

THESIS VOLUME 1

ANGEL PORT

A novel submitted as part of a thesis for the award of Doctor of Philosophy in Creative Writing at the University of Adelaide

Thesis title:

‘Just Deserts: Reading, Writing and Rewarding Australian Women’s Crime Fiction’

The thesis comprises:

Volume 1: Original novel, ‘Angel Port’

Volume 2: Accompanying exegesis, ‘Just Deserts: Recognising the Davitt Awards and Australian Women’s Crime Writing’

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THESIS ABSTRACT

This thesis combines an original novel 'Angel Port' and an exegesis on the Davitt Awards. 'Angel Port' is a contemporary literary and comic crime novel, named for a fictional seaside town in which the protagonist Nathan Newland must choose between transformation and retreat when confronted with the local secrets. The exegesis offers original research into the establishment, development and impact of the Davitt Awards, Sisters in Crime Australia's crime-writing awards for books by Australian women. The novel and exegesis are loosely linked through the exploration of the idea of just deserts, both good and ill.

THESIS DECLARATION

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Jessie Byrne
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CHAPTER ONE

Dr David Soulio was a man I could appreciate.

He was an academic and so a little on the light side, but otherwise recognisable – successful, confident in his success, affably superior. He leant back in his chair and rolled up the sleeves of his pale blue shirt, pushed back a strand of hair more pepper than salt. Behind him stood a wall of books and a desk scattered with technology and papers. An office dishevelled with care. It said too busy to be tidy but smart enough to know where everything was.

The annoyance I had felt with him dissipated. I had arrived at the Great Southern University an hour before to be told that the good doctor was not yet in. Why didn't I consider coffee in the refectory in the interim? With bad grace I'd found the building on the other side of a grassed quadrangle. It was one of those eighties' buildings of concrete on concrete. A university banner on one long wall boasted sparrow shit. A food race took up the opposite wall. The tables were crowded with students babbling in excitement. It was the beginning of the academic year and they hadn't yet grasped the extent of the year's workload. Apart from the students the only other new contraption in the hall was the red espresso machine. Two coffees and much rising anger later, my phone beeped. Dr Soulio was ready to see me.

Soulio was appraising me now. There was the usual look on his face. I knew what he saw – pink-icing skin, butter menthol eyes, caramel hair and the Epicanthic folds of Chinese eyes. An unsettling combination. Some found it interesting, others sinister. It was something I made work for me. It set me apart from all those other consultants with their flaky faces and working-lunch bellies. I initiated a reassuring smile and saw he was smiling his own reassurance back at me.

'I very much appreciate being here in Angel Port, Professor Soulio,' I said.

'Associate Professor. But call me David.'

'David then.'

'Great to have you on board,' he said. 'We need people of the highest calibre in the tertiary sector and more people like you bringing in their skills from the corporate sector. Of course, it is a mutually beneficial relationship. Without our graduates the private sector wouldn't be half what it is. A partnership, yes a partnership. Have you settled in alright?' He slid the milk jug in my direction.

‘So far, although my feet have hardly touched the ground.’

‘When did you get in?’

‘Today.’

‘All going okay?’

I nodded. Now was not the time to mention the absence of both electrical current and the real estate agent.

‘I believe you will enjoy our community here, Nathan. Not as sleepy as you may think. We have our fair share of action, the odd divorce or scandal. The occasional crime, for which the local constabulary seems pathetically grateful. A retired school teacher disappeared a few years back. Put on his hiking boots, grabbed his fishing rod and was never seen again.’

Soulio waved an arm towards the window where a line of scrub formed a dense, dark border along the edge of the campus. It was probably my imagination, but I smelled humus and rotting leaves and the rich tang of a coastal mudflat.

‘Not a trace of him. Nothing like a mystery for the local heartbeat to get going.’

‘Never found?’ I asked.

‘No real conclusion as far as I know. If you ask me, whenever a gentleman disappears there’s always a woman involved – either the one you want to be with or the one you want to be away from. Or both.’

He waited for my chuckle before continuing, then laughed himself as if something had just occurred to him. ‘One man disappears and one man appears. A kind of poetic symmetry.’

Angel Port and poetic symmetry. There was a thought.

‘Now, Nathan, don’t underestimate your new workplace. The Research Centre for Regional Health and Wellbeing may be in a regional campus but we have some of the finest minds in the business. Not all our researchers are on site. Dr Rani Singh is located in Wollongong. Jorj Voigt is based at Curtin Uni in Western Australia. We’re constructed as a world-standard research node.’

‘Node.’ I thought nodes existed in the body. Cancer in the lymph nodes kills you.

‘For now you’ll be sharing an office with Dr Jason Skinner, one of our senior researchers. Local boy made good. Started off in history of all things, then did his

doctorate in rural medical history. And Colin. Colin provides a little admin support. Sure you don't want a biscuit?'

Chocolate-coated Scotch Fingers. I took one.

'The job,' Soulio continued. 'It's much as we explained at the interview. A: complete the NHMRC grant application for the men's health project, and B: grow investment from the private sector in our centre. I've emailed you the details of potential benefactors, including a list of local business people and national companies and foundations. Nice suit by the way.'

I ran a hand over its creases. It was midnight blue, pencil thin.

'You to start immediately with the grant application – as you know, these things are bureaucratic nightmares. After that, start the begging.' There was a ping on David's phone. 'We'll have to continue later. I have a meeting with the Pro VC. Can't hold her up, not good politics.'

He stood and shuffled papers into a leather satchel.

'Oh, I forgot to mention. I received an invitation from one of our leading captains of industry to a little soiree at his property on Sunday. I can't make it but I've cleared it that you can go in my place. The guy's Bob Robertson AM. Former mayor and current chair of Robertson's Rural Holdings. He's top of my list for potential investors. He's standing for mayor again, so that might give us some leverage.'

He fished a small card out of his shirt pocket. It was the old-fashioned type powdered in baby blue with a frilled gold edge. The 'soiree' was a birthday party for Robertson's daughter Jennifer and the location was Dunkeld Downs. A map on the back showed a property ninety minutes away at the foot of the Grampian ranges.

I smiled and said I'd be pleased to attend. So much for my plans to escape back to Melbourne on the weekend.

'Great. I'll have to dash. Colin will be in in no time to get you started – computer, email, that sort of thing. Ciao.'

Colin arrived a minute later. No double take when he saw me. He was too tall to be a jockey but was dressed like one: orange trousers and a smooth pink and blue satin shirt. His hands, by contrast, were rough. Hard times or hard smoking, or both. Mossy eyes peered out from skin the colour of a long black with a dash of milk. He put out a hand.

'Colin. Call me Skink. Project manager and general dog's body. Follow me.'

ANGEL PORT

Our office was just big enough for the four desks and three bookshelves it held. Walls the colour of old sports socks were covered with forgotten notices and posters. Two tall windows looked out onto the academic geometry of a grassed quadrangle, rose-edged paths, and campus buildings. Town rooves glinted in the distance.

‘Cosy,’ I said.

‘It’s not too bad. There used to be six of us in here, before the government starting cutting funds to the sector. You’re here.’

He pointed to the desk closest to the door. It was standard issue. So was the grubby keyboard, the outdated computer, and the grey pin board that divided my desk from his.

Skink handed me a slip of paper. ‘Here’s your login name and password. I’ll let you get yourself settled and then help get you into the system, sign you up for the library, etcetera, etcetera. I’m on the other side of the screen so just cough.’

I wiped a finger along the desktop. With all the dust, coughing wasn’t an option, it was mandatory.

I’d arrived in Angel Port only hours before, had missed the turnoff into the town, and kept heading west. Cows standing in paddocks, gravel roads adorned with multiple letterboxes, a B-double up my bum and farting gear changes. Adelaide, said a big green sign, five hundred and thirty-three kilometres. I was tempted to keep on driving, not because I had any love for Adelaide. I’d never been there. But it had to be better than what awaited me in Angel Port, a job below my payscale and a furnished rental property that even the real estate pics couldn’t make appealing.

I grimaced and pulled onto a verge of dead grass, felt the sway of my Renault as the semi passed, no more than a whistle of air between us, then executed a uey and headed the few kilometres back east.

Angel Port, as the name suggested, is a coastal town, big enough to house a campus of one of the state’s universities but too small for much else. It was lunchtime when I pulled into the main street, a straight perpendicular line from the interstate highway in the north to the Southern Ocean in the south. The traffic was sparse and stuttering and the footpaths were cluttered with students and tourists and what I took to be locals. Not that I was an expert on rural folk. What I knew about the country could be summed up in a few words. Fresh air. Grass. Cow shit. Boredom. Bad coffee.

Angel Port lived down to my expectations. It was a discomforting mixture of new and old, bucolic and suburban, established money, failing grandeur, fast-food outlets, verandahed stores, orange brick veneers, and holiday rental fibros dolled up as cottages. I knew it also boasted a couple of award-winning buildings – the council chambers, winner of some ecological gong for its packed-mud, north-facing wall, and the university campus for a steel and glass Ag Science building that was a post-something take on the traditional woolshed.

A sign on my left announced the Great Southern University. 'Bringing education to regional Australia' stood out in green and red letters, the phrase's fluency split by a blue southern cross of stars. I grunted and looked away. In just over an hour I had to be there, chipper and ready to prove that I was all for regional tertiary education and oh so excited about bringing in the bucks the sector so desperately needed. Not to mention the bucks I so desperately needed.

