern and jeans. It was hard to tell who lived behind her large sunglasses and heavy make-up. Whoever did saw little sunlight.

"Come in," he said and stood back to let her enter. "How'd you get here?"

She didn't take off her sunglasses. "I flew to Byron Bay and hired a car."

He sat on the edge of the bed. She took the only chair and leaned forward, excitedly. "Where is she?"

Gary remembered he was running a business and the best time to get paid was before a job finished. "I know you must be anxious to see her. But there are a couple of matters I'd like to get out of the way. First, my bill so far, including all expenses, is about \$12,000. On top of that, when I tell you where to find Trixie, you'll owe me a \$5,000 bonus. So, after subtracting the \$10,000 you've already paid me, you'll owe me \$7,000."

"Of course. That's our arrangement and I'll honour it. In fact I'll give you a cheque right now."

She whipped out a chequebook and wrote a cheque for \$7,000, which she handed over.

He casually slipped it into his back pocket. "Thanks. The other matter is this: I'll only tell you where to find Trixie if I can be present when you talk to her."

Barbara Thompson arched a heavily tweezered eyebrow. "Why do you want to be there?"

"Because I reckon that whoever bombed my apartment is also looking for Trixie. I bet she knows who that person is."

She nodded her head. "Alright then, you can be present. But you've got to leave the talking to me. I know Trixie so, if she'll talk to anyone, it'll be me."

"I understand."

Barbara Thompson leaned forward. "So, where is she?"

A local map lay on the bed. Gary unfolded it and pointed to the right spot. "She's living in a feral commune about here, on the Bongollo Road."

More eyebrow instability. "What sort of commune?"

"Feral."

A tight smile. "Hah, I'm not surprised. That sounds like Trixie. When will you take me there?"

"What about tomorrow morning."

"Fine. I'll check into this motel. I see it has a restaurant. Let's have dinner together."

"Sure."

She went and checked in. When she returned, just after six, they went down to an empty restaurant with wood-veneer walls, a thin grey carpet and plastic tableclothes. They sat next to the window, overlooking a truck-stop and the highway.

The laminated menu offered dishes from half-a-dozen countries, many misspelt, most deep-fried. Gary played safe and ordered the fish of the day. Barbara Thompson did the same.

Gary had worried they wouldn't have anything to talk about. But, to his relief, Barbara Thompson happily prattled on about herself. He learnt that, after her husband abandoned her, she worked as an office cleaner, chicken-plucker, process worker and then nurse. Not surprisingly, she said little about her sons, who were a lousy advertisement for her parenting skills.

Her tough life had left her bitter and small-minded: politicians were scum; migrants were taking over; the poor were lazy bums and nobody did a good job anymore. She claimed to have lots of enemies. The more she talked, the closer Gary came to joining them.

He was relieved when she yawned and said she wanted an early night. When he offered to pay for dinner, she insisted on picking up the tab and he let her. It was the least she could do after boring him to death.

Back in his room, he stripped down to his singlet and underpants, lay on the bed and watched a re-run of *The Simpsons*. It had almost finished when the door crashed open and two men wearing balaclava masks charged through it. The first waved a pistol, the other a sawn-off double-barrelled shotgun.

Gary was stunned. Fear and shock fried his synapses. His pistol lay in the bottom of his suitcase, across the room. They'd cut him down long before he reached it.

The smart move was to raise his trembling hands, which he did. "Don't shoot. Who the fuck're you?"

"Ya worst nightmare," the one with the shottie yelled. "Ya want to live, do what ya fuckin' told. Get up."

"Who are...?"

The intruder with the shottie marched across the room and used the barrel to jab Gary in the stomach. "Get up or I'll spill ya guts on the floor." His trigger finger was white and the barrel quivered.

Gary stood up, hands still raised.

"Good. Now turn round and put ya hands behind ya back."

Gary did as he was told. While the intruder with the shotgun pressed the barrel into Gary's neck, his accomplice tied Gary's wrists together with rope.

Shotgun Man said: "OK, now we're goin' for a little drive."

Gary said: "Where to?"

"It's a surprise."

"What about my clothes?"

"Don't worry, ya won't need 'em."

Gary didn't like the sound of that.

Shotgun Man slipped over to the doorway, peered outside and looked back. "It's clear."

His accomplice stuck his pistol into Gary's back and shoved him towards the door. "Don't even think about running."

Shotgun Man led them out the door and over to an old white Holden Commodore. He opened the back door and ordered Gary to get inside. Gary complied. The other intruder slid in next to Gary and jammed his pistol into Gary's side.

About 30 metres away, the over-weight manager of the motel left his office and ran towards them. "Hey, stop. You've got to check out; you've got to pay."

Shotgun Man spun around and fired both barrels. The manager tumbled over and lay still.

The shooter leaped behind the steering wheel and dropped his shotgun onto the floor. Acrid gunpowder fumes filled the cabin. The engine was already running. He reversed a short distance and stamped on the accelerator. The car squealed out of the car park, burning rubber.

The masked man next to Gary looked over his shoulder. "Jesus, did you hit him?"

"Nah, fired over his head," the driver said, before glancing at Gary. "Now you're in deep shit, mate. Not paying your bill. Shooting at the manager. Cops will be after you. Hate to be in your shoes."

Gary was the only one who didn't laugh. Instead, he demanded: "What the fuck's going on?"

The driver said: "You'll find out soon enough. Right now, we're gonna blindfold you."

The man next to Gary took a roll of duct tape off the floor, tore off a long strip and stuck it over Gary's eyes, blinding him.

Five minutes later, Gary carefully slid his hand behind the back seat and felt around for anything that might make a good weapon. He felt some coins, a plastic ballpoint pen and a metal comb. Gently, he slipped the pen and comb into the back of his underpants.

The car stayed on a bitumen road for about twenty minutes, before turning onto a rough track that made it vibrate hard. Half-an-hour later, it stopped and Gary was dragged out. The cold night air made him shiver. Rough stones jabbed his bare feet.

They shoved him for about twenty metres. Then they pushed him up a steep ramp for about five or six metres. He stepped onto a floor with gaps between narrow wooden slats, and smelt dried sweat and lanolin. A shearing shed?

Someone kicked his legs from under him. He crashed to the floor. Rough hands tied his ankles together.

Gary said: "What do you want? Why am I here?"

The men laughed. Footsteps receded. A door closed.

For hours, he lay on the floor, shivering from fear and cold. He wondered why he was kidnapped and got nowhere. He just hoped that, when Barbara Thompson knocked on his door in the morning and found him gone, she'd call the police. But that depended, of course, on her still being alive.

Eventually, the door squeaked open. Footsteps came towards him. A hand yanked the tape off his eyes. He winced and wondered if he still had any eyebrows.

Light stabbed his eyes. He squinted and tried to focus. Slowly, the face in front of him took shape. God, it was Barbara Thompson. What was she doing here? He anxiously searched her face for some sign she was on a rescue mission: a smile, a hint of warmth... None. Fuck.

Desperately, he glanced around. They were in a large, disused shearing shed. Faint morning light poured through the doorway and gaping holes in the corrugated iron walls.

Two men stood behind Barbara Thompson. One was her son, Alex, the ex-jailbird, wearing a sardonic smile. Gary didn't recognise the other guy, who had a crew-cut, narrow face, hooded eyes and a large hooked nose. Lifting heavy weights had made his shoulders drop and his small head pop out. Amazingly, he looked dumber than Alex.

They wore exactly the same clothes as the two men who kidnapped him. So Gary knew what they were doing the night before.

"Hello," Barbara Thompson said.

Gary said: "Hi. What the hell's going on? Why am I here?"

She frowned, stood up and pointed at the two men. "You've already met my son, Alex, haven't you? And that's Dennis, his friend, who's giving us a hand."

Both men smiled mirthlessly. Dennis' teeth were so scattered he didn't need to floss.

Gary bet the two met in prison and found they shared a common interest in violent crime. "They looked better in masks."

Alex kept smiling; Dennis sneered.

She said: "I wouldn't insult them if I was you. They've been very gentle so far. That can change fast."

Gary looked her in the eye. "What the hell's going on?"

She smiled, enjoying his discomfort. "You still don't get it, do you?"

"Get what?"

She put her hands on her hips and shook her head at his foolishness. "Why do you think I wanted to find Trixie?"

"To ask her who killed your son, Tony?"

She laughed and shook her head again. "That wasn't the real reason. I wanted to find Trixie to recover the money she took."

Gary was very confused. "The money? *What money?*"

"Tony had at least a million dollars when he died. That's what he told Alex. He said he'd buried it in the bush somewhere, and Trixie knew where it was."

"And you think that, after he died, she dug up the money and disappeared?"

"Of course."

Gary shook his head in amazement. "So this was always about money. You didn't want to find out who killed your son?"

A shrug. "Not really. Finding that out wouldn't bring him back, would it? I wouldn't waste money on that."

Her eyes chilled his soul. She'd turned from being a nasty old bag into a lump of pure evil.

He said: "But why get me involved? Why didn't you find Trixie yourself?"

"Oh, I tried and got nowhere. So I decided to hire someone who knew how to find people - you. But, of course, I couldn't tell you about the money. So I pretended I was trying to find out who killed Tony."

Gary was shocked at his stupidity. He forgot the first rule: never believe a client. "Well, you fooled me. But why'd you bring me to this place?"

"So you won't get in the way when the boys kidnap Trixie. We might also need your help, if they can't find her."

"When are they going to grab her?"

"Soon. But don't worry. We just want the money. When we've got that, we'll let you both go."

"How do I know you're telling the truth?"

She shrugged. "You don't. But why would we kill you? When this is all over, you two won't go to the cops."

"Why not?"

She laughed. "Trixie would have to explain how she got the money, and you'd have to explain how you got kidnapped by your client. The cops would think you're nuts."

Gary saw her point. "What if you don't get the money?"

Her eyes and mouth hardened, making Gary wish he hadn't asked. "You're both dead." She glanced at her watch and turned to Alex. "You two had better get Trixie."

Alex said: "OK. What're you doing to do?"

"Stay here and watch him."

"Got your gun?"

Barbara Thompson patted the handbag slung over her shoulder. "Of course."

The two men shambled out.

Barbara Thompson spent the next four hours pacing up and down, glancing at her watch, rarely speaking. When Gary asked for water she told him to shut his fucking mouth.

He kept wondering if he'd get out of this set-up alive. He wasn't confident. He'd met some cold-hearted bitches in his time. But she outdid them all.

Her mobile phone beeped. She unholstered it and listened briefly. "You've got her? Good." She turned off the mobile and smiled at Gary. "Not long now."

Thirty minutes later, when a car approached, she turned and left the shed. Gary desperately looked around for a way to cut the rope around his wrists. He still had a pen and comb in his briefs. But the rope was very thick. They wouldn't be much help.

The corrugated iron wall behind him was riddled with rust. He slid his fingers into a gap between the sheets and worked a small piece back and forward for a few minutes until it broke off.

Though it wasn't easy, because of the position of his hands, he used the piece to saw the rope. But the iron was too flaky to cut properly. Then he noticed an old shearing comb on the floor, a metre away. He wriggled across and picked it up. Just as the shearing comb bit into the rope, footsteps came up the ramp.

Barbara Thompson entered and glanced over at him.

Next came Trixie, hands tied behind her back, bright-eyed with fear. She wore a blue T-shirt and khaki shorts.

The two thugs entered last.

Trixie saw Gary on the floor, looked puzzled and opened her mouth to speak. But Alex Thompson pushed her trembling body across the shed and into an old wooden chair.

She glanced over at Gary, still puzzled. His smile of reassurance went straight through her.

Barbara Thompson turned to her son. "Any trouble?"

He shook his head. "Not much. A chick tried to stop us. We tied and gagged her."

Obviously, Rachel. At least she was still alive.

"You searched Trixie's room?"

"Course."

"Find the money?"

"Nope."

She looked down at Trixie and snarled: "Alright bitch, where is it?"

"Where's what?"

Barbara Thompson slapped Trixie across the face, splitting her lip. "Tony's money—the million dollars."

"Don't know what you're talking about?"

Barbara Thompson scowled. "Listen, you silly cow, Tony had that money just before he died. He buried it somewhere. And you know where it is. Tell us and we'll let you go. Otherwise, you'll be begging to die before you die."

Trixie dabbed her bloody lip, looking fearful and insolent. Despite the situation, she was no push-over. "Don't know what you're talking about?"

Barbara Thompson straightened and curled her lip. "Alright, have it your way." She turned to Alex and Dennis. "Do what you've got to do, boys."

As she left the shed, Dennis smiled and pulled on some leather driving gloves. He stepped forward and slapped Trixie with the back of his hand, knocking her off the chair.

"Hey, stop," Gary yelled.

Alex reached inside his jacket, pulled a pistol out of a shoulder holder and fired in Gary's direction. The bullet pocked a hole about a metre above his head. "Shut up."

Dennis slapped Trixie several more times across the face, shutting her left eye and bloodying her features. She kept wailing that she didn't have the money and begged him to stop. Gary couldn't work out if she was lying or not. If she was, she was tough as barbed wire.

Dennis turned to Alex. "Fill the trough."

Alex left the shed and came back with a bucket of water that he poured into a small concrete trough. After several more trips, it was almost full.

Dennis lifted Trixie to her feet, marched her over to the trough and shoved her into a kneeling position. "Gonna talk, bitch?"

When she didn't respond, he used his big strangler's hands to force her head underwater. She thrashed about, but couldn't break his grip.

Gary didn't bother protesting. Instead, while Dennis and Alex got their kicks, he sliced at the rope around his wrists.

Dennis held Trixie's head under the water for almost a minute. She'd almost stopped thrashing when he let go. She reared back and flopped onto the floor like a landed fish, spluttering and wheezing. For a few minutes, she gasped for air. Then Dennis asked again what she did with the money.

"Don't have it," she panted.

Again, he dunked her head. This time she struggled weakly, obviously exhausted. When he finally released her, she rolled onto the floor and coughed feebly a few times, before lying still, dribbling water. He slapped her several times across the face, but she didn't move.

Gary prayed she was still alive.

Alex said: "The bitch dead?"

Dennis felt her pulse and shook his head. "Nah, but she's gonna be out for a while." He grinned. "Hey, maybe we should fuck her now, before she dies."

Alex shook his head. "Not while Mum's here."

Dennis frowned. "But I wanta fuck her, I really do."

"So do I. But not now—later."

Dennis shrugged. "OK."

"You hungry?"

"Fuckin' oath."

"OK. I'll go into town with Mum and get some food. You stay here and watch them. We'll bring something back."

"Sure."

"Just don't fuck her, OK? Not yet."

"But I can later, huh?"

"Sure. We both will."

"OK, no problem."

Gary interjected. "Bring back some food for me."

Alex snarled "Shut the fuck up" and left the shed.

Dennis got bored with guard duty and occasionally wandered outside. When he was gone, Gary sawed ferociously on the rope around his wrists, until it snapped. But before he could untie the rope around his ankles, Dennis returned and resumed pacing up and down. Gary kept his hands behind his back.

Dennis strolled over to Trixie and kicked her in the side. No movement. He crouched, pulled up her T-shirt, licked his lips and tweaked a nipple. "Mmm, nice titties. Oh, baby I'm gonna fuck you hard - so hard." He leaned over and sucked the nipple while stroking his crotch. Sick puppy.

Gary's ankles were still bound, but he'd seen enough. "Hey, what about some water?"

Dennis seemed to emerge from a trance. His lips dropped the nipple and he sneered. "Shut up."

"Jesus, just a sip. I'm dying of thirst."

"Good. Now shut up."

Gary took a deep breath and played his final card. "Tell me Denise, where'd you meet Alex? In the jar? You know, you two make a great couple. Was it love at first sight?"

There was a serious risk Dennis would respond by shooting him. But Barbara Thompson was in charge. Dennis *probably* wouldn't take such a big step without her approval.

"You've got a big fuckin' mouth."

"Not as big as yours, you cocksucker. You can hit women, but I bet you've never hit a man, you gutless piece of shit."

Dennis' face glowed with anger. He marched towards Gary, pistol drawn. Gary raised himself to a kneeling position.

Dennis stopped a couple of feet in front of Gary and pointed the pistol at his forehead. The muzzle looked enormous. Gary's nerves sizzled and he wondered if he'd made his final miscalculation. Maybe the bastard was going to shoot him. His heart bashed against his ribs.

Dennis lifted the pistol and chopped down at Gary's head. Gary swayed to one side. The butt gashed his left ear and hit his shoulder, which exploded with pain. Despite that, Gary grabbed the wrist holding the pistol and stabbed it with the shearing comb. Dennis screamed and dropped the pistol, which skittered across the floor.

Gary tackled him around the legs. Dennis went over backwards and the back of his head made a loud crack as it hit the floor. It was the most sickening sound Gary had ever heard, but Dennis grunted with annoyance, no more.