I drove on, past the dawdlers and impatient at the even slower traffic, and cursed the luck that had landed me in a town where one shopfront boasted the word 'haberdashery' and the tallest building was St Bede's Anglican Church.

After long minutes the road cleared and I found myself at a T-junction. Across the road a large park of green grass was signed Bishop Reserve. I saw the bright metal poles of a playground and the brown sludge of a duck pond, bordered by a sandy rise of dunes on the other side. The ocean beyond it was held secret, invisible, revealed only by the tang of salt in the air.

On the advice of the GPS I swung left, swung left again. Number one The Parade was the corner house. I pulled out wide to manoeuvre the Renault through the narrow entrance, careful not to chip the car's dark blue paint, and drew to a stop under a carport of corrugated plastic and overgrown wisteria. So this was home.

The air was clear, chill and briny, and to my untrained ears almost empty of sound. It was the sort of air that said you were either too far south or too far from the end of summer. Or both. Melbourne, when I'd left it four hours ago, had been hard and brittle with heat, sluggish and wilting. Angel Port seemed halfway to winter. Halfway to a lot of places I didn't care to pinpoint on a map. Tasmania, for instance.

The key was in the letterbox, as promised, denting a white envelope with the real estate agent's logo on the top left corner. McGavisk Real Estate. A Celt name but the bloke on the phone had been all-Australian when I'd spoken to him two days ago.

'Nah, mate,' he'd said, 'leaving the key in the letterbox is as safe as houses.' I'd heard a rustle at the other end, then the voice had resumed, this time more muffled. 'Late lunch, had to get somethin' in me gob. Anyway, I won't be around when you arrive. Taking a sickie.' McGavisk had laughed. 'You can't call it a sickie when it's your own business, but it's been a while since I spent a day in the tinnie and got me hook over the side. I'll come over in a few days and do the paperwork.'

'Not worried that I'll run off with the family jewels?'

'If there are any jewels there, mate, I'm a mug's uncle.'

'What if there's a problem?'

'Easy, talk to Janice next door. She's always good with a helping hand – and she can keep an eye on the place if you're not around. Righto. I'm off.'

I glanced at the adjoining house where the helpful Janice was supposed to reside. Red brick, small portico, diamond glass at the window by the front door, random shrubs. A mirror image of my own place. There was no twitch of a curtain. Only the shrubs swished in the breeze.

A quick check of my phone before I went inside. No new messages. I put the key to the lock and stepped into the empty house. The doorway led into a long passage, gloomy despite the time of day. I put a hand to the light switch. As you'd expect, it was dead.

Dealing with an electricity company is like wrestling with one of those Hindu gods, Kali for example, with her multiple arms promising one thing and her tongue poking out and suggesting a whole other level of service, talking at you until you're the one who's blue in the face. The conversation with the ElecServices consultant was pretty typical.

Yes, sir, the power will be on five days after the request is received.

It's already been eight.

This is after the paperwork has been formally registered.

And how long does that take?

This depends on demand.

Surely all you have to do is flick a switch in the central office and bingo?

Sorry to inconvenience you Mr ... er ... Newland. You will get a text message before the consultant attends to the matter.

I have to start a new job in an hour and I need ...

What I needed clearly wasn't a priority metric for the company. Just for the heck of it I tried the lounge room light again. Nada. The room was shades of bottle and olive and school-uniform drab green. And it was cold, the type that seeps in.

Call the real estate agent? The number clicked to voicemail. It seemed it wasn't just Iain McGavisk who'd gone fishing. Forget the all-helpful Janice next door. Not much she could do with a blood-sucking, profiteering electricity retailer.

I shouldn't have been surprised how things were panning out. It was just another rung on the long ladder downwards. A year earlier my position at PolData had been made redundant as part of a 'radical realignment of our business strategy, you understand, Nathan'. The senior partner, Edgar Jerome, had sat stiff in his leather ergonomic chair throughout. I, marooned on the other side of the desk, hadn't bloody well understood. Or I had understood only too well. At PolData I'd had a reputation for hard play with a pretty good record of cutting deals. Not asshole territory but no fairy bloody princess either. That had been the job. That was what the bosses had wanted. That was how you succeeded.

'I've worked my butt off for this business,' I'd said.

'Your efforts and successes for this business are highly valued by me and the other senior partners,' Edgar had said as he'd stood. Meeting over. 'I believe our generous package will give you time to find something in which you can exercise your considerable energy.'

I'd taken the partner's outstretched hand reluctantly. Despite its pretences, Melbourne was a small town and you never knew when Edgar and his Audi-driving mates would cross my path again.

Work down. Then girlfriend. Then house. I hadn't seen those coming either. If anyone was meant to have ended the relationship, it was me, not Briony. Briony, she was driven by some strange set of ethics that only she understood. At Espression, the café around the corner from our place in Knightsbridge, they'd given us the locals' discount after almost two years of singlehandedly propping up their accounts ledger. Briony had never pocketed the dollar she saved on each coffee but had added it to the tips jar on the counter. At first it had seemed cute, noble even. By the end just seeing that coin drop into the jar had set my teeth on edge. It was much the same when she left me. She was wearing a dress like a puzzle of fabric cut-offs. It wasn't one of my

favourites and was now a size too small for her. There was hurt in her eyes but she'd lifted her chin as she stood in the doorway.

'I don't want to leave you in the lurch, Nathan, so I've left you some money. We're up to date on everything, but this should cover all the new bills for the next two months. Well ... er ... all the best with everything.'

The flat, when she closed the door behind her, was empty of colour. I noticed for the first time that she'd already removed her Indian cushions and the sixties' canisters that shone in a rainbow of bleached metallics.

I could have returned the money to her. I didn't. Rents in Knightsbridge were impossible on one salary – and I didn't even have that. The rejection letters were piling up alongside the bills. I gave up the lease and lobbed in a house in Preston with a couple of midwives. It's hard to get much lower than birthing stories over breakfast.

When the recruitment guy mentioned a contract in Angel Port I grasped it like a man about to go under for the last time. Not that I was staying. I was the new generation white-collar FIFO worker – in, do the job, and get the hell out. That's if everything went according to plan.

CHAPTER TWO

If the first week in Angel Port was any indication, it wasn't a bad plan – the getting out bit, at least.

How quickly does a routine get established? Each day I arrived at the centre in second place. Furious keyboard tapping at the end of the corridor always preceded me. Skink informed me it was a mature-aged postgrad student, but I never saw her face so I can only take his word for it. For my sins of punctuality I started to get to know the campus security officer, Geena. Curly hair and a body that bore all its weight below the pelvis. She had a daughter named Caitlin who famously hated being dropped at childcare. She arrived puffed and nervy to undertake her early-morning round, keys jangling. Hi and goodbye and the office was my own until Skink arrived. He'd step in, cheery, coffee in a keep cup, and fall to work immediately on the other side of the grey divider. If he joined with us at all, Dr Jason would saunter in around noon and prop himself at his light-filled desk by the window to trawl through emails and Facebook. On occasion, David Soulio rolled in on the backwash of his other academic or administrative pursuits.

The morning was taken up with trips to the kitchenette to refill the chunky coffee mug my mother had given me for my new job (three red stripes and a picture of an apple – where does she find these things?) and long minutes at my desk perusing a copy of the NHMRC guidelines. Careful reading told me it stood for the National Health and Medical Research Council, which generously gives out grants to researchers. The bad news was that only around thirteen per cent of those who applied were successful. The worse news was that the other eighty-seven per cent actually knew what NHMRC stood for. The dire news was that the grant guidelines ran to one hundred and fifty pages, none of them in English. By the end of the week I'd made it to the middle of page thirty-six.

The impetus to bring in the money was compelling. On my second day Skink invited me over to his side of the divider to point at a spreadsheet boasting a high percentage of red figures.

'I'm starting to work up the rolling budget for the coming three years,' he said. 'Some of that will depend on the application you're doing. The grant will determine what our staffing ratios are. Our statistician Dr Ekala Hart is on indefinite leave. When we lost

our last funding her contract wasn't renewed. If you can get this proposal through we can take her on for the whole period.'

'No pressure then,' I said.

'No, only the future of one of the best statisticians we've ever had.' He hesitated but something about me reassured him. 'She's a Ngarrindjeri woman. I'd worry about her less if she were white and a bloke. All those guys stick together. It doesn't matter how good she is, she'll find it hard to get work.'

'Finding work in this economic climate can be very hard.'

'Ekala's been on four consecutive one-year contracts. So, you're right, no pressure.'

'Why can't David Soulio find Ekala work?'

'Soulio?' Skink snorted. 'Anyway, how's home?'

'Cold.' I didn't say it had the same frigid quality as the duck-egg blue safari suit he was wearing. 'Electricity's still not on.'

'Those guys make money hand over fist. Have you tried Janice, the next-door neighbour? She can usually help with things like that.'

'I haven't seen her or anyone there. The place seems all closed up.'

'Then you should get the real estate agent onto it. You're using Iain McGavisk, aren't you?'

'He's still fishing I believe.'

'Is that what he said?' His face broke into an expression I couldn't interpret. 'Decent bloke, some great stories. You should get him talking about some of his fishing expeditions.'

I couldn't think of anything more tedious, except perhaps NHMRC applications.

On the Friday the electricity company finally deigned to respond to my calls. It came in the form of a text message: *Tech services ten minutes away.*

Even at a cracking pace the walk home was twenty-five. I grabbed my jacket and house keys and ran, hitting the main street at a gallop quickly transformed into a limp. Hope leached away. There was no way I'd make it there before the bastards upped and left.

I cut across Bishop Reserve and was surprised to see the electricity rep still there. She was putting a note in the letterbox as I fell into the street. The woman straightened up and made a show of looking at her work folder. Message: you're late. Message: I have a long line of jobs to get through before the weekend. I flung myself between her and her van.

'Your guys gave me no warning you were coming.'

'Didn't you get the text?'

'I mean that you were coming today.'

'But you got the text.'

'Just then.'

She looked at me like I was one of those people who never checked their phones. For a moment it was a stand-off, then she shrugged. 'Where's the meter box?' she asked.

'Er.'

She clucked.

'I only arrived three days ago,' I gasped.

'Well Mr ...' she checked her folder, '... Nathan Newland. Alliteration. Poetic patterning parents. I'll look out back while you check inside.'

I didn't even have the key in the lock when she was back. She thrust a piece of paper and a pen bearing the company logo at me. 'Sign here.'

'What am I signing?'

'That you got the service.'

I didn't like her attitude but could already feel the hot water of the shower on my back. I scribbled my signature. 'I can't tell you how relieved I am to get the electricity back on.'

The look on her face suggested I was not just an unfit middle-aged, phone-ignoring complainant but a complete moron. 'No, the electricity's not on. I had to read your meter before we could put it on.'

I lowered the pen. 'So when will my electricity be on?'

'That depends.'

'On the demand, right?'

'Yeah.'

'So the general timeframe is ...'

'Within the next twelve hours. There's an efficiency drive on. The company's really lifted its KPIs.' She leant forward and winked. 'They're key performance indicators.'

'I know what KPIs are,' I said. For ten bloody years I'd lived and died by KPIs. I'd practically invented KPIs.

'Great then.'

'It's been real.'

By five o'clock that day I was almost looking forward to the staff drinks in the uni bar. My electricity woes had in no way been relieved by wrestling with the NHMRC online templates for the last hour of the afternoon. Millions of dollars and they couldn't employ one decent IT geek or one writer who could put the two words 'plain' and 'English' together.

The bar had no external windows and was a mixture of black paint and glass shelving lit from underneath. The older male academics wore loose shirts over jeans or, in the case of the Ag people, moleskins. The younger ones fought hard to be indistinguishable from the students with their two-hundred-dollar shoes and trousers baggy in the crotch. The layers of red and black fabric worn by the female academics could have housed an entire Bedouin tribe.

Director David Soulio was in full flight. He paused for a minute and popped another handful of peanuts into his mouth before continuing. 'Now the VC wants the negotiations deferred until after the end of the financial year.'

'Well he would,' said the woman at his side, something big in Environmental Sciences. 'He gets marks for financial efficiency in his appraisal.'

'He'd be better off spending his time on getting money in through the door, eh Nathan? That's how the private system works. You can't cut money you haven't earned in the first place.'

'Isn't most of the funding from the Commonwealth?' I asked.

'As it should be. Tertiary education is a national good, the great equaliser, right Meghan?'

Meghan, or Ms Environment, poured the last of the Wynns cab sav into her glass. It was ebony in the dim light. 'Absolutely. But there are also other sources of funding that Nathan may not be aware of. Research investment, fee-for-service, bequests, long-term investments, and of course international students.'

'The band's not bad,' I said. It wasn't my smoothest diversion but any minute now they'd launch into a critical analysis of the latest enterprise bargaining negotiations. From what I could see, academics got more than a fair day's pay for less than a fair day's work.

'Most of them are from TAFE. Not bad.' It was Skink's first input in half an hour.

For the entire evening Dr Jason had demonstrated the fortitude possessed by only the most ambitious by cocking his head attentively at every comment Soulio had made. He proffered Skink a single raised eyebrow. 'They're not very tight. They need a new lead. And the singer is flat most of the time. Did you hear the high notes on "All of Me"?''

'He's filling in. That's Shawnee, you know, from the florist's. I think he's doing an okay job for someone new.'

Soulio was still on his pet subject. 'Regional universities don't get their fair share of those foreign students. They all want to head for the big cities.'

'Speaking of heading,' said Ms Environment. She tipped her glass and drank the last of the wine in two gulps. 'It's been a long week and it's time to head home. David?'

Soulio gave me a sheepish smile and stood up. 'When the professor demands, right? Can we give you a lift home?'

My glass – my sixth glass – was still half full. It wasn't the Wolf Blass that came as a fringe benefit with the corporate job, but it was free and it was mine and I was going to finish it. And home was someone else's place with no electricity. I shook my head.

'Okay. Keep an eye on Jace, will you? He gets a little carried away with the ladies.'

'Er, right.'

'I'm off too.' Skink sculled his wine and placed a couple of notes on the table. 'I'm going to say a quick hello to Shawnee's dad on my way out.' He pointed at a blond man

with the wiry physique of a surfer. He was the spitting image of the lead singer, only twenty years older. 'His name's Fabian. Want to meet him, Nathan?'

Jason rolled his eyes. 'Now why would Nathan like to meet Fabian? It's not likely he's going to be needing a bunch of roses any time soon – or am I wrong about that, Nathan?' He leered.

'Nathan might like to meet Fabian because he's a nice guy and it's about being part of the community,' said Skink.

'You're more like Auntie May every day, Skinky,' said Jason.

'I take that as a compliment, cuz. See you all Monday.' He toodled his fingers and made his way across the floor.

So that's why Jason looked familiar. He was a smoother, fairer, more confident and more affluent Skink. A story of divergent lives, perhaps. One I wasn't going to pursue.

Once the others were gone Jason lasted no more than five minutes in my company. He saluted (yes, saluted) at a group of female undergrads near the bar and strode off. For the most part they towered over him in their high heels, which in no way detracted from their dazzled adoration. One girl received his particular attention. She had big clean teeth and big boobs, a blonde. Girls with mousy brown hair had become all but extinct.

That spelled the end of the night for me. Not wanting the Nigel No Friends label I headed for the taxi phone at the bar.

Stan Flavel, local taxi legend, was thirty minutes coming and less than effusive. 'So you said you wanted number ten The Parade?'

'One,' I said. 'One The Parade.'

'Righto. In that case, hop in. Thought you were the latest bloke on the scene at number ten. Last one was Aboriginal, know what I mean?'

I knew what he meant so I didn't reply.

'The woman there. She's got three kids from three different blokes. Why can't they keep their legs together? I'll tell you why. Because they want the social security money. Cut off the money and you wouldn't have all those brats running around.'

'That's not how I see it.'

'You're from out of town, right?'

'Melbourne.'

He humphed as if that explained it. 'Here you are then. Seven bucks.'

I gave him a ten. He fumbled around in his kitty, delaying, waiting for the tip. Given the conversation, I held out for my change. He handed it over with bad grace.

'Gotta keep moving. Busy night.'

I climbed out of the car and he executed a three-point turn to head back down the main street. Further along the road, outside the infamous number ten, the streetlight flickered as if in warning. The ground around it rose and fell in waves. I guessed that was the alcohol talking.

Next door, blindingly, a backyard light sprang on, sheet metal cutting across the fence. A door banged and footsteps padded. A clothes line squeaked, stilled, squeaked again. So the ghost of Janice breathed! I crept down the side of the house until I reached a silver sliver of light that cut through the fence palings. I put my eye to the gap. The garden on the other side was alive with colour – sheets in bright primaries, roses red, violets blue, garden pots in terracotta and teal, wisteria falling in bundles of green and purple from a trellis. A movement to the right caught my eye. I pushed a shoulder to the wood and caught a glimpse of a foot flicking an old slipper into the air as the back door banged shut. The light went off, as blindingly dark now as when it had come on.

I made my way inside and fell onto the cold bed.

CHAPTER THREE

The bedroom was pearled with aquamarine light when a fist on the front door dragged me into wakefulness and instant nausea. Too much red wine the previous night. I pushed the pillow over my head. The fist pounded again – and again. I threw back the quilt and wended my way down the hall. The door came open on my third attempt. I glowered at the man standing there.

‘Do you have any idea what bloody time it is?’

The man looked like a real estate agent – tall, perfectly coiffed dark hair, checked shirt, diagonally striped tie, and wide shoulders. He also smelled like one – expensive cologne – and smiled like one – expensive orthodontics. It was only when he opened his mouth that I reviewed my assessment.

‘Geez mate, you look a real sight,’ he said.

That got my hackles up. ‘Whatever you’re selling, I don’t need it.’

‘Been out on the sauce?’

The penny dropped. It was the voice.

‘You’re Iain McGavisk?’

‘Call me McG. Spelt capital M, little c, capital G, but pronounced McGee. As in, “Gee he’s sexy.” That’s me and I’m bang on time. Pun intended.’

‘You mean as in MCG, home of the great Australian obsession?’

McG’s face soured. ‘Not in my book. Mob of show-offs.’

‘I’m talking the footy, not the cricket.’

‘So am I.’