Gary scrambled on top and head-butted Dennis in the face. That produced only a wince. So Gary slashed at his face with the comb, and missed.

Dennis pushed Gary off, rolled on top of him and started punching him in the head. Gary realised he'd been unfair to Dennis, who obviously had a lot of experience hitting men, fucking hard. The 'roid monster's forearms were like hams and his fists like rocks.

A loud shot. Dennis' face looked extra-stunned. A red blob appeared in the middle of his chest. He pitched forward, gurgling blood.

Gary pushed him off. The guy flopped onto his back, red chest-stain growing. Blood percolated from his lips. His breathing was shallow and laboured. He was obviously fucked. Gary braced himself to ward off pity, but it never arrived.

He looked over at Trixie, holding the smoking pistol in two hands, face bruised and bloodstained, body trembling.

"I-I-Is he dead?" she asked through shredded lips.

Gary crouched over Dennis, who'd stopped gurgling, and couldn't find a pulse. The guy was done. "Yeah."

"Was that creep sucking my nipple?"

"Umm, yes, I'm afraid so."

Gary expected her to be upset. However, he was surprised when she ran over to the creep and kicked him savagely in the ribs. "Dickhead," she yelled and kicked him several more times.

"Save your energy. He can't feel anything."

"Yeah, but I'm enjoying this."

After a few more kicks, she shuddered and started to cry. Gary untied the rope around his ankles, staggered to his feet and gently took the pistol from her grasp. He held her for about a minute, while she sobbed heavily. Then he stepped back. "How do you feel?"

"Confused."

"About what?"

She dropped onto a stool. "A lot of things, like: who the hell are you? What're doing here?"

"I'll tell you later. They'll be back soon. We've got things to do."

Gary still wore only a singlet and underpants. He needed some clothes and Dennis, about the same size, was the obvious source. Too bad his T-shirt had a bullet hole and was drenched in blood. Gary took it off him and asked Trixie to wash the T-shirt in the tub. While she did that, he put on Dennis' jeans, a good fit, and his boots. A little large, but they'd do.

Trixie returned and passed him the damp T-shirt. Her washing had turned the blood stain pink. The bullet hole was almost dead centre. He considered complimenting her shooting, but thought better of it. He put on the T-shirt.

She looked down at Dennis. "We gonna bury him?"

"Only if you want some exercise."

"Nah, fuck 'im."

Gary peered out the doorway. The shed was at the end of a rough dirt track running through parched scrub. No other structures in sight. Not even a fence post. Looked like a long walk to safety.

Trixie said: "How're we gonna get out of here?"

"In a car."

"What car?"

"Barbara's. We wait till she comes back and borrow it. She won't be long."

"OK. Just let me shoot the bitch."

"You've already killed one person today. Isn't that enough?"

"Nope, I want to make it two."

He was starting to like Trixie, a lot. "We'll see."

While they waited, Gary examined Dennis' pistol, a Glock nine-mill. Carried fifteen rounds. He checked the slide and chambered a round. Worked well.

Ten minutes later, a puff of dust appeared behind the nearest hill. Gary led Trixie around to the side of the shed, where they waited in the shade.

The Commodore topped the rise with Alex behind the wheel, his mother next to him. It stopped about ten metres from the shed.

Gary drew further back into the shade and waited for them to get out. But Alex honked the horn to attract Dennis' attention. When he got no response, he slowly got out of the car, pistol drawn and warily crept forward.

Barbara Thompson also got out. "Silly bugger probably fell asleep."

Gary stepped out and considered telling Alex to freeze. But why take the risk? He squeezed off a round that caught Alex in the right shoulder.

Alex jumped back, as if stung and dropped his pistol. He fell to his knees, holding his bloody shoulder. "Shit, I've been shot—fuck."

Barbara Thompson screamed and opened her handbag.

Gary pointed his pistol at her and yelled: "Don't. Drop the bag in the dirt or I'll shoot you, you bitch."

She hesitated briefly and followed his instruction.

He stepped forward and picked up Alex's pistol.

Alex grimaced and squeezed his bloody shoulder. "Fuckin' hell. You've killed me. I'm gonna die."

"It hurts?"

"Course it fuckin' hurts."

"Then stop complaining: if you can feel it, you'll live," Gary said, wondering where he got that line from and whether it was true.

Barbara Thompson turned and started running towards the horizon with surprising speed for a woman in her mid-fifties. But Trixie raced forward and leapt onto her back, riding her into the dirt, sending up a plume of dust. Trixie rolled her over and started punching her in the face. "Fucking cow, bitch."

Barbara Thompson raised her forearms, but plenty of blows got through. Gary felt Trixie deserved her fun.

He looked over at Alex, still squeezing his leaking shoulder. "Give me the keys."

Alex scowled. "Fuck off."

Gary fired a shot just over Alex's head. Alex ducked and winced.

"I don't need a big excuse to kill you."

Using his left hand, Alex nervously reached across his body and took a bunch of keys from his right pocket. He underarmed them to Gary, who caught them.

Gary said: "And your wallet."

Alex reluctantly extracted it from his back pocket and tossed it over. Gary glanced inside and saw a large wad of fifties and twenties. Most kind.

Alex had turned very white. "What about my wound?"

Gary shrugged. "What am I supposed to do? I'm not a doctor."

Alex's lower lip quivered. "Then I'm gonna die?"

"No you won't. You've got a mobile. Call an ambulance."

Gary strolled over to Trixie, now eye-gouging Barbara Thompson, and told her they had to go. Trixie looked annoyed. After a final roundhouse slap, she got to her feet, still fuming.

Barbara Thompson stared up, chest heaving, eyes bright, face smeared with blood, dirt and mascara.

Trixie yelled: "Tony always hated you, you bitch." She spat at the older woman and missed; she spat again and didn't.

Gary had misjudged Trixie. Her flakiness covered a core of hardened steel.

Gary crouched next to Barbara Thompson. "I've met some unbelievable bitches in my time, but you take the prize. If I ever see you again, I'll shoot you on sight, understand?"

A nervous nod. "You're not going to leave us here, are you?"

"Yes. And before you go anywhere, make sure you bury Dennis. You don't want to explain to the cops how he got killed."

"He's dead?"

"He was five minutes ago."

"What about Alex? He needs help."

"You're his mother—you help him."

Gary looked over at Trixie. "Come on, let's go."

Gary picked up Barbara Thompson's handbag and got behind the wheel of the car. Trixie climbed in next to him. He did a three-point turn and headed back down the track.

Trixie turned towards Gary, exposing her battered face. "Jesus, I didn't think we were going to get out of there."

"I had my doubts. How do you feel?"

She gently felt around inside her mouth. "I'll survive. I've had boyfriends hit me harder than that."

"Including Tony?"

"No, before him. Tony was sweet to me."

"You want to go to a hospital?"

"Nah. They'll just ask a lot of stupid questions. I'll buy a pair of sunglasses."

"You sure?"

"Yes."

"OK. Tell me about Rachel—is she alright?"

"Yes. They punched her a few times and tied her up, but she'll be OK." Trixie stared at Gary. "So tell me, who are you? How'd you get involved in all of this?"

"I'm a private investigator. Barbara Thompson asked me to find you; she said you'd know who killed her son Tony. So I started looking for you. I had no idea she really wanted to find you so she could recover a million bucks."

"You didn't even suspect that?"

"No. I thought she'd lost her son and wanted justice."

"How'd you find me?"

"You used your credit card in Byron Bay. A hacker I know got into the credit card company's database. It was that easy."

She shook her head. "Shit. I didn't want to use the card, but I'd run out of cash."

"When you're on the run, old habits are always dangerous. So, tell me: what happened to the million bucks?"

"I've got no fuckin' idea. Tony never told me about buried money. He always claimed he was short of cash."

"Then why was Barbara Thompson sure you had it?"

"Because she's a flat-out greedy bitch. She couldn't accept that Tony left her nothing."

Gary had no idea whether Trixie was telling the truth or not, and didn't care. If she had the mill, she could keep it. After what she'd just been through, she deserved it.

He said: "Alright, I've answered your questions. Now, it's my turn. Tell me: who killed Tony Thompson?"

She stared at him. "Why do you want to know?"

"Because someone bombed my apartment and killed a good friend of mine. I think the bomber wanted to stop me finding you and discovering that he killed Tony."

"OK. And if I tell you who killed Tony, what'll you do?"

"First, I'll confirm that the guy bombed my apartment. Then I'll kill him stone death."

She smiled. "Really? That's not just big talk?"

"I'd kill him twice if I could."

She nodded enthusiastically. "OK then. I'll tell you who killed Tony. But first, I've gotta explain a few things—give you some background."

"Go ahead. We've got plenty of time."

She looked out the window. "First, you've gotta understand that Tony sold lots of drugs: coke, eccies, blue ice, LSD... You name it, he sold it."

"And you helped him?"

She shrugged. "Sometimes I made deliveries."

"Who supplied him?"

"Lots of people. But his main supplier was a guy called Pedro Garcia. Heard of him?"

"No."

"Pedro came here from Columbia about nine years ago. He often boasted that an uncle was a big drug lord back there."

"Why'd he come here?"

"Got into some sort of trouble: killed someone he shouldn't have, or something like that. Anyway, he had to get out of Columbia. So his uncle sent him out here to establish an Australian operation."

Gary was getting impatient. "Yes, but what's that got to do with Tony getting killed?"

"I'm getting to that. Tony also did business with a dirty cop called Pringle."

"Brian Pringle?"

"Yes. You know him?"

"I sure do."

Gary worked with Pringle on the Narcotics Strikeforce. When he started, colleagues warned him that Pringle was corrupt: he ripped off dealers, stole from crime scenes and sold information to criminals. Then the strikeforce raided a meths lab, and Gary and Pringle were assigned to be the evidence officers. When Pringle suggested they record that they only seized two bags of tablets rather than three, Gary told him to fuck off. After that, their relationship got nasty.

Gary said: "What did Tony do for Pringle?"

"Pringle often ripped off dealers and got Tony to sell the shit he stole."

"What did Tony get in return?"

"A commission—and protection."

"What went wrong?"

"Lots. Tony blabbed to Pringle that his supplier, Pedro Garcia, was importing huge quantities of coke. So Pringle, the greedy bastard, decided to rip off Pedro and make Tony help him."

"And that's what they did?"

"Yep. They killed Garcia in his apartment, and a guy called Morales, and stole about eight kilos of pure coke."

Those eight kilos were worth at least \$2 million, wholesale.

Gary whistled. "Wow. What'd they do with it?"

"Pringle hid it and got Tony to sell it off, slowly, so they didn't attract any heat."

"What went wrong?"

"The Homicide cops found Tony's fingerprints in Garcia's apartment and pulled him in for questioning. They didn't have much on him..."

"But Pringle got nervous?"

"Yep. He thought Tony would cough. So he iced him and kept all the coke."

"You're sure Pringle killed him?"

"Yes. Pringle rang up Tony and said he wanted to meet him in Darlinghurst. I told Tony not to go, but he wouldn't listen. He said he'd be back by five. When he wasn't, I called his mobile and got no answer. So I packed my bags and ran."

"And came up here?"

"Yes. Rachel's an old friend and the community was a good place to hide." She brushed back her hair. "So tell me: do you think Pringle planted the bomb in your apartment?"

Gary remembered Robyn's description of the man who visited his apartment at noon on the day of the explosion: about fifty... grey hair... very tough looking. That description matched Pringle.

"I'm sure he did. You see, Barbara Thompson employed me to find you; she said you could identify who killed Tony. At that stage, I had no idea that she really wanted to find you to recover a million dollars."

"I bet Pringle was already trying to find—and kill—you because you could finger him for the murders of Garcia, Morales *and* Tony. He must have found out, from the Homicide detectives I talked to, that I'd joined the hunt to find you."

"That news made him very nervous, because he knew that if I found you first, he was in deep trouble. So he decided to take me out of the race by planting a bomb in my apartment."

"Which killed your friend by mistake?"

"Yes."

"He must think you're pretty good at what you do?"

"He does because I am. There's also a lot of bad blood between us."

"So, what're you going to do to Pringle?"

"Like I said, I'll confirm that he planted the bomb. Then I'll punch his ticket."

A hard stare. "You're not just saying that to impress me?"

"No, he's going to die."

She smiled. "Good. But be careful, he's an evil fucking bastard."

"I know."

A few minutes later, they approached a bitumen road. A sign pointed to Armidale, 100 kilometres away.

Gary pulled over to the side and looked at Trixie. "Where do you want to go?"

She raised a blood-encrusted eyebrow. "I'm not sure. But even if I knew, I wouldn't tell you."

"Fair enough."

"Just drop me at the nearest bus terminal, OK?"

"Fine. I think the nearest one's in Armidale."

"Then take me there."

He slipped the car into gear and drove south along the bitumen road. "You got any money?"

She tried to smile, and winced instead. "Does it look like it?"

Gary wondered again if she had the million bucks Barbara Thompson was chasing. "See how much money's in the handbag."

She opened the handbag and fished out Barbara Thompson's purse. Inside were a stack of credit cards and a couple of hundred dollars. Gary told her to keep the cash.

Trixie held up the credit cards. "Can I keep these too? I can do plenty of damage."

"Be my guest."

After a long silence, Gary realised he still had a few questions. "Tell me, what was Tony like?"

"Tony was a nice guy. Yeah, he was a drug dealer. But he was good to me and I still miss him. He promised he'd eventually stop dealing and we'd have kids."

Trixie had a fantasy that her drug-dealing boyfriend would settle down in the burbs and become a family man. The whole concept was bizarre.

He said: "How'd you get on with Barbara Thompson?"

"That bitch never liked me. Always thought Tony was too good for me. Can you fuckin' believe that? Tony was a drug dealer, but she thought he was too good for me. God, I hated her."

"You said Tony also hated her. Was that true?"

"Yes. He reckoned she was a lousy mum who fucked him up. With a mum like that, he never really had a chance."

About an hour later, they entered Armidale. Both Trixie and Gary wore rags. So he pulled up outside a department store and, after getting Trixie's measurements, went inside and bought them both new clothes with Alex Thompson's money. He also bought Trixie a pair of dark sunglasses, to help hide her bruises.

They spent the night in a cheap motel, in the same room, but on separate beds. The next morning, Gary asked Trixie again where she planned to go.

This time, she was more forthcoming. "I've got some friends in Brisbane who'll look after me for a while. I'm not sure where I'll go after that."

Maybe she was telling the truth, maybe not. He didn't care.

He gave her most of the cash he had left and drove her to the bus terminal. He parked outside it and said: "If you need any help, give me a call. My firm is *Bloodhound Investigations*, in Sydney."

"Sucky name, but at least I'll remember it."

"Thanks."

"OK, take care."

As she strode into the terminal, he realised he didn't need to worry about her. She was a tough cookie—a real survivor. And maybe—just maybe—she had a cool million or more stashed away somewhere to help pay her bills.

He filled the Commodore with petrol and headed towards Sydney. Heading home gave him a heavy foot. The stripes on the centre line leapt towards him like tracer bullets.

Chapter 21

Back in Sydney, Gary dumped the Commodore in a back street in Potts Point and checked into the back-packer's hostel he stayed in before he left.

He wanted to know how the Homicide investigation into Robyn's death was going, just in case it had fingered Brian Pringle as the culprit. So the next morning he telephoned Detective Constable Karen Phillips.

She erupted. "Where the hell have you been?"

"I took a holiday to recover from the blast. Caught the bomber yet?"

"No. But I want you to come in here right away, for an interview."

"What about?"

"I'll tell you when you get here."

Gary didn't like being pushed around. "OK. But not Police Headquarters. Let me buy you lunch at that café around the corner. Then you can ask me anything you like."

"I would prefer..."

"Lunch or nothing."

"Mr Maddox, I..."

"I'm about to hang up."

A long pause. "Alright," she moaned.

"Good. Be there at twelve-thirty."

When Gary walked into the cafe, Phillips sat at a table in the corner drinking an espresso. Her dour expression and nervous tapping of the table presaged an unfriendly lunch.

He sat and smiled. "Hi. You ordered yet?"

"No."

Gary beckoned a waitress and they ordered sandwiches.

As the waitress left, Gary turned back to the detective. "How's your investigation going?"

"Not well."

"Why not?"

She said they'd talked to all the criminals Gary thought crazy enough to plant the bomb. Only three lacked solid alibis. She told Gary their names. He remembered them. They were all too Neolithic to build and plant a bomb.

He said: "You've interviewed them?"

"Yes, but they've only admitted to despising you."

"I love them too. Did you search their homes?"

"No. I've got no grounds to get search warrants."

"Do you think one of them might be responsible?"

She shrugged. "My hunch is they're clean. But I can't be sure."

Gary tried to look supportive. "If there's anything I can do to help, please let me know."

She leaned forward. "Actually, there is something you can do."

"What?"

"Start telling the truth."

He looked offended. "What do you mean?"

"For a start, tell me who planted the bomb."