The vision I had of McG from our phone conversation was of a short bloke, comb-over, skewed tie, rough around the edges, making it with a bit of hustle and a handshake. Never judge a book by its phone voice. ‘Bang on time?’

‘You did get my note? With the lease agreement? Standard beginning-of-lease inspection, just to make sure we agree on the condition of the house. Brought me trusty little camera so we can take a few pics.’

The smell of sweat and alcohol wafted around us. It was all I could do to stop myself from lifting my shirt and having a good sniff.

'I'm sorry, but as you can see this isn't the best time. What time *is* it?'

'Seven. Seven-oh-five now because you dragged your feet getting to the door.'

'To be honest Iain ...'

'McG. I have sustenance. Chockie doughnuts. Best in town. And we can be quick with the inspection.' It was then I noticed two paper packets in his hand. 'You go and make yourself beautiful and less whiffy. I'll wait out back, catch the sun.'

I conceded because any further argument only made my head ache. I let the bugger in and headed for the cold water in the bathroom.

McG was right about the doughnuts. We were out the back of the house on a garden bench that had each slat painted a different primary colour. Behind us a squat, spindly tree scraped the neighbour's fence.

Doughnuts. Painted furniture. It brought back memories of primary school.

The doughnut pastry was crisp and golden and the chocolate icing was a step closer to dark chocolate than in the old tuck shop. Despite the hangover, I finished the whole thing.

McG peered at me. 'And?'

He might have had the demeanour of a purveyor of miracle elixirs but he knew his pastries. 'You're right. That's one fantastic doughnut.' I pointed at the name of the bakers. 'Harp Bakery. Does everything around here have some sort of Angel theme?'

'Of course. The other bakery is called Heaven Bakehouse. It's better on the savoury. Next time I'll get you one of their sausage rolls. To die for. The Chinese is Panda Heaven. The hippy shop run by the Freewoman sisters is called Flutterby. The florist's is Angel's Breath. Great people.'

'I think they were at the uni bar last night.'

'Fabian. Shawnee. The angel theme works for the tourists.' McG scrunched up his packet and patted his stomach. 'You spruced up alright. Paisley shirt and all. Did you deliberately choose the nappy-poo brown to match your hair colour?'

I felt the heat rise to my face. 'Do you get a lot of business insulting your clients?'

'I'm only rude to people I like. Show time.' He stood up and made for the house. I followed more slowly.

We started in the back rooms, a lean-to kitchen with the bathroom – toilet included – leading directly off it. Someone had upgraded the kitchen in the eighties. There were beige cupboards with moulded wood handles and slate on the floors, scratched but otherwise intact. A large window above the sink looked out to the back garden.

McG pointed a camera at the fridge where a long, silver scratch marred the paintwork then wrote a note on his checklist. He moved to the other side of the room and tapped the top of the free-standing oven.

‘The back left hotplate doesn’t work. I’ve marked that down. We can have it fixed if you like. Depends if you use it or not.’

‘I would, thanks. I like cooking.’

‘We’ll get on alright, then. I like eating. You cook fish by any chance?’ He didn’t wait for an answer but led the way into a pink and grey bathroom. ‘Hails back to the fifties. A few cracks in the tiles above the bath and a bit of paintwork needed on the window frame. Hot water working okay?’

‘There’s no electricity. They promised I’d have it by this morning.’

‘Dinkum? I’ll give them a call. Tell me the company and account name before I go. You need heating. The cold seeps up from the floor. Bedrooms next.’

The hall divided the front section of the house in two. The spare bedroom was the first door on the left. It was dark, the blind down and the walls grey. Half a dozen cartons were piled on the single bed and the floor.

‘I haven’t got around to unpacking properly yet.’

‘No need to explain to me.’ He pointed at a water stain on the ceiling, made a note, moved on to the main bedroom at the front of the house. ‘Anything in here?’

‘The window rattles.’

McG pulled aside the lace curtain to reveal the bungalow across the street. The regularly spaced row of white roses along the neat picket fence suggested a home owner rather than a tenant.

‘Most of the houses were built by the same bloke back in the forties. Janice’s next door is a mirror image of this one. The Jacksons have got a cellar. Number nine. They’re collectors. Got to look in there once. Best collection of reds I’ve seen.’

McG gave the lower pane of glass a shove. 'Want it fixed? Probably just needs a bit of wood stuffed between the runner and the frame.'

'If you could fix the wind that would be better. Does it ever stop?'

'Angel farts.'

'I'll give the chock a go.'

McG led the way across the passage. Olive green curtains framed the bay window in the lounge.

'No cellar here?' I asked.

'If you find one, tell me. Maybe there's buried treasure. Anything we need to record here?'

I pointed at the set of glazed sliding doors that divided the living room from the dining area. Etched yachts floated endlessly across a breathless sea. 'The glass doors have come off their tracks.'

'I'll get my handy help to see to that. Out front should only take a minute.'

I grimaced at the light but followed him to stand on the scratchy lawn.

'I shouldn't have said what I said before about your shirt being the rich hue of nappy poo,' said McG.

'That's starting to sound like an apology.'

'It looks more like a galah with diarrhoea.'

I'd had enough of the jerk. I stepped in front of him and put my face to his. We matched height inch for inch. 'And that from the man with a 1980s wardrobe and a talent for customer service that makes ElecServices look positively professional.'

The real estate agent broke into a big, cheesy grin. Instead of moving back, he moved a nose closer and put one hand, fingers spread, at the top of my arm.

'You know, Nate, I'm starting to think you might be more than a city slicker with a pole up your arse. You and me, we're going to get on fine. Just fine.'

I went back to bed. By midday I knew it was a waste of time. I had a late breakfast of uncooked toast, commonly known as bread, and decided now was as good a time as any to get to know the neighbourhood.

ANGEL PORT

I took the path next to the reserve, crossed The Esplanade and found myself in a strip of grassed sandhills dubbed the Memorial Gardens. On the crest an old anchor was sunk deep in its cement bed, a plaque naming its ship, long lost: 'The barque *Matilda*, 1873-1915'. Against the blue sky it looked like the cross of Christ flung low. A woman with an A-type personality pounded past on the sand below, trailing a bitsa that was more interested in sniffing the seaweed than training for the Tokyo marathon. They were heading in the direction of a short jetty and a bitumen slipway that ended in the water. On the foreshore above the jetty was an empty car park. A short block building looked like the public conveniences. Next to it a caravan made do for a kiosk. All in a day's work for a tourist seaside town.

Except for the wind.

The wind barrelled in from the sea and nearly knocked me off my feet. The dunes were messy with it and the sand scrappy with downloads of seaweed and shell. The sea was messier. It had caught none of the clarity of the sky, but was a ruffled haul of dark green. Rollers punctuated the surface, landing in fits and starts. Hardly a lovely day in Bangor. I wiped the sand from the corners of my eyes and turned to the east.

Angel Port has only one cliff and a squat, unsatisfactory one at that: Monson's Promontory. It stood at no more than thirty metres, a short rump, more a hillock. It was easily scalable from the beach, for anyone who doesn't mind the slip of shale or the annoyance of ochre dirt under their fingernails. I am not one of them. I took the sure-footed safety of bitumen, past the doctors' and lawyers' houses on the foreshore, and arrived in a car park at the summit.

The place was empty. Below, not far out, a reef created shadows and mysteries, transformed jade into whitewash. On the horizon there was an uneven blue line, suggesting the humps and scoops of land.

A hand on my shoulder made me jump. I swung around to find a woman peering at me. A cigarette dangled from her right hand and her skin was the colour of dishwater. A raised eyebrow told me she was waiting for an answer. I buried my irritation.

'Er, sorry. Did you say something?'

The woman stepped close enough for her thigh to graze mine. There was a stale smell about her licked over with soap. She gave me a wink.

'Didn't mean to scare you luv. Like the view?'

'Nice.' I zipped up my jacket and turned back to the ocean to indicate the end of the conversation.

The woman wasn't strong on body language. 'It's already friggin' freezing and it's hardly even autumn. It's bloody depressing here in the winter, you wait and see.'

'I'm from Melbourne. That's depressing in winter too.'

As I said it I knew it was a lie. The clean whitewashed heat of the office, the cosy restaurants, even the rugged-up adrenaline of a footy match, these weren't depressing. They were what real people did who weren't banished to a pretend cliff with some unwelcome madwoman at their elbow.

I took a small step away and inspected the fall of sand dunes further east. Over the rush of air and water I heard the woman take another drag. When I looked back she was staring at the town. She was thin, the kind of thin that came with poor nutrition and lots of nicotine or drugs or all of the above. No breasts worth mentioning. Her dark green hoody was too flimsy for the weather and had a bleach mark at the elbow that looked like a stealth plane. NYU was printed in white on the front. Not a place she'd studied at, that's for sure. Not likely she'd even visited the place. I wondered if she'd even been to Great Southern uni, a mere four blocks up the road. Maybe as a cleaner.

She caught me looking. Her eyes told me she knew I'd been making the assessments, but she didn't mention it. Instead, she dropped the cigarette to the ground and stomped on it before the wind carried it away.

'We're neighbours you know,' she said.

'Neighbours?'

'Yeah, you're the new bloke in number one. I'm at number ten.'

It didn't immediately register. 'Oh.' Then, before I could stop himself, 'Oh!'

'Settling in okay?' she asked.

'People have been very welcoming.'

The woman snorted. 'Yeah. Welcoming.' A string of dyed black hair whipped across her face and she yanked it back under her hood.

'You lived here long?' I asked.

'Grew up here. On the other side of the highway. Left when I was ten. Came back a coupla years ago.'

A flurry of polite questions went through my head, the ones I usually pulled out for a social occasion, but I kept quiet. A swell hit the reef below, first white lightening and then thunder. I kept my eyes on it, pretending fascination. Behind me I smelled the brief flare of flame and the smoke of a fresh cigarette.

'I come here to get away from the kids,' she said, close to my ear.

'Sorry?'

'I come here to get away from the kids. Kaylah's ten now so she can look after things for a bit.' She drew deeply on the cigarette and then dropped it to the ground. 'Better get back. Gary will be home soon.'

Now she was going I could be friendlier. I stuck out a hand. 'Nathan's the name. You?'

'Sara. Without a haitch. Mum said the haitch was a waste of time.' I expected to see a tattoo on her arm when she extended it but there was nothing but warm skin and a confetti of freckles. Briony would have berated me for my prejudice. The crazy thing was that my prejudice had been overtaken by fashion. It wasn't just the bogans and the Collingwood players who had tats these days. The in-crowd was paying top dollar for their own designer pics.

'I'm sure we'll bump into each other again,' I said.

'Sure. Sure. Keep 'em hanging Nathan.'

She was down the hill within seconds, too brittle, I thought, to walk so fast. I dismissed her as another wave rolled in. Maybe I'd see a shark or an early whale out there. But there was nothing but empty water and the shadows of the reef.

CHAPTER FOUR

The 1970s renaissance of the Australian film industry could have used Dunkeld Downs as one of its period locations. The property was a broad expanse of rich farming land cut through with creek beds and spotted with towering gums. Beyond it, not more than a couple of kilometres away, were the primal peaks of the Grampians. The homestead came into view at the end of a well-graded road. It was single storey, a return verandah shading the sandstone walls and the French doors. A fountain bubbled in a ring of grass set in the circular driveway. I pulled the Renault up between a Patrol and a Jackaroo, a decrepit tabby between two rhinos.

It was a perfect Sunday. The sun warmed my face. Magpies gargled. A crow cawed. Somewhere strings played Vivaldi. I followed the sound of the music to the back of the house where three or four dozen guests mingled on a semi-circular patio. A drooping pepper tree shaded a long drinks and food table. I stepped back as a hive of children with towels in hand buzzed past, their destination an in-ground pool cut into the gold paddocks.

‘Jeremy, watch out for the gentleman! And no dunking!’ called a thin brunette in high heels. Whichever one was Jeremy didn’t bother to look around but kept pace with the tribe and disappeared inside the pool fencing. The woman shot me an apologetic smile.

‘Children!’ she said.

I smiled. ‘Children and pools. Those were the days.’

‘Indeed. I’m Sarah and this,’ she said indicating the man at her elbow, ‘is Antony.’

‘Nathan.’ Where Sarah was crisp, Antony had that loose fitness of someone who spent time on ovals and running tracks. He gripped my hand but I felt his distraction.

‘If you’ll excuse me, I think I’ll watch the children. God forbid something should happen to any of them.’

‘You’re such a worrywart,’ said Sarah. She toodled him with her fingers – it was clear *she* wasn’t going to volunteer for childminding duty. ‘Now, Nathan, you know the Robertsons from ...?’

‘I’ve never met them. I’m with the uni and I’m a kind of gate crusher.’

'I don't think we've met before.'

'I only arrived during the week. I'm with one of the research centres.'

She looked me up and down. 'Brown leather shoes. Elegantly faded jeans. Grey blazer. Pale blue T. I don't pick you for an academic. You're not a cocky either.' She indicated the crowd. Half of the men wore their Sunday-best moleskins. 'Maybe a communications and marketing whizz or a strategic management consultant?'

'Business development manager.'

'Ah! Hence your attendance at the Robertsons' little shindig. In that case, I'd better introduce you to our hosts.'

We'd taken two paces when a woman with all the hallmarks of local royalty stepped into our path. She was in her sixties and sported blonded grey hair, tailored slacks and a cream linen shirt, moneyed accoutrements on a body built for kick-starting jumbos.

'Sarah, who do we have here?' she asked.

'Jean, this is Nathan from the uni. Nathan, your host, Jean Robertson.'

'Ah, yes. Your David's replacement.' She gave me the once over. I could see she was trying to put together my lineage, but without a thorough DNA analysis she was going to find it difficult. Whatever her conclusions, she must have liked what she saw. 'You brought a partner with you?'

'No, nothing like that.'

'Is that so?' A pause. 'I'm not sure where Bob's got to but come over and meet our daughter, Jennifer. This is a little get-together we're having for her thirtieth birthday. I see you are empty-handed, so we'll grab you some bubbly on the way. Sarah?'

The younger woman waved us off. 'I'd better check on Jeremy.' Unlikely, but a nice way to ditch us.

Jean Robertson's skills of social manipulation were as imposing as the woman herself. Within five minutes she had a Great Western Prosecco in my hand – no consultation as to my tastes required – and had charmed away the two elderly women who were at Jennifer's table with the excuse of helping with the pastries. Outcome: I was alone with the daughter of the house.

Jennifer Robertson gave me a similar appraisal to her mother and took another sip of her orange juice.

'And?' I asked.

'Better than what she normally lines up.'

'Should I take that as a compliment?'

'It's a low bar.' Harsh, but there was no rancour in it.

Jennifer was a younger version of her mother, lofty and broad, but without the solidity that develops following decades of cottage pies and pavlovas.

'It's a lovely day,' she said. The line was delivered with the smallest twinkle of irony.

'A pity my partner couldn't make it.'

'Partner?'

'Briony.' Sometimes you say what is required.

'In that case, let's talk. What do you think of my party?'

The tables were dotted with well-dressed white people, most of the younger ones with full sets of their own teeth. 'Your guests seem a decent bunch.'

Jennifer snorted. 'My guests? I'd bet on you being smarter than that.'

'What about old school friends?' I pointed at Sarah, tilting glossy hair at a group of middle-aged men. I couldn't help comparing her with Sara without an aitch. As my dad would have said, 'There but for the grace of god'.

Jennifer snorted again. 'Look at Sarah and look at me and think again. Do you really think we were besties at school?'

She had me there. 'Another topic of conversation, then. How about football?' I asked.

'Only if we can stick to the positive comments Eddie Maguire has made about women.' She paused, waited three seconds, then breathed out. 'That finishes that!'

When she laughed her grey eyes bloomed jade and her wavy light brown hair tickled her forehead. She suddenly sobered up. 'Warning. My father at three o'clock.'

Bob Robertson, host, slapped me a welcome before I could rise from my chair. He was tall, over six-two at a guess, and matched his wife in the solidity stakes. And he was a force to be reckoned with. He looked like he'd be as at home in the boardroom as the hayshed or a Nationals central council meeting. His moleskins were whiter and brighter than any of his guests'.

'Robertson. Bob Robertson. I hear you're from the university. One of David Soulio's men, I believe?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Bob, call me Bob. How is my little town treating you?'

'Angel Port? It's a beautiful location.'

He gave me a shrewd look. 'I would have thought that a man with your background would find Angel Port a little ... small.'

So he knew my history already. The bastard was good. 'Melbourne is one of the great cities of the world. And my family and friends are there. However my first impressions are of a lively town and I intend to make the most of my time here,' I said.

Robertson changed the subject. 'I understand you're here to increase the revenue for David's research centre?'

'That's what they're paying me for.' Peanuts, but paying.

'Universities. Always trying to touch you up for money.' He leant closer and dropped his voice. 'You know what they say about academics? Money for nothing and your chicks for free. And that's just the lesbians.'

Next to me, Jennifer clucked her tongue. Robertson either didn't notice or didn't care.

'I know you've got a job to do, Nathan. I'm around next week. How about I text you a time and a place?' He handed me a card. 'Send me a text and then I'll have your number.'

'I'd appreciate that.'

'And is our Jenny keeping you entertained?'

'Absolutely,' I said.

'She may not be much of a looker, but she has character our Jen. Heart as soft as caramel.'

I drew in breath at the insult. Next to me, Jennifer's hands were clenched in her lap. I gave Robertson a level stare. 'On the contrary, both beauty and wisdom.'

Robertson was disconcerted only for a moment.

'Yes. Well. Of course. We think she's the loveliest girl on the planet.'

I made no reply and waited the man out until he remembered a wine crisis he needed to solve.

Jennifer bunged on a smile once he'd gone. 'You're very gallant.'

'You're the most interesting person I've met in Angel Port.'

'Another low bar then. And I'm only visiting, from Braidwood.'

'“The Year my Voice Broke”.'

'How clumsy of you!'

'Ooh. Tell me, how do you spend your time in Braidwood?'

'Freelance planning officer. That means I spend my days designing workable and aesthetically pleasing urban and rural spaces which councillors can vote down and business people can dispute.'

'Choice.'

'It's not so bad. I believe in what I do. Good planning is good for people, industry and the environment.' She took another sip of her drink. 'There is no Briony, is there?'

'No, not really, not anymore.'