Gary shook his head and lied smoothly. "Sorry. I wish I knew, but I don't."

She looked dubious. "Really?"

"Yes."

Their sandwiches arrived. Gary wolfed his down while she nibbled. Again, the vein popped out on her forearm.

"Where'd you go for your holiday?" she asked casually.

Her new tack surprised him. "North, to Byron Bay."

"What did you do up there?"

"Oh, fished, surfed, lay around in the sun."

"Sounds like you had fun."

"Oh, I had a great time."

She raised her eyebrows. "I'm surprised you say that."

"Why?"

"When you disappeared, I logged your name into the police computer and asked to be notified if you turned up. Imagine my surprise when I got a call from the desk sergeant at Byron Bay Police Station a few days ago. He said two men kidnapped you from a motel room. And on the way out, they fired a shot at the motel manager. Care to tell me what that was all about?"

Gary inwardly cursed himself for being over-confident. This woman was obviously no dummy and he shouldn't treat her like one. "Ah, yes. That was a rather strange event—a *very* strange event, actually. But it was... ah... just a case of mistaken identity. When they realised they had the wrong man they let me go, unharmed." He spread his arms. "Look, no bullet holes."

Her expression screamed "bullshit". "Is that so? Who did they intend to kidnap?"

"Don't know. They didn't say. And to be quite frank, I wasn't interested in finding out. I was just happy to be free."

"Do you know who they were?"

"No, they didn't hand out business cards."

"OK, what do they look like?"

"Don't know. But I'm sure they're both very ugly."

"Why do you say that?"

"They wore masks."

He'd hoped for a laugh and got a vinegary expression instead. "You're just feeding me a load of crap, aren't you?"

"No, it's all true."

A steely glare. "You know who planted the bomb in your apartment, don't you?"

Gary widened his baby-blues. "Of course not. You're jumping to conclusions."

"Really? Then why do you look so pleased with yourself?"

"I always look pleased with myself—it's a medical condition."

"Rubbish."

"Look, if I knew who planted the bomb I'd tell you, believe me, but I don't."

She shook her head, vehemently. "You wouldn't, because you want to punish the bomber yourself, don't you? Make him pay for killing Robyn Parsons."

Gary shook his head. "Look, I don't know who bombed my apartment. But even if I did, I wouldn't seek revenge. I was a cop, remember. I know how to ignore my personal feelings and follow the law."

Gary was rather proud of that little speech. But she curled her lips. "You must think I'm a moron. First, you give me a cock-and-bull story about why you were

kidnapped. Then you try to string me along with platitudes. Sorry pal, I don't believe you."

Gary enjoyed her unforced and authentic anger. He leaned forward and stared at her broken nose, dying to ask her out to dinner and find out how it got busted. But this obviously wasn't the right moment.

He said: "I'm sorry about that, because I'm telling the truth."

"Bullshit. You think you're so much smarter than everyone else, don't you? That, I promise you, will be your downfall."

He smiled. "Unless..."

"Unless what?"

"I really am smarter than everyone else."

Anger definitely improved her complexion. She stood up. "We'll see, won't we?"

"You haven't finished eating."

"Yes I have," she scowled and tossed ten bucks on the table.

She strode off with a nice sway to her hips.

Chapter 22

Karen Phillips' parents wanted her to get a good university degree and become a lawyer, accountant or some other kind of desk-bound professional. But she thirsted for excitement and became a cop.

She should have taken their advice.

After graduating from the Goulburn Academy, she spent two years in uniform refereeing domestic disputes, writing up burglaries, pacifying the mentally ill and attending motor accidents. People who summoned patrol cops were usually having a bad day in a bad life. She was really a social worker with a gun.

Then she spent four years as a detective at an inner-city station—chasing burglars and car thieves—before transferring to the Homicide Squad. She was elated about the move. Her career was back on track. She was going to be a Homicide star.

But, after three years on the Homicide Squad, she was bitterly disillusioned. Initially, the hardest part was coping with the human carnage. At her first crime scene, she crouched over the maggoty body of a 22-year-old nurse who'd been dragged into bushland, raped and stabbed to death. A month later, she followed a trail of dead kids through a house until she found their father with a shotgun in his mouth and his brains all over the wall behind him. But she slowly developed a carapace of indifference and stopped descending into hell every time she fell asleep.

Now the worst thing about the job was her colleagues, who weren't the elite cops she expected. Many were morons, timeservers, perverts or weirdos. She strongly suspected several were necrophiliacs. Because she was a woman, they gave her the shittiest jobs. At crime scenes, if she wasn't appointed exhibits officer, she had to take witness statements or handle grieving relatives.

To break the ice, she went out drinking with them and chatted about sport and sex. She even laughed at their tasteless jokes about murder victims and ignored

the occasional arm that brushed her boobs. But she realised she'd never be accept when a drunken Detective Inspector lay on the floor of a pub, and invited her to sit on his face while the others laughed like drains.

After that, she kept mostly to herself. She only really felt comfortable with Detective Inspector Marks, who appreciated her hard work and—best of all—was happily married.

Unfortunately, she didn't have a partner to provide her with support. Her last relationship died almost a year ago. Her boyfriend was an Inspector on the Fraud Squad: charming, good-looking, well-built and a terror between the sheets. He was very self-assured. In fact, he only looked nervous when his mobile phone rang.

So one night, while he snored, she hit the redial button and chatted with his other girlfriend, who seemed very nice. They quickly decided neither wanted him.

When she told him to fuck off, he claimed his other relationship was "no big deal". She replied: "Maybe, but this one isn't either."

She wasn't really angry with him. He was just a dumb slob who thought it was a big achievement to be shagging two women at the one time. She was really angry with herself for going out with him. How could she have been so stupid? From now on, she wouldn't accept second best. No more jerks. No more playboys. If she couldn't find the right man, she'd stay single and sit at home, on her finger.

As an antidote to loneliness, she worked out at the gym a lot and threw herself into her investigations, particularly the bombing of Gary Maddox's apartment. Marks was nominally in charge, but she did most of the leg work.

It was an intriguing case. Most murderers stumble around spraying out clues. Indeed, she never ceased to be amazed at their stupidity: they dropped their wallets at crime scenes, pawned their victims' property and boasted to their mates about what they'd done. They committed the ultimate crime with their brains in neutral.

But after three weeks she still had no idea who'd planted the bomb in Maddox's apartment. Whoever did it was tech-savvy and street smart. He left behind no clues at all.

That meant the key to solving the murder was Maddox himself. He claimed to have no idea who tried to kill him. But she didn't believe him. So she trawled through his police personnel file and found it full of contradictions. While working as an undercover drug cop, he made a lot of arrests and got numerous commendations. He was obviously a very good cop. But he was often reprimanded for disobeying orders and using excessive force when making arrests.

Like all undercover cops, he was psychiatrically assessed every six months. She flipped through his psych reports. The shrinks described him as highly motivated, highly intelligent and aggressive, with slightly paranoid tendencies. For once, they seemed to have got it right.

She wondered if he was crooked. Some cops, who worked undercover for a long time, never re-surfaced. Maybe his apartment was bombed because a drug deal went bad. True, there was no indication in his personnel file that he was dirty. But that meant nothing. Only dopey cops got caught.

To learn more about Maddox, she chatted with several cops who worked with him in the Narcotics Strikeforce. None were surprised that someone tried to kill him. One officer, Detective Inspector Rex McEwen, said: "That guy never heard an

order he didn't question. He was a chronic smart-arse with a bad temper. We once arrested a drug dealer who gave him some backchat and he tossed him down some stairs. The dealer ended up in hospital."

"Did he complain?"

"Yeah. So we charged him with resisting arrest. But after that I steered clear of Gary. I had to look after my career."

All the drug cops she spoke to thought Maddox was clean, except for Detective Sergeant Pringle, who said he'd heard a rumour Maddox was now importing heroin, but couldn't give any specifics. He asked her to keep him informed about her investigation.

So, in the end, her inquiries about Maddox shed no light on who bombed his apartment. Indeed, she still didn't know if he was good or bad, kind or cruel.

Then there was a strange twist in the case. Maddox was kidnapped in Byron Bay and released. She strongly suspected the kidnapping had something to do with the bombing of his apartment and hoped he would tell her what happened. But at lunch he lied to her. Didn't even look embarrassed. Just lied his head off. Fucking jerk.

She couldn't let him get away with that: she would go up to Byron Bay and find out exactly what occurred. Detective Inspector Marks had to authorise the trip. She headed for his office.

Chapter 23

Detective Inspector Marks was reluctant to approve the trip to Byron Bay. He suspected Karen Phillips was more interested in having a paid vacation than solving Robyn Parsons' murder. But she eventually convinced him there might be a connection between the bombing and the kidnapping, and he approved it.

She flew up to Byron Bay on a two-engine Fokker, and landed in a different country where the sun shone brighter and hotter, and everyone moved and talked in a lower gear. She tried to downshift to their pace, without success. At least her sunglasses dimmed their constant smiles.

She checked into a motel just behind Main Street and strode around to the police station. The day before, she'd telephoned Detective Senior Constable Derek Speakman who was investigating the Maddox kidnapping. He promised to make himself available when she arrived.

Like many country cops, the Duty Sergeant was a beefy guy with sleepy eyes and a shambling manner. He didn't look impressive, but probably knew the town like the back of his hand. When she introduced herself and asked for Speakman, he looked surprised. "You're from the Homicide Squad? What's this about?"

After she briefly explained, he shrugged. "OK, the detectives' squad room is out the back. Follow me."

They entered a demountable building attached to the rear of the station. Four gun-metal grey desks were neatly arranged along one wall. Only one was occupied, by a slim, balding man in his mid-thirties. The Duty Sergeant introduced her to Speakman and they shook hands. Then he lingered to hear what was going on.

Speakman said: "Why're you so interested in this kidnapping?"

"We think it might be connected with a murder we're investigating."

"Which one?"

"I'd rather not say, just yet."

"Fair enough. But there isn't much I can tell you. Maddox was kidnapped from the Bonanza Motel, a couple of clicks north of town. Checked in on Saturday morning; then, on Sunday night, a couple of guys wearing masks burst into his room and grabbed him. On the way out they shot at the motel manager and drove off in a white Commodore. That's all we know. Maddox hasn't been seen since."

"Anybody get the licence number of the car?"

"No."

"And you've got no other leads?"

"Correct. Right now, I'm sifting through a mole-hill of evidence."

"Well, I've got some news for you: Maddox is back in Sydney."

Speakman's eyes widened. "Shit. How do you know that?"

"I had lunch with him yesterday."

"Jesus Christ. What did he say? Who kidnapped him?"

"Claims he doesn't know: it was a case of mistaken identity."

"Do you believe him?"

"Nope. Total bollocks."

"I'd love to chat with him. He's got a lot of explaining to do. Got his address?"

She blushed. "Afraid not—he wouldn't provide it."

Speakman rolled his eyes. "Great."

"Did Maddox leave anything behind at the motel?"

"Yes, his car, a beat-up old Pulsar—it's in our pound—and a suitcase."

"Did you look inside?"

"Of course. Found some clothes, a few books and—wait for this—a Tokarev pistol, with two clips."

"Licensed?"

"No. That's another reason why I want to talk to Mr Maddox. Unless he's got a very fancy excuse, I'm going to charge him with possession of an unlicensed weapon."

"Can I see the suitcase?"

"Sure, it's in the evidence room."

Speakman led Karen Phillips and the Duty Sergeant down a narrow corridor to the evidence room, where he pointed to a suitcase sitting on a metal shelf. "That's it. Pistol's in our safe."

She opened the suitcase and looked inside. It was a mess. She turned to Speakman. "Was it like this when you found it?"

"Yep. Not much of a packer, huh?"

She rummaged through the contents. Underpants. Shirts. Singlets. Toilet bag. Two books: *The Tin Drum* and *Voss*. She was surprised he read books at all, let alone literary works.

Speakman escorted her out of the police station and apologised for not being much help. "I'm afraid I wasn't much help to the other detective, either."

"*Other* detective—what other detective?"

"The guy who came up here a few days ago to ask about the kidnapping."

Karen's heart raced. "Do you remember his name?"

"Of course. But, ah, he asked me not to tell anyone about his involvement."

"Did he say why?"

"No." Speakman was obviously annoyed at being asked to keep a secret for no apparent reason.

A warm smile. "Come on, you can tell me his name. I won't say a word, I promise."

A shrug. "OK. Detective Sergeant Pringle. Said he was on the Narcotics Strikeforce."

Jesus, *Pringle*—the detective who claimed Maddox might be importing heroin. What game was he playing? "Why did he want to know about the kidnapping?"

"He said Maddox might be part of a drug ring, but couldn't tell me more for 'operational reasons'."

"What did he ask you about the kidnapping?"

"Same sort of questions you asked. Seemed very anxious to find Maddox. You know, Maddox sounds like an interesting character."

"He definitely is."

After leaving the police station, Karen drove out to the Bonanza Motel and talked to the chunky, bespectacled manager. He described seeing Maddox, wearing only underpants and a singlet, leave his room with two men and get into a car. He thought Maddox was trying to abscond without paying and ran towards them. "Then one of them turned and fired a shotgun at me. Boom."

"What did you do?"

"I hit the ground and almost shat myself; I kept hugging the ground until they left."

"You didn't get the licence plate number?"

"Nope. I was keeping my head down."

"Fair enough. Any CCTV footage?"

"Afraid not."

The manager showed her around Maddox's now bare room, but she saw nothing of interest.

He said: "It's bloody dangerous managing a motel. This year I've been robbed three times. Then this happened. So I've applied for a handgun licence. Will you write a letter supporting my application?"

"What'll you do with the handgun?"

"Defend myself, of course."

"Yeah, and get yourself killed. If you get robbed, just put up your hands and be polite. Heroes wind up dead."

He obviously didn't believe her. Thought he was Wyatt Earp. Silly bastard would end up creating a lot of paper-work.

Flying back to Sydney, Karen decided that Pringle's behaviour was suspicious, to say the least, and she would find out more about him. The next day, she had coffee with a friend on the Narcotics Strikeforce and casually asked if he knew Pringle.

Her friend shifted nervously: "Yes".

"Good. What's he like?"

"Totally bent. If you've got any brains, you'll stay well clear of him."

"He's dangerous?"

"Lethal."

That piqued her curiosity. She went down to Human Resources and got another friend to slip her Pringle's personnel file—five fat manila folders. She leafed through them and discovered Pringle had been awarded numerous commendations and citations, and his job performance appraisals were uniformly good. Ostensibly, at least, he'd had a distinguished career. If he was dirty, that news hadn't reached his file.

The last folder she looked through covered his early years on the force. To her surprise, during that time, he completed a couple of courses on bomb disposal. Even got a Grade Two Certificate. Jesus. *Bomb disposal*. The guy knew *all* about bombs.

Chapter 24

Gary knew little about Pringle's personal life, except that he was married with two kids and owned a big cabin cruiser moored on the Georges River. He knew about the boat because Pringle often took colleagues out on it. They cruised around Botany Bay sinking beers, scoffing prawns and terrorising fish. Gary was never invited on a cruise. But his colleagues talked about them for weeks afterwards.

Gary wanted to know the exact location of the boat. So he phoned the main police switchboard and asked for an old Narcotics Strikeforce colleague called Moses Hapeta. The operator re-directed his call and Hapeta answered.

"Moses, this is Gary Maddox."

"Hello Gary—you're still alive."

"What do you mean?"

"I heard someone tried to blow you to bits."

"Yes, but you know me—hard to kill."

"Yeah, and only the good die young. Any idea who's responsible?"

"No. But half the world hates me, so take your pick. Anyway, when you're free, let's have a beer. It's time we caught up with each other."

"Why catch up now?"

"Because, since the bombing, I've been reaching out to friends."

"Hah. OK, we'd better meet soon, before the bomber tries again. What about this evening, 7.30, at the Royal Stag?"

"Sure."

"Good. And make sure the bomber doesn't join us."

"I'll be careful."

The Royal Stag was just around the corner from Police Headquarters. Gary arrived first and sat in a booth near the back. Ten minutes later, Moses arrived. The Maori was built like a two-door fridge, with massive shoulders and tree-trunk

legs. He almost touched both sides of the doorway. Dark sunglasses sat on a big, flat face.

Moses was the toughest guy Gary had ever met, and the best cop. Most undercover agents refuse to infiltrate bikie gangs, because bikies are ultra-violent and paranoid. But Moses once spent a whole year riding around with the Death Cheaters, who even made him a gang member. During that time, he took Gary to the gang's clubhouse to meet a dealer. Gary's guts were churning, but Moses acted like he owned the joint. When he talked, the bikies listened, and when he moved, they stepped aside.

"Hello Bro," Moses said as he sat down. His soft, almost girlish voice contrasted strangely with his enormous frame. He put his sunglasses on the table, but remained inscrutable.

"You want a beer?"

"I'm not here for my health."

Gary bought them a couple of beers and returned to the booth. As he sat down, he held his jacket closed to hide the pistol under his armpit.

Moses saw what he was doing. "You're packing, huh?"

"Of course. What about you?"

Moses patted under his arm. "I never leave home without it." He sipped his beer. "So tell me about the bomb."

Gary described the explosion and Robyn Parsons' death, but didn't mention his trip to the North Coast or his discovery that Pringle was the bomber.

Moses said: "Poor girl. Who's running the Homicide investigation?"

"Guy called Marks. His offsider's a woman called Phillips."

"I've heard of Marks—supposed to be a good operator—but haven't heard of her. They got anywhere?"

"Nope."

"And what about you: you got any idea who planted it?"

"No."

A raised eyebrow. "Really?"

"Yes, really."

"But you're trying to find the guy?"

"Of course."

"What'll you do if you find him?"

"I'll put the bastard in a box."

"Sounds like a good idea."

Gary sipped his beer. "Anyway, let's not talk about that. Tell me: what's happening on the Strikeforce?"

Moses spent half-an-hour cataloguing the poor leadership, incompetence and corruption that bedevilled the organisation. In other words, little had changed.

Gary asked what had happened to several former colleagues who were still cops. Moses described the inordinate number of divorces, breakdowns, detox programs and disciplinary proceedings they had gone through.

Eventually, Gary felt it safe to broach what he really wanted to discuss. "And what about Brian Pringle—what's happened to him?"

Moses rolled his eyes. "That bastard. Unfortunately, he's still there. But the good news is that the Police Integrity Unit recently called him in for a chat."

"Why?"

"Don't know. I just hope they nail him."

"Well, don't get your hopes up—he's slippery as an eel. They'll probably recommend him for promotion."

Moses sighed. "Probably."

"But I'll say this about the bastard: I loved cruising on his boat. Remember those trips?"

Moses looked surprised. "You went on some of those? I thought you hated him."

"Not at first. We fell out later. What was the name of his boat?"

"WATER RAGE."

"That's right. Jesus, my memory's getting bad. I've even forgotten where he moored it."

"In a marina, near Oatley, on the Georges River."

"That's right. He still got it?"

"Yep, goes out most weekends. The guy loves fishing. Still has a big pile of fishing mags on his desk."

Gary remembered how Pringle often thumbed through them during work hours.

Now that he had all the information he wanted about Pringle, he started reminiscing with Moses about their time together on the Narcotics Strikeforce. Two hours and eight rounds later, they staggered out of the pub, slapped each other on the back and promised to keep in touch.

Chapter 25

The next morning—a Friday—Gary drove a hire-car along the Georges River, looking for Pringle's cabin cruiser. He eventually found it tied up at a marina with about fifty other boats.

The following morning he returned, parked the car on a nearby hill and watched the marina. Just after nine, Pringle parked an old Lexus in its car park and got out, wearing a polo shirt, chino shorts and canvas sneakers. Gary hadn't seen him for a few years. But he hadn't changed much. Though now in his early fifties, he still had a razor-sharp face and athletic build. He obviously worked out.

As Pringle walked along a wooden jetty to his cabin cruiser, carrying an esky and fishing rod, Gary strolled down to the marina. When Pringle unlocked the cabin of his boat and carried the esky inside, Gary sprinted up the jetty and stepped onto the deck of the boat.

Pringle emerged from the cabin and Gary stuck a pistol in his face. "Hello Brian. Long time, no see."

Chapter 26

Most cops are gradually sucked into corruption. Temptation slowly corrodes their souls. Not Brian Pringle. He never had one. From his first day in uniform, he took bribes, shook down criminals and demanded freebies. Search warrants were just a licence to plunder.

Later, on the Narcotics Strikeforce, he thought he'd died and gone to heaven. Stealing cash and drugs from dealers was like taking candy from babies.

So when one of his snitches, Tony Thompson, told him Pedro Garcia was importing big shipments of coke, he just had to rip off one. Stealing it would be the pinnacle of his corrupt career, like winning an Olympic gold medal.

The rip-off went smoothly: Pringle and Thompson killed Garcia and his pal, Morales, and grabbed the coke. But then their plan went awry. The Homicide cops found Thompson's prints in Garcia's apartment and called him in for an interview. Thompson kept his mouth shut, but Pringle got nervous and rubbed him out.

Pringle also planned to kill Thompson's girlfriend, Trixie Powell, who knew a lot about his dealings with Thompson. However, when he got to Thompson's apartment, the bitch was gone.

If Trixie blabbed, he could easily go to gaol. So he worked tirelessly to finding her and rub her out. However, she had disappeared into thin air.

Then a Homicide contact mentioned that Barbara Thompson had employed Gary Maddox to find Trixie. That frightened Pringle, because Maddox was smart and relentless, and hated Pringle. Pringle had to make sure that Maddox didn't find Trixie before him. So he planted a bomb in Maddox's apartment, but only managed to kill a neighbour. Then Maddox disappeared.

Pringle anxiously monitored the police computer for some mention of him. That was how he discovered Maddox was kidnapped near Byron Bay. He went up there and poked around. But the local detectives had no idea why Maddox was kidnapped or what had happened to him. Pringle had no idea either. He just prayed that whoever kidnapped the bastard was considerate enough to kill him.

Pringle liked to think he was always a couple of steps ahead of the game. However, for the first time, he wasn't so sure. Where was Maddox? What had happened to Trixie? Until he had answers, he couldn't relax.

Indeed, he started having anxiety attacks in the middle of the night that made him wake up sweating. He'd always treated his wife and two sons with callous contempt. Now he was brutal. When his wife recently complained that he never showed any interest in her, he said: "That's not true—I've always noticed your tits are too small and your arse is too big." She called him a "shithead" and threatened to leave him. But he knew she wouldn't. He wasn't that lucky. He was stuck with the whining bitch.

He also loathed his two teenage sons, a pair of nasty shits destined to become career criminals. He didn't mind that choice of career. But they were so fucking dumb they'd spend most of their lives behind bars. What special form of insanity made him sire the little bastards?

One thing was certain: when he retired, he'd ditch all of them. They wouldn't feature in his new life. He wouldn't even keep a photo of them.

His only relaxation was fishing. So on Saturday morning he woke early and glanced over at his wife, snoring loudly. As soon as she woke, she'd start whining. These days they usually had their first fight while still in bed.

He snuck into the kitchen, quietly ate breakfast, packed his esky and drove down to his cabin cruiser, reflecting that he'd love to take his wife fishing and use her as bait. He carried the esky across the marina and stowed it in the cabin of his boat. But, as he returned to the deck, he found himself staring straight into a pistol, with Gary Maddox behind it.

"Hello Brian. Long time, no see."

Shee-it.

Chapter 27

Pringle's face shook and his voice went white. "M-M-Maddox. What the fuck're you doing here?"

"I want to chat. Turn around and go back inside."

Pringle ducked back into the cabin.

Gary followed and waved his pistol towards a bench. "Sit there and keep your hands where I can see them."

Pringle sat next to a pile of fishing magazines and spoke with a burr. "What's this about?"

"Been very busy recently, haven't you?"

"What do you mean?"

"You've killed four people, and you tried to kill me."

"Really? Who'd I kill?"

"Let me see: first, you killed Pedro Garcia and a guy called Morales, when you ripped off eight kilos of coke. Then you killed your accomplice, Tony Thompson, and then a woman called Robyn Parsons."

Pringle looked nervous. "I didn't kill any of them—that's bullshit."

"It's not. You killed the first three to cover your tracks. Then you tried to kill me, but killed the woman instead."

Pringle shook his head vehemently. "Don't know what you're talking about."

Gary shrugged. "Fair enough, if you don't want to talk, that's fine."

A hesitant smile. "Really?"

"Yes, so I'll kill you now."

Gary raised his pistol and pointed it at Pringle's forehead. He had feared he couldn't shoot Pringle in cold blood. However, he thought about Robyn and his corrupt father, and felt his head and hand grow quiet. Yes, he could do this.

Pringle's eyes bulged and chin quivered. "Alright, alright, I'll tell you what you want to know."

"Good, and remember this: next time you lie to me, the penalty is death. Then I'll go and have breakfast, probably bacon and eggs."

"OK, OK. What do you want to know?"

"First question: how much coke did you steal?"

Pringle hesitated and shrugged. "Umm, about eight kilos."

With some prompting, Pringle described how, with Tony Thompson, he killed Garcia and Morales, and ripped off the coke. Then he murdered Thompson and planted the bomb in Gary's apartment.

Gary said: "Why'd you try to kill me?"

"I knew you were looking for Trixie Powell. She was a big danger to me. I had to make sure you didn't find her first." A smug smile. "And, of course, I've never liked you. Killing you was gonna be fun."

"What did you do with the coke you stole from Garcia?"

"We sold some. But most is still buried in the Royal National Park."

"Where in the park?"

"I can draw a map. Give me a pen and paper. Why don't you take the coke and let me go?"

Gary's heart grew cold again. "I don't want the coke."

"Then what do you want?"

His bitterness welled up. "Revenge."

Pringle's whole face trembled. "Because I tried to kill you?"

"No, because you killed someone very close to me."

Pringle looked puzzled and shook. "Shit, you mean the woman in your apartment?"

"Yes, Robyn Parsons. She was a good friend and you blew her to bits. For that you're gonna die. Say your prayers."

As his finger tightened around the trigger, something cold and metallic jabbed the back of his neck. Instinctively, he knew it was a gun. Shit.

Someone behind him spoke. "You've had your fun. Don't move - not an inch."

Gary immediately recognised the soft voice. A massive brown hand reached around and tore the pistol from his grasp. "Now, turn around."

As Gary turned, Moses Hapeta stepped back, pointing his pistol at Gary's chest.

"Hello, Gary."

"Hello, Moses."

Pringle gulped in air. "Thank fucking Christ. The bastard was going to kill me."

"I saw that."

Gary hoped Moses was on his side, but the signs weren't good. "So, umm, Moses, what're you doing here?"

"After we chatted in the pub, I wondered why you were so interested in Brian."

"Interested? We talked about a lot of people."

"True, but you were obviously digging around for information and we talked about him last. So I wondered if Brian tried to blow you up and you wanted to bump him off. I was right, huh?"

"Yes, he blew up my apartment. He's now killed four people."

"I know, I've been listening."

"You should arrest him."

Moses giggled. "No chance."

Gary's heart sunk. "You mean, you're working with this prick?"

"No, we don't work *together*. I have my own business operation. But we sometimes help each other out, don't we Brian?"

Pringle smiled. "That's right. Thanks for saving my bacon, though you could've warned me this asshole wanted to ice me."

Moses shrugged. "I could, but I wanted to find out what was going on first. You know, I wondered if you ripped off Garcia."

"Now you know."

"Yes, and you grabbed eight keys of coke?"

"Thereabouts."

"Well, I want half. That's my commission for saving your arse."

"No problem. You've earned it."

"Good. Now, what do you want to do with Gary here?"

"First, I've got to extract some information."

"What information?"

"There's a chick I've got to find, and I think he knows where she is."

"Who?"

"Her name's Trixie Powell. She was Tony Thompson's bitch. She's the last mouth I've got to shut."

Moses turned back to Gary. "Hear that Gary—where's Trixie? Tell us and I'll make sure Brian shows mercy."

"You mean, you'll let me go?"

Moses didn't even blink. "Of course. We go back a long way."

An obvious lie. They both had to kill Gary, because he was too dangerous to release. "Get fucked."

Moses smiled mirthlessly. "Look Gary, I know we're friends but, if you don't hand over Trixie, I'll have to re-evaluate."

"Don't worry, I think our friendship's over."

Moses shrugged. "Have it your way. Let's see how much pain you can take."

While Pringle covered Gary with a pistol, Moses moved behind him and patted him down. Finally, he used police-issue handcuffs to fasten his hands behind his back.

Pringle opened a collapsible chair next to a fold-out table and barked: "Sit".

Gary complied.

Pringle said: "This is the last time I'll ask nicely—where's Trixie?"

No point crawling. "Fuck off."

Pringle slammed the pistol butt into the side of Gary's head. The world turned dark and he felt a strange, remote pain, as if it wasn't quite his. He toppled off the chair and, because he was handcuffed, his head bounced on the wooden deck. He blacked out for several seconds. As he regained consciousness, the pain got up close and personal.

Moses heaved him back into the chair. His head throbbed. Blood dribbled into his eyes and mouth, tasting bitter. He wanted to rub his head, but couldn't.

Gary looked up at Moses. "Enjoying yourself?"

Moses's flat face remained impassive. "Wise up Gary. Tell us where Trixie is and we'll let you go, I promise."

"Bullshit."

Pringle smiled mirthlessly. "OK, smart guy. I've got some good news and some bad news. The good news is that I don't have a blowtorch—otherwise I'd roast you like a turkey."

"The bad news?"

"I've got a big boning knife. If you don't cough I'll cut off your fingers, one by one. Understand?"

"Piss off," Gary mumbled through stiff lips and braced himself for another blow.

Instead, Pringle flashed an evil smile. "Alright, I'm going for the knife. You'd better have an answer ready by the time I get back."

Pringle ducked into the small galley and returned holding a huge knife. He ran his index finger lightly along the edge, producing a few beads of blood. He sucked the finger and smiled at Gary. "Mmm, I use this to fillet fish. But you'll do. Got an answer for me now, smart-fuck?"

"Get stuffed."

Pringle turned to Moses. "Uncuff him."

Moses ground his pistol into Gary's neck and unlocked a bracelet. Gary put his elbows on the fold-out table and rubbed his wrists. Moses leaned forward and re-cuffed his hands.

Pringle said: "Spread your fingers on the table."

Moses jabbed the pistol into his neck. Gary slowly complied.

Pringle grinned maliciously. "Last chance. Tell me where to find Trixie or I'll perform my first amputation."

Gary couldn't tell the truth - that he had no idea where she was - because Pringle would kill him out of hand. Somehow, he had to send one of these bastards off on a wild goose chase and hope to overpower the other. But he couldn't capitulate too easily. If he did, Pringle would smell a rat.

Gary said: "Bugger off."

Pringle leaned forward, grabbed Gary's right wrist and slid the knife over his little finger, scraping the bone, drawing blood.

Now was the time to capitulate. "OK, OK. I'll tell you where she is."

"Good. Where?"

"She's staying in Camperdown, with a friend."

"Who's the friend?"

"Girl called Jane—Jane Rourke. They used to work together, as hookers."

"What's the address?"

"59 O'Riordan Street, Flat 29." Gary once lived at that address, though there were only 28 flats in the block.

Gary kept his eyes focused on the boning knife, hoping to see it rise. Instead, with a loud grunt, Pringle pressed down hard, lopping off the little finger of Gary's right hand.

Gary screamed. He never realised his body could manufacture so much pain. Blood gushed from his finger stump onto the table. For a few moments, he blacked out. Moses stopped him falling.

Gary cradled his bloody hand against his body, leaving the severed finger on the table. "Shit. Why?"

Pringle grinned. "Because you fucked me around. You shouldn't have done that. Trixie had better be at this address or I'll slice off your nuts and eat them on toast?" Pringle took a dirty towel off a rack and threw it at Gary. "Stop bleeding on my boat."

Gary wrapped the towel around his maimed hand and, ignoring the brutal pain, pulled it tight. It quickly turned into a bloody mess. Tears ran down his cheeks, his head floated and his vision wobbled. He wanted to open his mouth and scream. But, if he did, he'd never stop.

Pringle said: "Got anything smart to say?"

"Piss off."

"Hah. Call that smart?" Pringle turned to Moses. "I'll go and see if Trixie's there. You watch him."

"No problem."

"You won't let your friendship with this guy get in the way?"

Moses laughed. "I saved your life, didn't I? When you come back, bring me my four kilos of coke."

"Sure. I'll be back in a few hours."

Pringle left the cabin.

The pain in Gary's hand had declined to a dull throb. He looked down at his finger, lying on the table, and croaked: "For God's sake, put it on ice."

Moses ducked into the galley and returned with a tray of ice. He delicately placed Gary's finger on top and returned it to the freezer. "Satisfied?"

"Yeah."

"How does your hand feel?" Moses asked, curious rather than concerned.

"Like shit."

"Don't worry—it's only pain."

Gary wanted to curl up into a ball and nurse his finger. But, if he wanted to survive, he had to keep Moses talking and wait for his chance. "I thought you were a friend."

"Yeah, well, I'm not enjoying this," Moses said, without inflection.

"How long have you been dirty?"

"Most of my career."

"I didn't know."

"Sorry, I forgot to mention it. But I've always hated following the rules. Breaking them's a lot more fun."

Gary understood what he meant. Moses turned to crime out of boredom, not greed. He loved walking on both sides of the street—being beyond the law. Gary used to think that, if he ever went dirty, that would be why. He always hated time-serving cops who stood for nothing, good or bad.

Gary said: "You're helping dealers."

"So what? The war on drugs is a joke. The only law that matters is supply and demand. They always meet. Cops just affect the price."