'Nice play. How about another topic of conversation or am I to be thrust on to the untender mercies of mother's invitees?'

Other conversational items were not to arise. A pair of latecomers won Jennifer's attention. They were an older couple, the man tall and lean, the woman small and plump. He guided her by the elbow to a table and pulled out a chair. I picked him for a doctor. He had both the arrogance and the appalling dress sense of the profession. The wife was better dressed in a conservative, understated way. Robertson advanced on him, all bonhomie, and scurried to the drinks table to bring back a bottle of the bubbly.

'A medico?' I asked.

'You're quick. Dr Leslie Rich and his wife Joan. He's the local obstetrician and gynaecologist. My mother is fond of saying that he gave birth to half the children in the district, including me.'

'I hear a “but”.'

'Make that *very* quick. He is highly regarded. No-one says a bad word about him.'

'But you are about to.'

She hesitated. 'Perhaps another time. Oh, and there's Ramona! Hey!'

A redhead maybe a little older than Jennifer broke into a grin and headed our way. The eyes of every single man followed her. And why not? There are many attractive women in the world but few who are beautiful. Ramona fell full-bodied into that category. I stood. Next to me Jennifer spluttered into her glass.

'I'm Nathan Newland, new to town.'

'I'm Ramona Elvey, new to town – that is, I arrived eight years ago. Married to Andy Ferraro, abalone diver.'

Message received loud and clear. The name Ferraro seemed familiar and I realised he was one of the investors Soulio wanted me to hit up. Abalone licences were roughly the same as licences to print money, if you liked long hours in cold water prying creatures that looked like female pudenda from rocks.

Jennifer nodded in the direction of the doctor and his wife. 'Look who preceded you in, Ramona.'

'The people you meet when you don't have a gun.'

Before I could ask what they meant, a scream went up from the pool. A young voice, terror-filled, saying over and over, 'I'm sorry! I tried! I tried!'

I looked up. A boy of about ten or eleven was standing, dripping, just inside the pool fence. He was sobbing and screaming. One arm pointed at a dark shape at the bottom of the pool.

'Keira! It's Keira! I tried!'

The party noises stopped. A second later a man broke from the crowd and sprinted to the pool gate. He swung it open and dived into the water, his jacket like wings behind him. You could feel the strain on his arms and lungs as he pushed himself through the water to the small figure unmoving on the pool floor. He grabbed her with both hands and kicked towards the surface. Water shattered into shards as they rose into the air, the girl limp, lifeless in his arms. The man rolled onto his side and struck out for the pool's edge. Keira transformed into a pale, thin body, unresponsive, her face skimming across the top of the water in a tangle of hair. They made the pool steps where a clammy-looking bloke with a caterpillar moustache pulled the girl to the pebblecrete path.

'Simon Peacock, Angel Port copper,' said Jennifer at my ear. I hadn't noticed, but she'd laced her hands around the top of my arm and was digging her fingers in.

'At least he's good for something,' said Ramona in my other ear.

'Quiet!' yelled Peacock.

For a moment I thought he was talking to us, until I noticed his attention was directed at the boy who'd called the alarm. The poor kid was sobbing. He bit his lip and tried to do as he was told, only his body was shaking and the tears wouldn't stop.

A voice broke out of the crowd and Dr Leslie Rich pushed his way through. 'Move back, please! Move back!'

The doctor put his head to Keira's chest, shook his head and rolled her onto her side. He stuck two fingers down her throat and held his ground as a rush of vomit and chlorinated water soaked his trousers. He thrust his fingers in again. Less water this time. A moment's pause. Then Keira coughed. You could hear the crowd let out its breath. Rich rubbed a hand over the girl's back, moving it in circles, watching as more water dribbled from her mouth, but the torrent was over. Keira groaned and starting crying out, 'Mummy, mummy.'

Her mother didn't come. Instead, a girl showing the first buds of adolescence under her bikini slipped in beside her. She put a hand to the younger girl's cheek.

'Will Keira be okay?' she sniffed.

'Your sister will be fine, Jaimie,' said Rich.

The sharp fear left the older girl's eyes. I saw it replaced by something more like cunning. Ramona must have sensed it too, for I heard her suck in her breath. The word 'witch' escaped from her lips.

'Go and get your mother, Jaimie.' Rich waved the girl off and surveyed the crowd. 'Simon, Jack, can you help me get Keira inside?'

The two men lifted her as ordered and Rich placed a proprietorial hand on her stomach. The doctor's wife separated from the crowd and took up a position next to the girl, stroking her forearm and murmuring something indistinguishable but comforting.

'For god's sake, Joan, don't get in the way like some ninny! Move out of my way!' said her husband.

The second man, Jack I presumed, gave Joan a swift look of sympathy as she stepped backwards and put her fingers to something shiny at her neck.

The onlookers parted for them like the Red Sea. Then the waters broke. The children started crying or screeching or both, frightened and excited. Parents swooped upon them with towels and admonishments.

I noticed that Ramona was no longer with us. She had entered the pool enclosure and was holding the boy to her chest, making sounds much like those Joan Rich had attempted.

'It's okay, Jeremy. You did well. Look, here's dad,' she said.

She drew back for the man who'd executed the rescue. It was only then that I recognised him as Antony. Last I saw he'd been heading to the pool to supervise the children. I saw self-flagellation in his face before he pulled the boy to him as if they'd been saved from a catastrophe which, in a way, they had been.

'I'm sorry! I tried, I tried! I'm so sorry!' sobbed the boy.

'It's okay Jeremy, she's alright. Keira's alright. I should have stayed.'

'Keira was playing with Jaimie and Jaimie was pushing her and Keira started to cry and Jaimie hit her and then Keira disappeared. She went under the water and I waited but she didn't come back and Jaimie swam off and then I dived down to get Keira but I couldn't lift her up and I couldn't breathe. I tried but I couldn't get her up. I didn't mean to leave her there, I didn't!'

A voice cut in. The wife, Sarah, stood on her heels glowering down at her son. 'I told you no dunking, Jeremy.'

Ramona faced the other woman. 'We don't know what happened. In fact, if Jeremy hadn't called out Keira might be dead. None of the other children did anything.'

Sarah gave the other woman a look of pure contempt. 'If you wouldn't mind, we might just sort this out between ourselves.'

Ramona shot Antony a look and made for the pool gate. Next to me, Jennifer let out a breath and released my arm. I took her hand and squeezed it.

'The girl will be alright, won't she?' asked Jennifer.

'If they got her out in time.' I saw the devastated look on her face and revised my answer. 'Of course, she'll be fine. You could tell by the way the doctor reacted.'

'Maybe I should go in and see.'

I let go her hand. 'You do that. I'm sure everything is fine, absolutely fine.'

ANGEL PORT

She pecked me on the cheek and headed for the patio stairs. The party was breaking up so I decided to take my leave as well. It was one time when farewelling the hosts would be more of an intrusion than a requirement.

I headed for the western edge of the property, drawn by the loamy smell of hoed garden beds. Hydrangeas created clusters of blue and lavender at the edge of the verandah. A path led through a wisteria arbour to paddocks gilded with late-afternoon sun. I started down it, keen to see the view, when I noticed a figure at its end. The doctor's wife, Joan Rich. There was something desolate about the way her arms fell to her sides and her head drooped. I retreated and made for my car.

CHAPTER FIVE

The sharp rap of knuckles on wood made me jump. My eyelids were a narrow channel with dawn flowing along them. Another rap. I was still too far from the day to know what the sound was. I hadn't slept well, images running through my head. Drowning kids, crying kids, scolding wives, Robertson smiling over glasses of champagne.

A voice.

'Nate, you in there? Can you open up?'

Not bloody again. McG, the bastard.

I pulled a clean T-shirt over my boxers and stumbled to the front door where McGavisk stood alongside a woman the size of a small Chihuahua. She was wearing navy cargo pants and an orange fluoro shirt. Behind them the day was pale gold.

McGavisk gave me a broad grin. 'Sleepyhead, got you the best carpenter in town.'

I looked over the woman's shoulder to a van inscribed with aMAZing Carpentry.

McG coughed and shucked his chin at the woman. 'Meet Maz. She's going to fix the dining room doors. She's doing us a favour, squeezing us in. Maz, this is Nate.'

'Nathan.'

Maz barely gave me a glance. She bent to a lift a toolbox half her size. I bent to beat her to it. 'Let me help you with that.'

She snorted and muscled past. McGavisk shook his head as if admonishing a naughty child.

'The dining room is ...' I began.

'I know where it is,' Maz said, and disappeared through the first door on the left.

I scowled at McG as if to say, what the? He shrugged a what-can-I-say? 'Mate, she's the best. But I suggest you stay out of her way. She doesn't take fools lightly.'

'Gee, thanks.'

'Seeing you're up, I can take you into work.'

'At this god-awful hour?'

'We'll go via Heaven on the way and snaffle a few cheese and bacon muffins. Fresh as.'

'They won't let you in, trust me.'

For a moment he looked confused. 'Ah, Heaven. Heaven Bakehouse. As to the real deal, I wouldn't want to join a club that would have me as a member.' He laughed. 'I'll be reading the paper in my car while I wait.'