"What about the kids who get hooked?"

"So what? I don't give a fuck about them. They're worms, cockroaches, bugs. If they had any will-power they wouldn't be addicts. I despise them. Don't care if they all die."

Jesus, he wasn't just a criminal, he was a Nazi as well. "I didn't know you at all, did I?"

"Correct." Moses sat on the long wooden bench. "So, Pringle put the bomb in your apartment, huh?"

"Yes, and killed my neighbour. She was just an innocent bystander."

Moses shifted slightly. "He shouldn't have done that. Innocent bystanders should be left, well, bystanding."

"But you'll still help him?"

"I'm not as upset about her death as you."

"You know, don't you, he's going to kill Trixie as well?"

"Of course. But he won't find her at Camperdown, will he?"

"Yes he will."

"Bullshit."

"You think I lied?"

"I know you did."

"Why?"

"You gave in too easily."

"Jesus, he was going to cut off my fucking finger."

"That's not a big deal for a stubborn bastard like you."

"If you think I lied, why'd you let him go?"

Moses smiled. "So we can have a private chat."

The pain in Gary's hand was growing again and he became light-headed. "About what?"

Moses put his hand into his jacket, took out a little vial of white powder and waved it in front of Gary. "Know what this is?"

"Coke?"

"Correct. I carry it around in case I've got to load up someone. Tell me where Trixie is and I'll let you do a couple of lines. It'll ease the pain."

Gary had never lusted after anything so much in his life. "Let me do them now?"

"No, tell me where Trixie is."

"I've already told you."

Moses shook his head and put the vial back inside his jacket. "Suit yourself. Alright, stand up. I want to cuff your hands behind your back."

"Why? I've lost a finger."

"Don't care. Still don't trust you."

Most undercover cops carry a small concealed weapon as a back-up. Gary was no different. He had a buckle knife in the belt around his waist. The buckle formed the handle and the three-inch blade nestled behind the leather strap. He wore it as a memento of his undercover days, until now.

Gary palmed the knife with his left hand and hid it behind the bloody towel over his right. He tried to block out the pain and focus on what he had to do. Don't be jumpy; don't move too soon. If he slipped up, Moses would splatter his brains all over the boat.

Moses stepped forward, key in his left hand and pistol in his right. Gary extended his hands. As Moses unlocked the handcuffs, his pistol moved offline. Gary jumped up and drove the buckle knife into Moses' carotid artery.

Moses screamed and stumbled back, a geyser of blood spurting from the wound. Gary clung tight so Moses couldn't use his pistol. They danced a grotesque gavotte until Moses fell onto his back, Gary on top. Gary jarred his right hand and almost blacked out. But he still managed to head-butt Moses and crush his nose.

Amazingly, Moses still held the pistol. Gary rolled onto his arm and buried the knife deep into his bicep. Moses screamed and dropped the weapon. Gary tossed away the knife and scooped up the pistol with his left hand. He staggered back against a bulkhead, clumsily tightening the towel around his maimed hand, pain excruciating.

Moses lay on his back, both hands clasping his throat. Blood bubbled between his fingers. Jesus, how much more did he have?

"Fucking asshole," Moses croaked and staggered to his feet, still holding his throat. There was an edge-of-extinction gleam in his eyes—the last spark before death.

Gary said: "Be smart Moses, I've got your pistol."

As Moses let go of his throat and rushed forward, Gary raised the pistol and pumped three shots into his chest. Moses still slammed into Gary and squashed him against the bulkhead. Gary screamed with pain. Blood splashed his face, almost blinding him. Moses jolted Gary with two uppercuts.

Gary jammed his pistol under the Maori's chin and pulled the trigger. The pistol roared. Blood and brains plumed from the top of Moses' head. The big Maori arched his back, convulsed twice and collapsed.

Gary slumped to the deck and lay for a couple of minutes, panting. Then he climbed to his feet and looked down at the Maori's lifeless eyes, awestruck. Moses had been a magnificent beast. Strong. Brave. Cunning. Merciless. Yet now he was dead. Made a small mistake and paid a huge price.

Gary's legs buckled and he crashed to the ground. Everything went black.

Gary opened his eyes, bewildered. But the throbbing pain in his right hand, the sight of Moses' dead body and the huge pools of drying blood quickly reminded him of what happened.

After tightening the bloody rag around his right hand, he reached inside Moses' jacket and took out the vial of cocaine. He flipped off the cap and emptied its contents with a couple of big snorts. The pain receded to a distant throb, somewhere beyond his hand.

He found the key to the handcuffs in a pool of blood. As he removed them, he heard beeping and got confused. Was he carrying a mobile? No, must be Moses'.

He opened Moses' jacket, dragged out a mobile phone and pressed the receive button. "Hello."

"Moses?" Pringle said.

The coke made Gary light-headed. "Moses can't come to the phone right now."

A long pause. "That you Maddox?"

"Yeah."

"You killed him?"

"It wasn't suicide. You'd better get rid of him, before he gets smelly."

Pringle wouldn't dare call the police, because he'd have to explain too much.

Pringle said: "You'll pay for this."

Gary didn't have time to trade insults. He hung up, dialled triple-0 and told the operator to send an ambulance to the marina.

The operator said: "What's the nature of your injury?"

"I've lost a finger."

"An ambulance will be there soon."

Gary slowly climbed out of the cabin cruiser and staggered up the jetty towards the road, nobody around to help. The cocaine already seemed to be wearing off. His head swam. He staggered through a gate and slumped onto a curb, blood everywhere. Shit. Couldn't have much left.

He realised he'd forgotten his finger and didn't have the strength to go back. Damn. He had to stay awake—had to.

Five minutes later, an ambulance siren shook the air. His vision dimmed and he pitched forward. He tried to put out his arms, and couldn't.

Chapter 28

Gary lay in a small hospital room on crisp white sheets, wearing a surgical gown. How did he get there? Then he recalled what happened on Pringle's boat and shuddered. It was like a crazy dream.

His right hand, swathed in bandages, hurt less than before; his scalp felt stiff and tender. He lifted his left hand and gingerly felt his head. A large bandage covered his forehead.

He punched a green button on the headboard. Twenty seconds later, a nurse appeared. She was in her early forties, with greying hair and a stern face.

Gary said: "Hello beautiful."

She smiled through thin lips. "Tell that to my husband. How do you feel?"

"Better than a few hours ago. How'd I get here?"

"An ambulance picked you up."

"Where am I?"

"Sutherland Hospital."

"What's the damage?"

"You've lost the little finger on your right hand. We've also had to put fifteen stitches in your head. What happened?"

Gary wracked his brain for a good lie. Not easy. "Umm... it's hard to remember... Ah, yes, now I remember: got my finger caught in a boat winch."

"How'd you hurt your head?"

"Must have hit it when I fainted, I guess."

"Too bad you didn't bring your finger with you. We might have been able to re-attach it. Is there anyone you want us to contact, Mr Maddox?"

"No. How do you know my name?"

"We looked in your wallet. It's in the bedside table."

"What happened to my clothes?"

"They're being washed. They were quite a mess. I've never seen so much blood."

Most of which was Moses'. "When will I get them back?"

"Probably tomorrow morning."

"What time is it now?"

She glanced at her watch. "About six-thirty."

"In the evening?"

"Yes."

"I'd like my clothes back now, if possible."

She looked surprised. "Why? You won't need them."

Pringle could easily find out where Gary was and then anaesthetise him with bullets. Gary was a sitting duck.

He said: "I've got to get out of here immediately."

"You're not going anywhere for a while."

"We'll see about that. Where's the doctor?"

"He'll be here in half-an-hour."

"Can I see him right away?"

"No, you'll have to wait," she said and left.

Soon afterwards, a young woman from the hospital's administration department arrived and took down his details. Since she already knew his name, there was no point giving her a false one.

"Do you belong to a health fund?"

"No."

"Are you carrying your Medicare Card?"

"No."

She pursed her lips disapprovingly. "Alright. Thanks for your time." She started to rise.

"Look, if anybody rings up the hospital and asks for me, I want you to say I'm not here."

She raised her eyebrows. "Why?"

"Umm... well... you may not recognise me, but I'm quite a well-known actor. If the gossip columnists find out I'm in hospital, they'll probably make up all sorts of stories: say I'm dying of AIDS or getting a nose job, or something like that. So if anybody rings up and asks for me, say I'm not here."

His story sounded incredibly lame. But his creative juices were stagnant.

She looked dubious, but nodded. "Alright, I'll have that noted on the computer."

"Thanks."

Gary drew little comfort from that. Pringle might have already rung up the hospital. Or he might ring up and say he was a cop. If he did, they'd probably give him the information anyway.

The young woman left and Gary dozed off. He woke when someone called his name. "Mr Maddox, Mr Maddox."

Above him was a tall, thin man in his early fifties, with crinkly red hair and faded freckles, looking dog-tired. His name tag said: "Dr Felix Elliott."

Gary's right hand now hurt like hell. The painkillers had obviously worn off.

"Hello, I'm the surgeon who operated on your hand. How does it feel?"

"Like it's on fire. Can you give me something for the pain?"

"I can give you some more Percodan. But we've got to be careful with that, because it's addictive."

"I don't care."

"You say that now. What happened to you?"

Gary repeated the story he told the nurse.

Dr Elliott said: "It's lucky you got to the road before you passed out."

"I know. When can I get out of here?"

"Not for several days. You've lost a lot of blood. We also have to change your bandages regularly and make sure there are no complications: septicaemia, gangrene, things like that."

Gary shook his head. "Sorry Doc, I can't hang around. I've got some important business meetings tomorrow. I've got to attend them—got to."

"You need post-operative care."

"Look, when my clothes come back, I'm walking out of here and there's nothing you can do to stop me. Surely, I can get my bandages changed at another hospital."

Dr Elliott crossed his arms and thought awhile. "Where do you live?"

"Bondi."

"I suppose you could attend the casualty department at St Vincent's. I could give you a letter describing your condition."

"Thanks."

"But you're being very unwise."

"Doc, I'm a big boy. I take full responsibility. Now what about some more Percodan?"

Dr Elliott said a nurse would bring him some, and slouched off to spread gloom and doom elsewhere. When he'd gone, Gary opened the top drawer of the bedside table, fished out his blood-encrusted wallet and nervously looked inside. Two hundred bucks. Not much of a war chest.

He lay back and drew up a mental balance sheet of his assets and liabilities. On the plus side, he was still alive and had a couple of hundred dollars in cash. He also had several thousand dollars in a savings account. On the debit side, he'd lost a finger, had no weapon and had an ultra-violent and crooked cop hunting him. If this wasn't his darkest hour, it was pretty close to it.

Chapter 29

Gary knew that, if he fell asleep on his hospital bed, Pringle might sneak in and administer a fatal dose of bullets. So he spent most of the night wandering around the hospital, dozing on spare beds. When he returned to his room the next morning, the nurses chided him for his absence.

Just after 8 a.m., a nurse brought his clothes, freshly laundered, but with big light-purple stains and several tears. He showered and dressed. A nurse changed his bandages.

Dr Elliott appeared just after 8.30 a.m., looking like he'd just killed a patient and was too tired to care. He gave Gary various prescriptions and a letter describing his condition, and told him to have the bandages changed every second day. "But you really should spend several more days in this hospital."

"Don't worry, this is best for my health, believe me."

"You don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes I do. Good health isn't just about pills and treatment, you know."

Gary said goodbye to the doctor and left the hospital. Once outside, he decided to pick up his car, still parked near the marina. He'd be taking a risk, because Pringle might have staked it out, but he needed transport.

A taxi deposited him a block away from the marina. He walked up a side street, peered cautiously around a corner and saw his car about thirty metres away. After scanning the area and seeing nothing suspicious, he dashed over to the car, started the engine, stomped on the accelerator and zoomed down the street.

Thirty minutes later, he knocked on the front door of Ray Boland's house in Cremorne.

Ray opened it and his jaw went slack. "Christ, you look like hell. What happened?"

"It's a long story. Anne home?"

"Yes."

"Then let's go around to the toolshed."

Ray stepped outside and closed the door behind him. They walked down the side path to the toolshed. Once inside, Gary slumped onto a stool, leaned back against the metal wall and put his bandaged right hand on his lap.

Ray said: "What's been going on?"

"It's a long story."

"Tell me everything."

"OK." Gary told Ray everything that had happened to him during the last month. When he finished, 20 minutes later, Ray shook his head. "So Pringle blew up your apartment to stop you finding Trixie. That doesn't surprise me. I met the prick a few times. He even smelt evil."

"Did you ever meet Moses Hapeta?"

"Yes, several times. I can't believe you killed him. He looked like artillery shells would bounce off him."

"He died hard, believe me."

"What about your hand - does it hurt?"

"Only when I'm awake."

"What'll you do now?"

"First I'll get well, then I'll get even."

"You could call it quits."

"And let Pringle get away with murdering Robyn and chopping off my finger? You must be kidding? Nope, he's gotta die. It's that simple."

"He won't be easy to kill, particularly now he knows your coming."

"Of course not. But failure isn't an option."

Ray shrugged. "Then good luck. Anything I can do to help?"

"Yes."

"What?"

Gary had considered asking the gun-dealer, Dragovic, for another pistol. But, if he did, Dragovic might shoot *him*. "Umm, I need a piece."

Ray stared hard. "Why do you think I've got one?"

"Because you're a cautious man who prepares for every contingency."

Ray chewed over Gary's request for a long time and nodded reluctantly. "I've got a Smith & Wesson I souvenired from a crime scene. I don't think it can be traced."

"Any ammo?"

"Some."

Ray stood on his workbench, opened a ceiling hatch and reached into the roof cavity. He extracted a square biscuit tin that he put on the bench and opened. Inside was a Smith & Wesson .357 automatic, a shoulder holster, two empty clips, three boxes of .357 hollow-points and a small cleaning kit.

Gary's eyes lit up. "God, it's beautiful. Have you got a bazooka as well?"

"Afraid not."

"You want it back?"

"Not if you use it. In fact, keep it anyway. I probably should get rid of it."

"Thanks. Does Anne know about it?"

Ray looked very nervous. "Of course not, and you won't tell her, right?"

"My lips are sealed. Let's treat this as a man thing."

Gary had to lie low until his hand healed. After leaving Ray, he drove south for two hours to the steel city of Wollongong and checked into a cheap motel.

He showered, swallowed a Percodan and flopped onto the bed. The pill knocked him out for twelve hours. He woke, took another pill and climbed back into his clothes.

After breakfasting in the motel's cafe, he went to an ATM, withdrew some money and bought some new clothes. Then he went over to the casualty department of Wollongong Hospital and waited a couple of hours until a doctor examined his hand. The doctor said it was healing well and re-banded it.

He drove further south until he reached the small fishing hamlet of Huskisson, on Jervis Bay. Autumn was stripping the trees and bringing cold ocean currents up from the south. The tourist season was almost over and it was easy to get a cheap motel room.

For the next three weeks, while his hand healed, he did a lot of sleeping, strolled along the beach, fished off the wharf, read the newspapers and sank beers at the local RSL.

Every second day he drove to the local hospital, where a nurse changed the bandages on his hand and checked the wound. As it healed, the pain lessened and he cut his Percodan consumption.

It looked like Ray Boland kept the Smith & Wesson in good condition. But Gary had to be sure it was. So he opened the cleaning kit, took out a wire rod and put a patch on the end of it. Then he spent an hour cleaning and loading the .357.

It would be a long time before he could shoot with his injured right hand, if at all. Until then, he had to use his left and hope for the best.

To test his aim, he took the pistol into the Jervis Bay National Park and fired a couple of clips at some tin cans, missing plenty. Fortunately, Pringle was a much bigger target and a .357 hollow-point bullet always did a lot of damage.

That night, Gary lay in bed and thought, for the first time in a long while, about his father's funeral. The NSW Police Force hijacked the ceremony and turned it into a full-dress extravaganza. An Australian flag was draped over the coffin. The heavily braided Police Commissioner eulogised his father's dedication to duty, courage and self-sacrifice. Then six cadets from the Goulburn Academy carried the coffin out of the church, through an honour guard, and slid it into the back of a waiting hearse.

The whole time, Gary knew the ceremony was a farce, because his father was crooked and buried \$300,000 in his back yard.

Now, lying in bed, he wondered how corrupt his father had been. Would he, like Pringle, have killed to avoid detection? Gary realised that he didn't know, because he never really knew his father at all.

Early the next morning, he checked out of the motel. The old guy at the reception desk said he hoped Gary enjoyed his stay.

"Yes, very restful."

"Where you going?"

"Back to Sydney."

The old guy rolled his eyes. "Hah. People up there will kill you for a buck."

Gary smiled. "Not if I kill them first."

A chuckle. "Got a point. Good luck."

He drove back towards Sydney, to play it out.

Chapter 30

Detective Inspector Clyde Taylor had spent eight years in the Police Integrity Unit chasing dirty cops. Most were breathtakingly stupid, risking their careers and reputations for a blow-job, a free meal or a few extra bucks they lost on the pokies anyway. Though Taylor was no shrink, he sometimes wondered if, deep down, they *wanted* to get caught.

However, he suspected there were a few crooked cops who made big money and were seldom detected. They were like big sharks cruising the ocean depths, trawling for hidden prey, rarely glimpsed.

He recently sighted one of those sharks when a drug dealer called Renato Tomasis was arrested for heroin possession. Facing a long stretch, Tomasis coughed to the PIU that he sold drugs for Detective Sergeant Brian Pringle.

Taylor wanted to charge Pringle with corruption. But Tomasis was a convicted felon whose evidence was worthless. That meant Taylor's investigation would probably go nowhere.

Still, Taylor was obliged to interview Pringle about the allegations. When he did, he'd try to scare Pringle into confessing and rolling over on other dirty cops, though it was highly unlikely a tough bastard like Pringle would buckle. Probably just laugh. Then Taylor would close his investigation and watch the bastard slide back into the murky depths.

Taylor had agreed to meet Pringle at Police Headquarters next to Hyde Park. When Taylor stepped into the interview room, Pringle was already seated, wearing a half-smile. What was so fucking funny?

Taylor said: "Good Morning, Detective Sergeant."

Pringle's grin expanded. "Morning, Sir."

Taylor sat opposite and reached out to turn on the recording machine. To his surprise, Pringle reached out and grabbed his wrist.

Pringle said: "Don't bother."

"Why not?"

Pringle looked serious. "I want to cut a deal."

Taylor almost fell off his chair.

Chapter 31

Back in Sydney, Gary rented an apartment in Coogee with low ceilings, cramped rooms and out-of-date fixtures. The explosion that destroyed his previous apartment also ruined his furniture and most of his belongings. So he bought a new mattress and threw that on the bedroom floor. He'd buy some replacement furniture later.

Now he had to corner Pringle and kill the bastard. That wouldn't be easy, because Pringle knew Gary was hunting him. So he spent a couple of days reviewing his options. Then he read a story in the Sydney Morning Herald that rocked him to his core.

TOP COP ADMITS CORRUPTION

One of the state's most experienced drug squad detectives has admitted to corruption and agreed to give evidence against other corrupt police officers.

According to a police source, Detective Sergeant Pringle has admitted to the Police Integrity Unit that he used an informant to sell drugs.

However, the PIU has agreed to give him immunity from prosecution in return for him giving evidence against at least half-a-dozen fellow officers.

Detective Sergeant Pringle has been a policeman for more than 25 years and spent the last ten on the Narcotics Strikeforce. He has made numerous major arrests and received two citations for bravery.

The police source said that Detective Sergeant Pringle has now been placed in the witness protection program...

Gary read the story with a mixture of anger and despair. In one dazzling move, Pringle had escaped his clutches. From now on, Pringle wouldn't have to worry about Gary trying to kill him or prosecution for his crimes. Instead, he'd have all the forces of the law behind him. They would give him a new identity and new home. Then he could enjoy his ill-gotten gains in complete safety. What more could a crooked cop want? The bastard had cut the deal of the century. He must be laughing his head off.

The Witness Protection Unit would obviously keep Pringle in Australia until he finished giving evidence against his colleagues. Then it would ship him off to a foreign destination: probably the United States or England.

Somehow, Gary had to pierce the veil of secrecy that surrounded Pringle and complete his quest to kill the bastard. However, the Witness Protection Unit, which had a separate building and separate computer system, was a hard nut to crack. Nobody had ever tracked down someone under its protection.

He would have to become the first.

Chapter 32

The next morning, Gary interviewed a couple of potential clients. The first was a shop owner who wanted to find out which employee had his hand in the till;

the other an embittered wife who wanted to know where the husband she was divorcing had hidden his assets. Both wanted Gary to start work immediately; neither wanted to make an advance payment. That was contrary to his revised business plan and he showed them the door.

Just after noon, a knock on the door. He opened it and saw Detective Constable Karen Phillips standing outside, wearing a crème blouse and tight navy skirt.

"Hi, what're you doing here?"

"I was in the neighbourhood and thought I'd drop in." She strolled into his office and scanned the cheap furniture.

"I'm trying to keep my overheads down."

"You're doing a good job." She noticed the bandage on his right hand. "What happened to your hand?"

"I lost a finger."

A surprised expression. "How?"

"Got a bit excited in the kitchen. Never been much of a cook."

She lifted both eyebrows. "Really?"

"Yes."

"Jesus, bad luck follows you around like an old dog, doesn't it? Your apartment got blown up; you got kidnapped; you lost a finger in... what? ... a cooking accident. You're lucky to be alive."

He shrugged. "True. Fortunately, God's saving me for a special purpose."

She *almost* laughed. "Don't kid yourself."

"How can I help you?"

A wintry smile. "I want to buy you lunch."

Now he raised *his* eyebrows. "Really?"

"Yes, but somewhere cheap—I'm a poor cop."

"Don't worry, I don't know anywhere expensive."

As he followed her down the stairs, he wondered why she'd warmed to a few degrees above freezing, but soon focused on her firm calves.

He took her around the corner to a small Italian restaurant, where a waiter took their orders. After he left, Gary said: "How's your investigation going?"

The detective leaned forward. "That's why I wanted to have lunch. I think I know who planted the bomb in your apartment."

Gary lifted his eyebrows. "Who?"

"Detective Sergeant Brian Pringle."

She'd hit the jackpot. Gary hid his shock. "You mean, the drug squad cop?"

"Yes."

"Wow. You know, I used to work with him. How'd you find out?"

She leaned forward and narrowed her eyes. "Stop pretending you're surprised. You've known it was Pringle all along, haven't you?"

He didn't know *all along*: he only found out a couple of weeks ago. So he spoke truthfully: "No, I haven't."

A frown. "I don't believe you."

He leaned back. "That's up to you. Why do you think it was Pringle?"

She explained that Pringle was the only drug cop who claimed Gary was dirty and she later discovered that Pringle went up to Byron Bay to investigate after Gary was kidnapped. "I've also heard rumours he's crooked. But the clincher was

in his personnel file. He did a couple of bomb disposal courses. The guy knows *all* about bombs. He obviously knew how to put one in your TV set."

Gary was impressed with how cleverly she strung together the clues.

She said: "What I don't know is *why* he tried to kill you. I'm hoping you'll tell me."

Gary was tired of lying to her. She'd done her job well and deserved to be given the last few pieces of the puzzle. He leaned forward. "You really want to know?"

"Yes," she said determinedly.

"Off the record?"

She hesitated and nodded. "OK."

"Good, because I won't give you a statement."

"I understand."

"Alright. And don't think I've been holding out on you. I only discovered the truth quite recently."

"I accept that. Tell me what you know."

"OK. About three months ago, a drug dealer called Pedro Garcia got murdered, along with a guy called Morales. Remember that?"

"Yes. I wasn't involved in the investigation, but I heard about it."

Gary described how Pringle and Tony Thompson killed Garcia and Morales and stole eight kilos of coke. Pringle then eliminated Thompson to stop him talking.

"Thompson's girlfriend, Trixie Powell, knew Pringle was the killer. So, when Barbara Thompson employed me to find her, Pringle got nervous and planted a bomb in my apartment."

"He must have thought you were dangerous."

A smile. "I am dangerous. There's also a lot of bad blood between us. He didn't need a big excuse to blow me up."

The detective listened carefully. "You found Trixie Powell, and got all this information from her, didn't you?"

Gary didn't want to put the cops on Trixie's tail. "I'd rather not say."

A sigh. "OK. And, just out of curiosity, what was your relationship with Robyn Parsons?"

"We were friends."

She looked dubious. "You never slept with her?"

"Correct."

"Why not?"

He shrugged. "Never got around to it."

"At her funeral, you looked shattered."

"Of course I did. I'd just got her killed. I'll always feel guilty about that."

"You must hate Pringle."

"That's an understatement."

She leaned forward. "Is that why you set fire to his boat?"

He cursed himself for not expecting she would hold something back. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Really? About a fortnight ago, Pringle's boat went up in flames. My guess is you were responsible. In fact, I reckon you tried to kill him and missed."

Gary realised Pringle must have torched his boat, probably with Moses Hapeta's body still inside, to destroy any evidence. "You're wrong."

She leaned back and smiled. "Don't worry. I don't care if you tried to knock him off. I just want to charge him with murdering Robyn Parsons. But I've got no evidence that would stand up in court—zero. And now he's skipped into the witness protection program."

"Have you tried to interview him?"

"Of course. I contacted the WPU, but they won't tell me where he's hiding. He's their star snitch. They don't want me to ruin his credibility and make them look stupid. They don't call it the criminal protection program for nothing."

"Even if you contact him, he won't talk. He's too smart."

She sighed. "I know."

"So, what'll happen to your investigation?"

"Unless I find some solid evidence against Pringle, it'll become another cold case and he'll get off Scot free. What are you going to do?"

Gary lied: "Nothing—this is a matter for you guys."

A frown. "Bullshit. You want to kill him, don't you?"

"No, but even if I did, I couldn't: while he's in the witness protection program, he's invisible."

"True."

The waiter brought their pasta meals. For a while, they ate in silence. Gary kept glancing at her broken nose, dying to ask how she broke it.

She finally looked up. "I'm afraid I misjudged you."

"What do you mean?"

"I thought your apartment got bombed because you were involved in something illegal—maybe even drug dealing. Sorry about that."

He wasn't upset. In her shoes, he'd have thought the same thing. "Don't worry, you're paid to be suspicious. And it's no secret that a lot of drug cops go bad."

"You didn't?"

"No, I stayed pretty clean. My father brought me up to follow the rules."

She leaned forward. "A while ago, I asked you why you quit the force, remember?"

"Yes."

"Want to tell me now?"

"Why do you want to know?"

She shrugged. "Just curious."

He didn't like discussing his resignation, but he liked her a lot and wanted to open up a little. So he hesitantly explained how his father revealed, on his death bed, that he had buried \$300,000 in his backyard.

"Wow. What a shock. Did he tell you how he made it?"

"No, though he obviously did something dirty."

"You mean, he brought you up to follow the rules and didn't follow them himself?"

"Yes."

"And that's why you quit the force?"

"Yes."

"But you did nothing wrong. You could have stayed a cop."

"If I did, I'd have continued a family tradition that was bullshit. I'd have felt like a phoney." He shrugged. "I was also getting tired of the job and all the dickheads in charge."

She leaned forward. "What did you do with the money—spend it?"

He blushed. "No, I gave it to a couple of charities."

She laughed. "You're kidding?"

"No. Now, I wish I'd kept some."

"I bet you do. But you did the right thing, I think. So how do you feel about your father now?"

Time had blunted his anger and his attempt to kill Pringle made him feel less morally superior. Pringle deserved to die. But killing him would be murder. Gary couldn't deny that.

He said: "Maybe I was a bit judgmental. We get handed lots of shitty choices in life, and it's hard for a cop to stay honest."

"Very true."

Time to change the topic. "Anyway, I've told you about myself. Tell me this: how'd you break your nose? Making an arrest?"

She smiled. "No, my brother broke it, when I was about ten."

"How?"

"We were playing backyard cricket. He hit a ball and I didn't duck fast enough."

"Ever consider getting it re-set?"

"Of course. But I thought: stuff it, it's part of me. You don't like it?"

"I think it's great."

While they finished eating, Gary got her to describe some of the murder investigations she'd worked on. She was a wry and interesting raconteur. The more she talked, the more he liked her.

When the bill arrived, he tried to grab it, but she was too quick.

"I promised to pay, remember?"

"OK. But, if you do, you've got to let me take you out to dinner."

She looked flustered. "I can't."

"Why not?"

"For a start, you're still a witness in a Homicide investigation."

"Come off it. You know Pringle did it and you're about to close the file."

"I haven't closed it yet."

"So, when you close it, you'll have dinner with me?"

She frowned. "No, you're not my type."

Gary hid his disappointment behind a smile. "You can't blame me for trying."

Chapter 33

As Gary strolled back to his office from their lunch, he noticed someone on the pavement opposite quickly turn away and stare into a shop window. Though Gary couldn't see his face, his build was unmistakable.

Gary strolled along the street and into an alley. Halfway along it, he ducked into an alcove and waited.

About twenty seconds later, quick footsteps approached. Alex Thompson shuffled past, wearing a denim jacket and grey slacks, looking like he was hunting a lion with a pen-knife.

Gary stepped out and squeezed Thompson's right shoulder, where Gary shot him. Thompson screamed with pain and stumbled around on rubbery legs. It was easy for Gary to open his jacket and drag a .22 automatic from a shoulder holster.

Gary shoved Thompson into the alcove and ground the muzzle into a nostril. "So, your shoulder still hurts?"

Thompson's eyes were glazed over with pain. He gasped: "Fuck yeah - hurts bad."

"Tell me why you're following me, or I'll rip your arm off." Gary put his hand lightly on Thompson's shoulder and the guy cringed.

"I just want to talk to you."

A lie. Barbara and Alex Thompson thought Tony Thompson had a million dollars when he died, and Trixie Powell stole it. Alex obviously intended to kidnap Gary and torture him until he revealed the whereabouts of Trixie and the money.

Gary said: "Listen, you stupid dickhead. I don't know where Trixie's gone and I don't know anything about the money. Trixie claimed she didn't have it."

"She's lying."

"Maybe. But I don't care. If you ask me, after what you creeps did to her, she deserves whatever she's got. Now, if I let you go, will you leave me alone?"

"You really don't have the money?"

"Do I look like I'm rolling in dough?"

"I guess not. Yeah, I'll leave you alone."

"Good. And tell your bitch mother to do the same."

"I will."

Gary considered telling Alex that he'd found out that Brian Pringle killed his brother, Tony. However, the Thompsons had shown no interest in avenging Tony's death and didn't deserve that information.

He said: "Just remember, if I see either of you again, I'll shoot you on sight, understand? On fucking sight!"

A sour expression. "I understand."

"Good. Now fuck off."

To Gary's surprise, instead of moving off, Thompson hesitated and said: "I've got just one question..."

"What?"

"Who's the American?"

Gary was puzzled. "What American?"

"You don't know about the American?"

"What are you talking about?"

A wry smile. "Nothing—forget it."

Gary considered interrogating him further about "the American" but it didn't seem important and this wasn't the place or time. Instead, he patted him on the shoulder. Thompson screamed and fell back against the wall. Gary continued towards his office.

Chapter 34

Henry Olsen had made a lot of money—\$8,325,000 to be precise—killing people. He invested most of it in shares. So when he read on-line that the US Federal Reserve was planning to lift interest rates and that could cause a share-market crash, he got worried. Maybe he should cash up and wait for the bears' picnic.

He wanted to phone his financial adviser in New York and get his view. But it was noon in Sydney right now, and would be 7 p.m. in New York. His adviser had probably gone home. Have to catch him tomorrow morning. Until then, there was no point worrying.

His hotel room was on the 41st floor of the Intercontinental Hotel. He strolled over to the window and looked out at bunch of sailing boats racing each other across Sydney Harbour under a perfect blue sky. Despite the view, he felt glum. When he was in the US Marine Corps, he spent six months in the stockade for breaking a sergeant's jaw. After that, if he stayed in a hotel room for more than a few days, he got claustrophobic. During the month he'd occupied this room, it had shrunk to almost half the size. He desperately wanted to go home to New York. However, he couldn't because he'd contracted to kill whoever iced Pedro Garcia.

His employer—one of Pedro's uncles—was a big-shot in the Medellin cartel. He was furious when he heard that his favourite nephew was murdered in Sydney and eight kilos of coke was stolen. He couldn't look his sister in the eye until her son was avenged.

The uncle employed Olsen to be his instrument of vengeance. He chose the right man. During his ten-year career as a hitman, Olsen had contracted to kill 21 men and one woman, and slain every one.

Until now, he'd always worked in the United States. However, when his broker offered him the chance to do a hit in Sydney, Australia, he jumped at it. He realised that, in an age of globalisation and disappearing international borders, a contract killer had to travel. He flew into Sydney on a tourist visa, under the name Kenneth Roberts.

Unfortunately, the assignment proved more difficult than he expected. The uncle wasn't sure who killed Pedro, and put Olsen in touch with a couple of Pedro's friends in Sydney. Olsen contacted them, and they said a guy called Tony Thompson usually helped Pedro package his coke shipments and got whacked a fortnight after Pedro.

There was obviously a falling out among thieves: Thompson and an accomplice rubbed out Pedro and stole his coke; then the accomplice rubbed out Thompson. So Olsen had to identify the accomplice who killed Thompson and whack him.

Olsen visited Thompson's mother one evening, stuck a big pistol in her face, and demanded to know who killed her son. She claimed she didn't know. However, she'd employed a private investigator called Gary Maddox to find out.