Dissent was useless so I headed for the bathroom. I couldn't resist poking my nose into the lounge room to check out the tradie talent. Maz had already lifted one of the doors off its track and stood gripping it, arms spread impossibly wide. Slow learner that I was I leapt to her assistance. One snarl stopped me.

'McG didn't give you the talk, did he?' she asked.

'What talk?'

'The don't-get-in-my-way-when-I'm-effing-working talk. So, step back buddy and get out of my hair.'

Her hair was something else. Black and lustrous, falling in a ponytail down her back. Her eyes, I noticed, were shaped like my own. Chinese goldrush genes like me. There was a stirring at my station. Maz either didn't notice or pretended not to. She propped the door against the wall so the sailing boat could travel the worn cream paint.

'The electricity's not on yet. Won't you need it for your tools?'

Maz pulled a phone from her trouser pocket. 'I'd say it will be on in five four three two one. There you go.'

The house leapt to life. The ceiling light blazed, the microwave pinged, the fridge hummed, the table lamp glared. The radio in the kitchen mumbled and then broke into a dreary fifties croon.

'Bang on seven. Good as her word,' Maz grinned and pocketed her phone.

'How ... who ...?'

'Any time you want to finish a sentence.'

'How did you know about the electricity coming on?'

'McG. He spoke with Janice – she's your next-door-neighbour – who knows someone in the electricity company. Bit of a miracle worker.'

'Oh!'

‘Highly articulate.’

The car horn blasted and I needed a shower badly. I left the pint-sized chippie bending her sweet arse over her toolbox.

Monday morning at work brought the joys of further translation of the grant guidelines. Fortunately I had my trusty *Bureaucratese for Dummies* by my side. Soulio popped his head in on the way to a lunch/launch/meeting/greeting.

‘How’s it going there Nathan?’

‘Getting there.’

‘No Jason in yet?’

Of course there wasn’t. It was still morning.

Soulio smiled. ‘Sleeps in a bit much, the old Jace, know what I mean? Lucky he wasn’t let loose on a high school. They’re all legal here. So all good with you?’

I nodded.

‘Good to hear. How about that investor list?’

My recollection was that I wasn’t to touch the list of potential investors until I’d spoken with him. But I had a few aces up my sleeve – an appointment with Robertson on Thursday afternoon and a ‘come by and have a chat’ meeting with Harbourside personality and public benefactor Victoria Bartholomew that very day. For good measure I threw in my introduction to Ramona of the Andy Ferraro fame, embellished admittedly. Not bad for a first week.

‘Excellent, excellent.’ Soulio checked his phone for the nth time. ‘I said you were the man for the job. And keep onto the Ferraro family – not a university degree between them but totally cashed up. God bless the Japanese passion for shellfish. We might be able to do something about an honorary something. And the grant application?’

I made some point about a proposal being worthy whether or not it was scribed in Arial twelve point. Soulio duly laughed but genuinely lit up when his phone beeped. ‘I have to take this.’ His ‘Ciao’ was lost in the corridor.

Skink’s head appeared from around the divider. ‘Good of him to drop by. So who’s on this list of schmucks you have to touch up for money? Not literally I hope.’

‘I don’t know, some of these men look like they’re my type.’

'I can suggest a couple of names you can concentrate on.'

'I'll email the list to you.'

'I heard you mention Bartholomew. She's a good sort. A strong supporter of women in science. Pitch her our statistician Ekala Hart and Rani, Dr Rani Singh – she's our epidemiologist – and you're in with a chance.'

'Thanks for the advice.'

'And when's your appointment with Robertson?' he asked.

'Thursday arvo.'

Skink screwed up his nose. 'Take baby wipes.'

'Why?'

'You'll want to wash your hands afterwards.'

If you've never been to Harbourside, don't bother.

The west of the town is a mess of chimneys blowing toxins over rusting sheds and conveyor belts plunging Australian resources into foreign ships. The east is a mass of railyards where old V/Line trains come to die but are never buried. The town itself is in three parts – the spec-built suburbs, the CBD and central township of solid Victorian architecture and municipal oddities, and the fishing harbour that hauls in much of the town's prosperity.

It was mid-morning when I arrived there so there was little activity at the harbour, just the overwhelming smell of fish and diesel. I drove past it, window down, and sought out forty-two The Esplanade.

Victoria Bartholomew's house was set on two blocks, one bearing the house, the other a tennis court framed by lawns of an unseasonable green. Shore-front houses with French doors and gardener-tended lawns generally housed women with designer bobs and precisely laundered white or black attire. Bartholomew surprised me. She was wearing track pants splattered with paint. A line of grey along her scalp suggested a long-overdue visit to the hairdresser's. She led the way up the stairs to a dormer room overlooking the sea. The room was the colour of daffodils, or at least half of it was.

'Yes,' she smiled, anticipating my thoughts, 'the other half is all over me.'

Yellow stuck to her clothes. A solar flare lit her left cheek.

'I'm not the neatest painter on the block. Do you like the colour?' She was not looking for a reply. 'Always very cheerful, yellow. Especially as winter will soon be upon us. Mind if I keep cutting in? In this weather the paint dries too fast.'

'The temperature's dropping,' I said. 'It's dropped around nine degrees since I left Angel Port.'

'Really? That's very precise. I hadn't noticed.'

Bartholomew peered through the window, careful to keep her clothing from the velvet seat at its base. As she did, the first drops of rain started to fall. She dipped a brush on the edge of a plastic honey bucket and knelt to continue a line of paint along the skirting.

'I paint. You talk. Find somewhere to sit that won't get paint on that nice suit of yours. Once I've finished this bit we'll have tea.'

I started the spiel I'd rehearsed in the car. 'The GSU's Research Centre for Regional Health and Wellbeing has a pre-eminent reputation for investigating some of the most pressing health and wellbeing issues facing regional communities. In the last five years we have delivered ground-breaking research into rural men's health, the health and wellbeing effects ...'

Bartholomew sat back on her haunches and glared at me. 'Not the sales pitch. And not a regurgitation of your homepage. Lift your game.' She bent over again and put paint to wall.

I cut to halfway through the spiel. 'As you no doubt know, we are currently undertaking three research projects. We're also seeking funding for two more. And there is the ongoing contribution to academic literature.' I understood that phrase to mean writing obscure articles to be read by three other people in the world who would write obscure articles in return.

'That's a lot for a team of only four researchers.'

'We've done the math. If we get sufficient investment we've budgeted to take on more people. And there are the postgrads.'

'Dang. Could you pass me that wet rag over there?'

The rag was an old pair of undies riddled with fluff. She wiped a splodge of paint from the wooden floor and flung the rag over her shoulder.

'The two proposed projects we are seeking funding for – in addition to men's health – are healthy ageing in the rural sector and antenatal care for adolescent mothers,' I said.

'Big change for you, from consultant to supplicant for a regional uni?'

She eyed me. I eyeballed her back with feigned humility.

Bartholomew put out a hand to be lifted up. 'Not as agile as I used to be. Need a stretch on the rack after bending down like this. Thanks.' She stood back and surveyed her work. Satisfied, she wrapped the brush in a clean plastic bag and placed the lid on the honey pot. 'I'll clean up and then we'll have tea. I'm done in for the day. Head down to the kitchen at the back of the house and I'll see you there in five.'

Bartholomew's kitchen was a federation revamp, completed when native flowers bloomed on wall tiles and walnut cupboards were opened with brass handles. It opened onto a large family room and, from there, floor-to-ceiling views of the backyard. An iron birdbath featured in one corner, daisies in another. Bartholomew caught me looking. She'd changed into leggings and a Midnight Oil T-shirt.

'Lovely isn't it? A day doesn't go by when I don't think how fortunate I am,' she said.

The tea tray was out of keeping with the wooden solemnity of the kitchen. Tea bags dangled from two chipmunk mugs. The sugar was an assortment of packets from cafes and restaurants. The milk was in its carton.

I took a sip of tea and launched back into business. 'As I was saying, the two proposed projects are ...'

Footsteps in the passage intervened. I followed Bartholomew's gaze and was surprised to see Antony, Jeremy's father, step into the room. He looked dreadful, like he'd been the one floating at the bottom of the pool, not the hero of the day.

'What's wrong?' Bartholomew asked.

Antony saw me and checked his answer. 'It's okay mum. I'll come back later.'

Mother and son. Welcome to the western Victorian coast.

I put a hand out to him. 'Nathan Newland. We met at Dunkeld Downs the other day. You and your son saved that girl from drowning. It's Antony, isn't it?'

'Tony's fine. Only Sarah calls me Antony.' He bit his lip.

Bartholomew headed to the kitchen. 'The kettle's just boiled, Tony. I'm sure Mr Newland won't mind. Take a seat.'

Tony needed no second invitation. 'Funny. All of this is because of that damn party.'

'All of what?' asked Bartholomew, offering him a dinosaur mug. The steam drifted up and away.

'Sarah. She flew to Singapore last night.'

Bartholomew's mouth straightened. 'I see. Jeremy's still not doing well?'

'Nightmares. And that little ...' He looked at me. 'Jaimie, the older sister, has been telling everyone at school that Jeremy tried to drown Keira.'

Poor bloke. 'I heard Jeremy tell you what happened. He was very brave. You should be proud of him. I didn't see it, but my money is on Jaimie as the culprit.'

Bartholomew patted her son's knee. 'See, Tony, I told you the truth would out.' She turned to me. 'You have children Nathan?'