Maddox had disappeared. So Olsen decided to wait until he reappeared, then force him to reveal who killed Thompson. Every day, at about noon, he telephoned Maddox's office, hoping someone would answer. Eventually, someone picked up the phone and said: "Gary Maddox here."

Bingo. Olsen hung up.

Chapter 35

Gary ate lunch in a café and strolled a hundred metres back to his office. He climbed the flight of concrete steps, unlocked the door and stepped inside. As he did, he sensed something was wrong. That impression was confirmed when a metal object dug into his neck and a voice—with an American accent—said with calm authority: "Don't move, or I'll shoot you dead."

Gary glanced sideways and saw a handsome, well-tanned man in his mid-thirties wearing an expensive, light-grey suit, holding a Walther .357 Revolver. A cold hand gripped his heart and his nerves sizzled. The fact that this guy could break into his office, owned a high-calibre pistol and was spookily calm, suggested he was a professional killer. Pringle must have hired him to kill Gary, who braced for a bullet. "What the hell do you want?"

The guy's Dixie accent evoked steamboats, magnolias and plantation mansions. "I'll explain everything shortly. First, put your hands behind your back and do nothing stupid. I've killed lots of guys. Killing you would be nothing special."

Gary's mouth was full of glue. "What the hell is this about?"

The guy shoved his pistol further into Gary's neck. "Shut up and put your hands behind your back, now."

Gary complied and felt handcuffs snap over his wrists. The American patted him down, very professionally, and found nothing. "Alright, sit down."

As Gary sat, the American slipped across the room and locked the door. He returned and stood over Gary.

Gary managed to half-fill his lungs. "What do you want? Did Pringle send you?"

"Who's Pringle?"

"Brian Pringle."

The American shook his head. "Don't know him."

Gary felt a flood of relief. Maybe this guy didn't plan to kill him. "What's this about?"

The American threw a thigh over a corner of the desk and pointed his pistol at Gary's chest with a rock-steady hand. "You're aware, aren't you, that several months ago, two guys killed a drug dealer called Pedro Garcia and ripped off eight kilos of cocaine."

"Yes."

"Pedro's uncle is a big wheel in the Medellin cartel. He wasn't happy when he heard his nephew got iced. So he sent me out here to... umm... dispense some justice."

"You mean rub out the two guys who killed Pedro?"

"Correct. But when I got here, I discovered one of the killers, Tony Thompson, was already dead and nobody could identify his accomplice."

"Too bad. How can I help?"

"I think you know the name of his accomplice."

"Why?"

"I think the accomplice killed Thompson. So I recently had a chat with Barbara Thompson during which I threatened to blow her head off if she didn't tell me who killed her son. That got her talking. She said she employed you to identify the killer."

"So what? Maybe I didn't identify him."

"True. But if you don't tell me who killed Tony Thompson, I'll have to torture you. In five minutes, you'll forget you're human."

His matter-of-fact tone made Gary a believer. However, he didn't need to make threats. Gary was overjoyed at the chance to make Pringle the target of a professional hitman. "Don't worry, I'm very happy to tell you who killed Thompson."

The American lifted his eyebrows. "Who?"

"A drug cop called Brian Pringle."

"The guy you just mentioned?"

"Yes. Pringle and Tony Thompson killed Pedro Garcia and ripped off his coke. Then Pringle iced Tony Thompson to stop him blabbing."

"How do you know this stuff?"

"That's a long story."

"Take your time and leave nothing out."

Gary summarised how Pringle and Tony Thompson killed Pedro Garcia; Pringle killed Tony Thompson; Trixie Powell ran away; Pringle blew up Gary's apartment to stop Gary's investigation and accidentally killed Robyn, and Gary located Trixie Powell and got the full story from her.

"Pringle sounds like a seriously bad dude."

"Pure evil."

"You must be pissed off with him for blowing up your apartment."

"The woman he killed was a good friend. The bastard has to die."

"Have you tried to kill him?"

"Yes."

"What happened?"

Gary described how he located Pringle's cabin cruiser and what occurred on the boat. When he mentioned that Pringle cut off his little finger, the American glanced at his still bandaged right hand to confirm that.

As soon as Gary finished his story, the American frowned contemptuously. "So you let Pringle get away?"

"It wasn't my fault. The Maori guy saved him."

"Only because you talked so much. I'm surprised you didn't offer him tea and scones, if that's what you folks eat around here. You should have iced the bastard straight away. Hello—bang. Know why you didn't?"

"Why?"

"Deep down, you didn't want to kill him. So you missed your chance. Big mistake. Real killers don't talk. We're not interested in social interaction. When I've got to kill someone, I do it like this." The American snapped his fingers, making a sound like a gunshot.

Gary remembered that this guy was a hitman, and felt a chill go down his spine. "I killed the Maori."

"I don't give a shit about him. Pringle was obviously one of the two who killed Pedro, so I want him dead. Where do I find him?"

Gary didn't want to mention Pringle was now in the witness protection program, but didn't want to lie to this guy either—that could be fatal.

Gary said: "Umm, that's a problem."

Eyes narrowed. "Why?"

"He's now in a witness protection program."

There was nothing pleasant about a hitman's frown. "In a what?"

"A witness protection program. I think you've got similar schemes in the US."

"I know what the fuck they are. What the goddamn hell's he doing in yours?" He didn't sound like a Southern gentleman anymore—or any kind of gentleman.

"Look in my top drawer. You'll find a press clipping. It explains everything."

The American opened Gary's top drawer and fished out the clipping from the *Sydney Morning Herald* of a few days ago.

Gary fearfully watched the American read it, lips compressed.

Finally, the American glared down at Gary. "Shit, this is your fault. You tried to kill Pringle and fucked up. So he jumped into the witness protection program."

"Looks like it."

The killer glare of a killer. "Fucking amateur."

Gary was tired of his insults. "I'm sure you've made mistakes—you've missed targets."

A frown. "No I haven't."

"Not one?"

"Never."

"Oh? Well, at least I found out Pringle helped Thompson kill Pedro Garcia. You didn't manage that."

"True. But I'm not a detective. I'm a hitter, and a damn good one." The hitman appraised Gary coldly. In his sharp green eyes, Gary saw the bright hopes and dark desires that made him as American as apple pie. "I bet you want to know what I'm going to do with you."

Gary felt a huge lump in his throat. "Yeah, ah, I was wondering about that."

"I could kill you."

The lump grew. Gary swallowed hard. It didn't budge. He forced words past it. "Not a good idea."

The American crossed his arms and smiled slightly. "I agree. Know why?"

"Why?"

"I don't like killing people I'm not paid to kill."

"Good principle."

"Yes. And we obviously both want Pringle dead. So I want us to work together."

"How?"

"You're obviously a good detective. Find Pringle and tell me where he is. That's all you've got to do. I'll do the rest. Here's my card. It has my e-mail address. No one can trace it. Send me his location."

The assassin slipped a business card into the top pocket of Gary's shirt.

Gary said: "OK, though he won't be easy to find in the witness protection program."

A broad smile. "Maybe. But if anything in life is certain, if history has told us anything, it's that you can kill anyone."

His words rang a small bell in Gary's mind. "Michael Corleone, right—*Godfather, Part II*?"

Another smile. "Yes."

"That was just a movie."

"So what? It's true. All you've got to do is find Pringle and leave the rest to me."

Gary didn't have a clue how to find Pringle but, when a hitman is pointing a pistol at you, it is important to appear useful. "OK, no problem."

"Good."

"What if I want to kill Pringle myself?"

Eyes narrowed. "Let me put it this way: I'll be happy if you kill Pringle, because I'll get paid anyway. But if you try to kill him and miss, and he gets even harder to find, I'll be very, very upset. That's the last thing you want. I won't care that I haven't been paid to kill you."

"I understand."

"Good. I'm going back in the US. When you find Pringle, let me know and I'll return, OK?"

"Sure. Will you un-cuff me?"

"Of course."

The American tucked away his pistol and smiled like a god-fearing farm boy from the Mid-west. Gary imagined him standing on a baseball mound singing *A Star Spangled Banner*.

The American released Gary. "Since we're going to be partners, let me buy you a cup of coffee to show there are no hard feelings. There aren't, are there?"

Gary felt circulation return to his hands. "Of course not. What's your name?"

"Kenneth Roberts, but call me Ken."

Gary shook his hand. "Pleased to meet you, Ken."

Chapter 36

Gary took the man who called himself Kenneth Roberts down to *Angelo's* cafe, almost empty. Roberts chose a chair with a good view of the door.

Gary rubbed his wrists, still sore from the handcuffs, feeling confused. One minute Roberts was pointing a gun at him, the next they were sitting in a cafe like great pals. But that incongruity didn't seem to bother the American, who looked very pleased with life. He obviously had quicksilver emotions—probably because he had none at all.

Gary wondered how to kick off the conversation. Ask him how long he'd been a hitman? Or whether he'd done any interesting jobs recently? Maybe not. He chose a blander topic. "How do you like Sydney?"

"Oh, you have a lovely city here. Lovely weather. Nice beaches. Good-looking women. But I'm getting a little home-sick." He sounded like Rhett Butler again.

"Really? Where, exactly, is home?"

An airy wave of the hand. "The States."

Gary smiled. "And I suppose Roberts isn't your real name?"

A grin. "It is right now—and *now* is all that counts."

A waitress appeared and they both ordered cappuccinos. Gary asked Roberts if he'd seen much of Sydney. He said he hadn't, so Gary recommended some good sights. Then he realised he'd probably never get another chance to have a friendly chat with a top-line hitman. Lots of questions begged for attention. "I don't want to sound rude but, ah, do you enjoy your work?"

The hitman didn't seem annoyed. "You mean, killing?"

"Yes."

A shrug. "I try not to, because that distorts your judgment and is, well, pretty sick. You go down that road and you'll end up in a very dark place indeed."

Gary looked into his hard green eyes and sensed he'd strolled down that road many times and only just managed to stumble back. One day, he'd just keep walking.

"And, just out of curiosity, how do you usually kill your targets?"

A small diseased smile. "The easiest way possible—gun, knife, rope, whatever's best—unless, of course, the client makes a special request."

"What do you mean?"

The All-American hitman smiled slightly. "Sometimes the client says the target must *know* that he's dying and *why* he's dying, and be screaming in pain. Those hits cost extra."

Gary wondered why the killer was being so forthcoming and realised he was warning Gary to behave. Not necessary.

As the waitress brought their coffee, the solicitor, Terry Fraser, strolled into the cafe. Gary hoped he wouldn't notice them. But he headed towards their table, smiling like a game-show host.

"Hello Gary. I've been trying to contact you. Where have you been?"

"Away doing a job."

He nodded at the bandage on Gary's right hand. "What happened to your hand?"

"Lost my little finger."

"How?"

"Chopping up a steak."

"Ouch. I didn't know you could cook."

Gary held up his right hand. "I can't—that's why this happened."

"Hah." Terry looked inquiringly at Kenneth Roberts, and Gary introduced them to each other. The two men shook hands.

"Pleased to meet you," Roberts said with a cheesy grin.

"Likewise. You're obviously from the US?"

"Yes, just visiting. Pull up a chair and have coffee with us."

Gary hoped Terry would decline. But Terry loved meeting people, especially those who looked prosperous.

"OK," Terry said, and sat down. As he did, his mobile phone played a few bars from the William Tell overture. He pulled it out and turned it off. "Sorry, I'm a lawyer and my clients won't leave me alone."

Roberts grinned. "I know how you feel. Mine are always ringing up to find out if I've finished a job. It's a pain in the butt."

Roberts glanced slyly at Gary, who admired the guy's chutzpah and suppressed a giggle.

Terry said: "Really? What sort of work do you do?"

"I'm a corporate recruiter."

"A head-hunter?"

"Yes." Another smile flitted across his face, like a black crow.

"What're you doing Down Under?"

"I've got a job to do."

"Head-hunting?"

"Yes."

"How do you know Gary?"

"Oh, we have some mutual friends."

Terry recently took his family on a holiday to the United States and listed some of the places they visited. Roberts said he'd been to some, but gave no hint as to where he actually lived. When Roberts said he'd been to Disneyland in Anaheim, Gary wondered why he went there: to assassinate Mickey Mouse, or maybe Goofy?

Roberts asked Terry if he was interested in the stock market and Terry revealed he had a sizeable equity portfolio. They dove into an animated discussion about the effect on stock prices of shifting paradigms, distribution curves and black swan events. Terry thought it was time to bail out of the market; Roberts wasn't so sure.

Eventually, the American glanced at his Rolex. "Well gentlemen, I've got another engagement; I should get moving." He rose and looked down at Gary. "I'll wait for your email."

"You'll get it," Gary said with more confidence than he felt.

The two men watched Roberts disappear out the door.

Terry said: "Interesting guy."

"Yes, very interesting. Guess what he really does for a living?"

"What?"

"He kills people."

Terry looked stunned. "No shit?"

"No shit at all. He's a professional killer."

"How do you know that?"

"He told me."

"And you believed him?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"My hands were cuffed and he was pointing a gun at my head."

"Jesus. Glad you didn't tell me that earlier. I'd have crapped in my pants. How do you know him?"

"Our paths crossed during an investigation."

"I hope you're not employing him."

"Hah, even if I wanted to, I couldn't afford him."

"What's he doing out here?"

"Working, of course."

"You mean, he's gonna kill someone?"

"When he finds the guy."

"Shit."

"Don't worry, his target's a very bad dude—scum of the earth."

"Then I wish him luck."

"You do? You're a lawyer—what about due process?"

"Fuck that. We spend too much time molly-coddling criminals. Most of the bastards need a bullet in the back of the head." Terry shook his head ruefully: "An assassin huh? Well, apart from that, he seemed like a nice guy."

When Terry left, Gary pulled out the business card Roberts gave him. It said: "Kenneth Roberts, Corporate Recruitment". At the bottom was an e-mail address.

Chapter 37

Gary spent many hours wondering how to pierce the veil of secrecy that now surrounded Pringle. Then one evening, while TV channel surfing, he came across a fishing program. Inspiration struck.

Early the next morning, he telephoned the computer hacker, Vincent Drew a.k.a. Lone Wolf.

"Whatchya want?" Drew asked sleepily.

"I'm offering you a supreme challenge."

"What?"

"To find someone in the witness protection program of the NSW Police Force."

"You mean, someone who's got a new identity and new home?"

"Yes."

"Not likely, dude."

"You mean, you're giving up without a fight?"

"No, it's just that some things are *im—poss—ible*."

"You haven't listened to my plan yet."

"What plan?"

"The guy I'm interested in used to subscribe to a lot of fishing magazines. I want you to hack into their subscription lists and find out who's cancelled their subscriptions during the last month and who's taken out new ones. Can you do that?"

"Probably, though it might take a while. What's his name?"

"Brian Pringle. Call me back."

Two days later, Drew told Gary that Pringle had subscribed to two different fishing magazines. Both subscriptions were cancelled a fortnight ago.

Gary said: "Got a list of new subscribers?"

"Yes, during the last fortnight there were forty new subscribers to those magazines."

"Any of them subscribe to both?"

"Yes, five."

"Got their names and addresses?"

"Sure, I'll e-mail them."

When Gary got the list he saw the five new subscribers were scattered all over Australia. He called up Drew and asked him to access Telstra's computer system

and find out which subscribers had land-lines and when their lines were connected. Drew reported back that two had land-lines and both were connected at least a year ago. So it was unlikely one of them was Pringle living under a new name.

That left three new subscribers without land-lines. One lived in Sydney, one in Melbourne and one in Cairns. Gary checked out the Sydney address and got a friend to check out the Melbourne address. Pringle wasn't at either.

That left only the subscriber in Cairns. His name was Philip Schmidt and his address was a post office box. Taking a punt, Gary flew up there to have a look around.

He had to wait two days before Philip Schmidt turned up to empty his post office box. Schmidt was Pringle.

On the flight back to Sydney, Gary considered telling the American hitman where Pringle was hiding and letting him whack the bastard. If he did, there would be no blood on his hands, no chance of arrest and he wouldn't have to worry about stuffing up and having the hitman target *him*.

However, he felt personally responsible for Robyn's death and annoyed that he botched his previous attempt to kill Pringle. He had to avenge her and shoulder whatever burden of guilt came with that.

Chapter 38

Brian Pringle had fought the marlin for almost an hour and recovered more than 500 metres of line. But the fucker was still dancing hard, 300 metres from the game boat.

Despite wearing a kidney harness, his back was sore, shoulders aflame and hands arthritic claws. Yet, he wouldn't give up. No bloody way.

The captain of the game boat, Dick Ventry, stood next to him and said: "You've got a real brawler there. Just keep the tension on the line. Remember, pump and wind, pump and wind."

Ventry held a beer can up to Pringle's lips so he could take a few big sips. Tasted like honey.

The marlin jumped high out of the water and Pringle felt the line go slack. He wound it in fast. Still slack. The hook had fallen out. "Shit, I've lost him."

Ventry patted him on the back. "Bad luck. Not your fault. Sometimes, they suddenly change direction and throw the hook. There's nothing you can do about that. You want to go back in?"

It was five o'clock and Cairns almost an hour away. Pringle nodded. "Sure."

Ventry went forward to tell the helmsman to return to port.

Pringle took off the harness and rose gingerly from the game chair. Christ, he'd taken a beating. Be sore for days.

Despite that, he felt great. Life was good. He sold Pedro Garcia's coke for \$1.5 million, taking his slush fund to \$5.5 million. Then he did a squeal deal with the Police Integrity Unit. In return for ratting on some colleagues, he got an indemnity and a slot in the witness protection program.

Cutting that deal was a master-stroke. It meant he could hide from that bastard Maddox and leave his shitty family behind. Didn't even leave his bitch-wife a note. She found out he'd gone from the newspapers. And, in a couple of years, when he'd finished giving evidence, he'd get relocated overseas, where he could enjoy his ill-gotten gains without a care in the world. His best years were ahead of him. They'd be golden years alright.

At dusk, the game boat nudged against the jetty. Gulls flapped around, waiting for fish scraps to be thrown overboard. They were out of luck.

Pringle thanked the captain and climbed off the boat, carrying his rod and a small bag holding his gear. Halfway along the jetty, leaning against a pylon, was a flabby guy about fifty years old, neatly dressed in a polo shirt, canvas trousers and deck shoes. His face was lobster red.

As Pringle drew abreast, the man straightened up and spoke in a posh English drawl: "Excuse me, sir, I just saw you get off that boat. I want to hire one. Tell me: is the captain any good."

"Yes, he's very experienced—knows where to fish."

"How much does he charge?"

"About \$1000 a day."

"Mmm. I might speak to him. Any other skippers you'd recommend?"

"A few."

"Maybe, if you're not too busy, you'll let me buy you a beer, while I get their names."

Pringle hesitated. Fucking tourists. Always asking stupid fucking questions. Most didn't know their arses from their elbows. An Ashes Test Match was being played in Perth. Pringle loved cricket and was anxious to get home and watch the last session of the day's play.

"Can't, I'm afraid. Got an urgent appointment."

He strolled into a large car park, got into the late-model Holden sedan the Witness Protection Unit had supplied and headed for home.

Most houses in Cairns were known as *Queenslanders*. Their timber-built living areas and verandahs sat on a raised platform. Pringle resided in a particularly impressive Victorian-era Queenslander which occupied a large block on the side of a hill.

He parked under the platform and trotted up the wooden front steps. He opened the front door and reflected on how wonderful it was to be living on his own. If his wife was around, she'd have kept interrupting him while he tried to watch the test match.

He grabbed a beer from the fridge and strolled into the high-ceiling living room. After turning on the overhead fan, he looked around for the remote control device. He thought he left it on the couch, but found it on the coffee-table. Getting forgetful.

He dropped onto the couch and pressed the power button on the remote. The world turned to heat and light.

Chapter 39

Gary was surprised at how easy it was to persuade Ray Boland to build a bomb for him. Ray reckoned that, if anyone deserved to die, it was Pringle. "You'll just be exterminating a pest." Ray also gave Gary some tips on how to break into the house in Cairns where Pringle was staying.

After Gary broke into the Queenslander and attached the bomb to the television set, he immediately got into his car and drove back to Sydney. After 15 hours on the road, he arrived at his apartment just after 6 a.m. and quickly accessed the web-page of the Sydney Morning Herald. The main story grabbed his attention.

CORRUPT COP DIES IN BOMB EXPLOSION

Self-confessed corrupt detective, Brian Pringle, has died in a bomb explosion.

According to a police source, Pringle died yesterday evening when a bomb ripped through the house in Cairns where he was living under a false name.

Last month, Pringle agreed to give evidence against other corrupt police officers in return for immunity from prosecution and a new identity. At the time of his death, he was in the witness protection program.

The police source said that the Queensland Homicide detectives investigating Pringle's death have no idea who planted the bomb. Nor do they have any idea how the bomber discovered Pringle was in Cairns.

"The whole thing is very embarrassing," the source said. "The Witness Protection Unit is supposed to protect people like Pringle. In this case, it obviously didn't. I think heads will roll."

After reading the story, Gary wondered if he was right to take the law into his own hands and kill Pringle. He soon realised he'd never fully resolve that question. So he put it aside and thought about breakfast.

Chapter 40

The next morning, Detective Constable Karen Phillips stood in the middle of Gary's office, red-faced and glaring. "You planted the bomb, didn't you?"

Gary feigned ignorance. "You mean the bomb that killed Pringle?"

"Yes."

He'd already rehearsed his lies. "Of course not. I mean, I read about it in the paper, but that's all I know."

"Don't bullshit me—you're in this up to your neck. You planted the bomb to avenge Robyn Parsons."

He held up his palms and tried to look innocent. It was not a natural expression. "I had absolutely nothing to do with that."

She frowned. "Then where were you yesterday?"

Gary had already arranged an alibi with Ray Boland. "I went fishing with a friend."

"Who?"

"A guy called Ray Boland."

"Where?"

"Off some rocks at Malabar."

"Bullshit."

Gary knew that an innocent man, in his situation, would get angry. He put an edge in his voice. "You're crazy. A lot of people wanted Pringle dead, including all the cops he ratted on. Why accuse me?"

"Because you're the only one smart enough to find out where he was hiding and plant a bomb. In fact, you made sure that Pringle died the same way as Robyn Parsons, didn't you?"

Gary shook his head. "You're giving me way too much credit."

"No I'm not."

"I promise you, I had nothing to do with his death—nothing. Anyway, why do you care? Are you investigating it?"

"No. But murder's a crime and I'm a cop."

"You're getting carried away. Whoever killed Pringle did the world a big favour. He deserved to die."

"You're a sick man, you really are." She turned and stomped out of his office.

Gary gloomily watched her leave. He really liked her, particularly when she was angry. But too much separated them, like the murder of a crooked cop. Best to forget her.

He did some paperwork for about half-an-hour, until there was another knock on the door. He opened it. George Oliviera stood outside.

Shit. Oliviera was the restaurateur who employed Gary to find out if his business partner, Robert Zacharias, was stealing from him. Gary had installed two spy cameras in one of their restaurants but, so far, had only filmed Zacharias shagging Oliveira's wife. Gary still hadn't mentioned that to Oliveira.

Oliviera looked unhappy. That wasn't surprising, because Gary hadn't contacted him for more than a month.

"Hello Mr Oliviera, come in and take a seat."

Oliviera entered and claimed a chair facing the desk.

Gary shut the door and sat behind his desk. "How can I help?"

"I've been trying to get in touch with you for weeks. Where have you been?"

"I've been very busy: had an urgent job. Sorry about that. Now I can finish yours."

"You don't need to."

"Why not?"

"You weren't around, so I watched the surveillance tapes myself. Guess what I saw?"

"What?"

Oliviera leaned forward, looking excited. "Bob Zacharias fucking my wife."

Gary feigned surprise. "That's terrible, really terrible."

"You know, I had no idea they were humping—absolutely none. What a shock."

"What did you do?"

"At first, I was really pissed off. Then I calmed down and realised it was my fault. I've been a lousy husband—I treated her like shit. I'm not surprised she cheated on me. Anyway, I'm not going to do anything about it."

"You mean, you're not going to tell her to stop shagging Zacharias?"

"Correct."

"And you're not going to tell him to stop either?"

"Correct."

Gary was stunned. "That's a matter for you. I'll remove the surveillance cameras and send you a final account."

"Umm, don't remove them. Leave them where they are. In fact, I want to buy them off you."

Gary was perplexed. "You mean you want to keep using them?"

His face reddened, slightly. "Yes."

Oliviera was obviously a very sick puppy. Gary didn't want to hear any more. "OK, OK. I'll bill you for the cameras."

"Thanks."

As Oliviera left, Gary reflected that it was good to have a satisfied customer with the means to pay his bill. The reason for his satisfaction was much less important.

Ten minutes later, Gary strolled into *Angelo's* café to meet the solicitor, Terry Fraser, for a chat over coffee. Terry already sat at a corner table. For once, he didn't have a mobile phone in front of him.

Gary sat down. "Where's your mobile?"

"I left it at work so you wouldn't complain."

"Can I frisk you, just to make sure?"

Terry looked hurt. "You don't trust me?"

"I never trust phone addicts."

Terry rolled his eyes and leaned forward. "Did you see that someone killed that dirty cop, Brian Pringle?"

"Yes. Blew him to bits. Did you know him?"

"No. What about you?"

"Yes, and didn't enjoy the experience. Pure evil."

"The bugger was in the witness protection program, yet someone found him and killed him with, I must say, considerable panache. I bet the Commissioner is kicking arses left, right and centre; careers are being shoved through a blender. But I guarantee they won't catch the bomber. He sounds like a real pro." A smile. "Wasn't your American friend, was it?"

Terry was obviously joking, thankfully.

Gary said: "No. He went back to the US about a week ago."

"Did he do what he came to do?"

"No."

"He was an interesting guy."

"He was, if he wasn't trying to kill you."

A waiter arrived and they both ordered coffee.

Gary said: "How's life? Has Alison come home yet?"

Terry's 13-year-old stepdaughter recently ran away to live with her biological dad.

Terry smiled broadly. "Yes, Margaret followed my advice and stopped calling her. Then, a week ago, Alison got the shits with her dad and trotted home. Now she won't even talk to him. So everything's hunky-dory in the Fraser household."

"Good. And how's your search for spirituality going?"

"What do you mean?"

"About a month ago, you were listening to freaky music and boring me rigid with talk about meditation. What's happened to that?"

"Oh, *that*. I've moved on. Didn't have the patience for meditation."

"Thank God you've woken up. I thought your brain was turning to puree."

He fiddled with a sugar satchel. "You busy?"

"Not particularly."

"Good. I've found you some work."

"What?"

"One of my clients manages the shopping centre around the corner. He needs someone to guard the nativity scene."

"Hah. Will I be armed?"

"No. All you have to do is sit on your arse for a couple of weeks and make sure that nobody messes with the Baby Jesus. Even you couldn't fuck it up. Want me to give the guy your name?"

"How much?"

"About \$50 an hour."

It was a lousy job for lousy pay, but he had bills rolling in constantly. "OK, tell him I'm interested."

Their coffees arrived and Terry described a worker's compensation surveillance job he would soon brief Gary to do. Then Gary paid the bill and they split up.

Soon after Gary got back to his office, someone knocked on the door. He answered it and found a tall, sweaty looking guy wearing a courier uniform standing outside.

"Gary Maddox?"

"Yes."

"Got something for you."

He handed Gary a gift-wrapped package.

"What's in it?"

"Champers, I think."

"Who's it from?"

"Dunno, will you sign here?"

The guy offered Gary a delivery slip for signature.

Gary ignored him, tore off the wrapping and saw it was a bottle of top-range Dom Perignon. He looked at the writing on the small card attached to it: "*Well done—glad to see you stopped talking.*" No signature.

Gary's stomach churned. He couldn't drink this champagne. When he killed Pringle, he thought he was doing the right thing. Maybe he was wrong. But, if so, he made a genuine mistake. He wasn't a hitman and didn't want praise from a hitman.

"Will you sign here?"

He signed the delivery slip and proffered the bottle to the courier. "Here, you take it."

A look of surprise. "You don't like champagne?"

"I like it, but I don't deserve this bottle. Go on, take it."

After a short hesitation, the guy grabbed the bottle, thanked Gary and scuttled down the stairs.

Chapter 41

Gary was impressed with the nativity scene at the Funland Shopping Centre. The stable was at least ten metres wide and had plenty of room for life-sized figurines of Baby Jesus in a manger, Joseph, Mary, the Three Wise Men, the Archangel Gabriel and several sheep and goats. Big hay bales were scattered around the floor.

His job was to sit in a chair, wearing a fecal-brown shirt that said "Security", and make sure nobody damaged or stole any of the figurines.

For the first 15 minutes, he was fully alert. Then his mind wandered and he spent a lot of time reading newspapers or books. After two days, he started going a bit crazy. If he sat there much longer, he'd probably start talking to Baby Jesus, or vice versa.

Several times, he had to stop little kids climbing over the small white fence around the nativity scene and approaching the figurines. When he did, their parents accepted his intervention with good humour.

However, near the end of the second day, a skinny straw-haired kid, about eight years old, stood in front of the nativity scene chewing gum and wearing a sullen expression. He pulled a lolly out of his pocket and threw it at Baby Jesus, but hit a Wise Man instead.

Gary rose from his chair. "Hey, you can't do that."

The kid extracted another lolly and shied at Baby Jesus again. Bullseye.

The kid pulled out another lolly and was winding up when Gary grabbed his arm. "Stop."

Someone behind Gary yelled: "Let go of my son."

Still holding the boy's arm, Gary turned and saw a tall guy with a bushy-beard wearing a leather vest stretched over a big gut. "Is this your son?"

"Yes, let him go."

"Tell him to stop throwing lollies at Baby Jesus."

"He hasn't thrown anything."

"Yes he has."

The boy intervened. "No I haven't."

Bushy-beard said: "You hear? He hasn't done nothing."

Gary let go of the boy's arm. "That's not true. But it doesn't matter, if he doesn't do it again."

The father crowded Gary. "We're not going to leave until you apologise."

Gary was ten kilos heavier, a lot stronger and obviously a lot smarter than this oaf. He wasn't going to back down. "I'm not apologising for anything."

"Listen, just because you're wearing a shit-brown uniform doesn't mean you can boss people about. What's your name? I'm going to complain about you."

The comment about his uniform struck a raw nerve. He was itching to sink his fist deep into the guy's pudding gut.

A female voice said: "Is there a problem here?"

Gary turned and saw Detective Constable Karen Phillips, standing close.

Bushy-beard said: "Who're you?"

She held up her NSW Police ID card. "I am Detective Karen Phillips, from the Homicide Squad. Like I said: is there a problem here?"

"Homicide Squad? What are you doing here?"

"I am trying to prevent a murder. What's going on?"

"This man grabbed my son for no reason."

She looked at Gary and raised an eyebrow. "Is that true?"

Gary was glad to see her and started enjoying himself. "No. His son was throwing lollies at Baby Jesus. You should arrest the kid for destruction of property and maybe blasphemy."

"He's only a kid."

"He's a menace to society. Next thing you know, he'll be robbing banks."

"Hah, hah. I'm not arresting anyone." She turned to the father. "Sir, I suggest that you and your son move along."

"But..."

"Don't worry, I'll give this security guard a very stern lecture about how to behave in future—I promise."

The father looked uncertain and nodded. "OK." He grabbed his son by the hand and marched off.

Gary looked at her and grinned. "You saved him from a terrible beating."

"You can't stay out of trouble, can you?"

"I was just trying to protect Baby Jesus."

"It wasn't worth a fight."

"I've got a job to do."

She stared disdainfully at his shirt. "You call this a job?"

He shrugged. "It's a couple of weeks' work at a decent hourly. I couldn't say no. Why're you here?"

"I went around to your office. You weren't there, but I ran into a solicitor called Terry Fraser who said I could find you here."

"What do you want?"

"To tell you that we've closed the Parsons investigation. Basically, we've dumped the blame on Pringle who, of course, isn't around to complain."

"Good."

She shuffled. "And, umm, I want to apologise."

"For what?"

"Accusing you of killing Pringle. I'm sorry about that. I jumped the gun. I shouldn't have."

She obviously still believed he killed Pringle, but wanted to build a bridge between them. Hope fluttered around in his chest like a caged bird. "You mean, you're not interested in Pringle's death anymore?"

"Correct. That's a matter for the Queensland detectives. He deserved to die, anyway. Let's just forget about him."

The fact she was prepared to overlook that he'd murdered someone suggested she rather liked him. He smiled inside. "OK."

"Good." She shifted on the balls of her feet. "You asked me out to dinner a while ago—remember that?"

"Yes."

She looked nervous. "That offer still open?"

He smiled. "Of course."

"Good. Then I accept."

He told himself to stay cool. "Fantastic."

She smiled and regained her poise. "But there's one condition."

"What?"

"You wear a different shirt."

Chapter 42

Gary had often wondered whether Barbara Thompson was correct when she claimed her son had a million dollars when he died and Trixie Powell snaffled it. He got his answer the next morning. A postcard arrived in the mail. On the front was a photograph of a snow-covered hotel where the bill would give him a heart attack. Printed in the top right-hand corner, in gold letters, were the words *Hotel Augustine—St Moritz*. Intrigued, Gary turned over the postcard and read the childish scrawl on the back.

"Hi Gary,

"I lied when I said Tony was broke when he died. He had about \$2 million. I'm spending some of it on a holiday in Europe. Nice hotel, huh?"

"Stay well. Thanks for everything. See you when I get back to Oz.

"Lots of love, Trixie."

Gary read the postcard twice and laughed until tears dripped off his chin.