'One, a son. James. He's a teenager.'

'The best thing in the world isn't it?'

I mumbled something.

Tony gave a weak smile. 'Thanks Nathan for saying that about Jeremy. He is the most honest boy I know. He was born compassionate. Unfortunately all that doesn't help him at school.'

'It will blow over,' said Bartholomew. 'These things always do. And as for those who persist in avoiding the truth, Tony, they're not worth old chip wrappers.'

I glanced between the two of them. Bartholomew clearly put Sarah in the greasy paper category. My guess was that Tony wasn't ready to bin her yet.

'What was your impression of Bob Robertson?' Bartholomew's question was addressed to me.

One talent a good business development manager requires is the nose for a minefield. I sniffed and offered a circumspect reply.

'I really have had little opportunity to get to know Mr Robertson as this stage. My guess is he's old school.'

'Old school? A euphemism for sexist and paternalistic I presume?' When I didn't respond she retrieved a folder from the coffee table. The words Research Centre were scrawled across it in lead pencil. 'I assume you have asked Robertson for finance?'

'He is on the investor list I was given.' I didn't mention I already had a meeting with him in my diary.

Bartholomew grimaced. 'Let me make this clear. I will not co-finance any project that also has Robertson's name on it and I will also need to vet the benefactor list before I sign on. I don't link my name to men who do not respect women or Indigenous Australians.'

She opened the folder and continued.

'While I see the value in your centre's work, I am not convinced about the academic standing of your director. However, one of your senior investigators, Dr Rani Singh, has an international reputation and Dr Ekala Hart comes with the highest of recommendations. Dr Jason Skinner has a slight if competent publication history. Dr Voigt clearly has expertise in men's rural health.' She closed the folder and stood. 'Send me the full business proposal and make sure that Dr Hart has a long-term contract in the project. Now, if you don't mind ...'

My marching orders. Tony caught me on my way out. Either my words or the tea had done him the world of good. He had some colour back.

'I'm a masseuse. Next time you're in town come in and I'll do your back and shoulders for free.' He handed me a card.

'Thanks. I might even take you up on that.'

Outside foreign-registered ships cut chunks out of the horizon.

CHAPTER SIX

I am a fan of sushi and sashimi. Plastic boxes with raw fish and rice have a special kind of appeal, especially if your first pay check hasn't come in and the boxes are half price at the end of the day. After a week in Angel Port I was on speaking terms with the woman who ran the sushi place, Minh Tran – Vietnamese as it turned out, not Japanese. I waved to her now as I passed her tiny shop in the main street. My destination was the Cherub Café, half a block further down and popular vote-garnering hole of Bob Robertson AM.

The young woman behind the counter in the Cherub Café wore black jeans and a pink T-shirt sporting a fat angel. She had pink hair to match. Her eyes narrowed when I said I was meeting Bob Robertson but she pointed a finger at a table in the back corner.

'That's where he usually sits.'

Robertson was ten minutes late. He entered wearing a navy suit and loose maroon tie, a mobile phone glued to his ear. His voice boomed across the room. 'Fishing rights are my number one priority. We know what those pussies think. Where do they think all the jobs are going to come from? They don't give a shit if people starve or not. We'll talk soon.'

He didn't look in my direction – first there were the voters to schmooze. He shared a ribald joke with a couple of men by the window, Winners Windows emblazoned on their jumpers. He took a seat, backwards, at a side table where an elderly woman was eating cheesecake. Eight nods to her tale of bowel woes and a kiss on the cheek. He threw a compliment at a young mother wiping a squished vegemite sandwich from her toddler's cheeks. Only then was it time to entertain the man who had no voting rights – me.

'My apologies,' he said in a low voice, 'but you've got to take your opportunities when you see them.'

'Of course.'

'Have you ordered?' He didn't wait for a reply. 'I could eat a horse. I've been out on the campaign trail most of the day and haven't eaten since that last biscuit and cup of tea.'

He clicked his fingers at the waiter. I could feel her animosity wilting the rhubarb tarts. She disappeared into the back of the building and an older woman brought the menus. Robertson hardly looked at her. Organic, local and gluten-free dominated the menu so I guessed she'd be voting for the greenie opposition. Robertson went for the all-day big breakfast. I calculated the money in my wallet and opted for a melting moment and tap water. Robertson shooed the woman away and leaned back in his chair.

'So?' he asked

I laid out the few sheets of paper I had on our proposed projects: sketchy outlines emailed from Soulio, back-of-the-envelope budgets from Skink, and colour prints of some of our website pages to make it look more substantial.

'Thanks for meeting with me, Mr Robertson.'

'Bob.'

'Bob. Thanks. As you no doubt know better than I do, the GSU's Research Centre for Regional Health and Wellbeing undertakes research into ...'

'... regional health and wellbeing ...'

'Exactly. Currently we have a small but highly recognised research team operating through a collaborative node.'

'I like your director, David. I know you have two of the Skinners there as well. Jason was harum-scarum as a kid, but seems to have made something of himself. Colin was always quiet. What does he do there again?'

'He's the project manager and looks after the finances.'

'Is that so? Did he get the job because of his family connections? Not that there's anything wrong with that, mind. Family is everything.'

'He seems very competent.'

'Really? If you say so.'

The food arrived. My biscuit looked okay but it was hard to go wrong with a melting moment.

'Eat. Drink,' said Robertson. 'I've sat through hundreds of these meetings before. It comes from running one of the district's biggest companies.' He pushed a hunk of bacon onto his fork and doused it in runny egg. It was half gone before he started doing

the talking. 'Let me be honest with you Nathan. I see you have the proposal in front of you.'

'It's hardly a full-blown business proposal at this stage. I can have that to you within a week.' Fingers crossed under the table.

Robertson indicated he didn't care. 'How about I read what you've got there – keeping in mind it is just an outline – and we talk about what I'll get out of this deal. If it becomes a deal.' He bit off a piece of toast, chewed, swallowed. 'As you know, I've thrown my hat into the ring for the mayoral election. I was mayor here for eight years before stepping down to concentrate on my business interests again. I can now no longer stand by and watch this current mob ruin our town. Bloody greenies would close every business if they could. The current mayor, River Brown – ridiculous name – has no concern for our economy whatsoever. If there's a downturn you cut rates and then you cut services.'

I took a bite of the biscuit. Stray crumbs shot up my nose and made me sneeze.

'I'll be straight with you. In the old days I would have won hands down. Now there are more and more of the hippy types moving into town, and city people looking for a seachange. None of them stay, of course, come in, complain, throw tanties when things aren't what they expected, then bugger off. Don't know what makes us tick and don't give a shit what mess they leave behind. That mob will most likely vote for River and her motley crew. I need every bit of support I can get, like from the uni. You guys are here to stay.'

I could see where this was going and interjected. 'The university cannot endorse political candidates.'

'Of course not. I understand and support the policy wholeheartedly. It is however in a position to give public recognition to those who donate to its work.'

'Well, yes Bob, that is something we can do.' I paused, gathered my thoughts. 'In addition to going on the website on our benefactor list, we are in a position to provide media on any donation that comes in. I imagine the local papers and radio will pick up the story. I'd work personally with our communications team to get the most bang for your buck.'

I hadn't met the communications people though I was sure they'd come on board. Soulio was a sure thing. He'd lick arse for more money.

'If we do agree on a deal, I want control over timing of the announcement,' said Robertson.

'We can accommodate that.'

'Righto. Let me get the bill. Take it as a welcome to my little town.'

A lost opportunity. I could have had the chia pancakes with fresh berry compote and South Cape cream cheese. Robertson raised his hand and clicked again. The waitress with the pink hair shot a glance out back and reluctantly made her way to our table. Robertson's face broke into a smile somewhere between come-to-papa and here's-your-sex-god.

'The bill, Mary-Jane,' he said. 'Nathan here is new to town. Nathan, MJ is one of our local artists.'

'Is that all?' she asked.

Robertson winked at me. 'Shy and retiring, the artistic type. What do you think of the pictures on the wall? They're all Mary-Jane's.'

Complimentary was the only possible response. A series of blown-up photographs adorned the dark pink walls. They depicted the local beach with lacy patterns overlaid in white and gold. The patterns looked random. On closer inspection I saw a face in one, a wing in another. If you twisted your head the patterns appeared and disappeared, like one of those 3D pictures of Jesus and his sacred bleeding heart. The photo behind Robertson was of a lighthouse. The sketch lines on that picture were indecipherable squiggles.

'You have a real eye. I take it that it's a photograph and then photoshopped?'

'I use pastels over the photographs. If there's nothing else ...'

She tore off the bill and slapped it on the table. As she did, Robertson put a hand to her bottom and patted her on her way. I expected retreat. I was wrong. Mary-Jane swung around and put her nose an inch from Robertson's.

'Don't you ever touch me again.'

Robertson laughed. 'Come on Mary-Jane. It's only a bit of fun.'

'It's harassment. There are laws against harassment.'

'Not in this town there aren't. We use commonsense here. We won't be dictated to by those politically correct pricks in Melbourne.'

I looked around at the other patrons. The older woman was craning to hear, but I reckoned her hearing aids weren't up to it. The young mother was fussing with the toddler's bib to protect his innocent ears from the horrors of adult behaviour. The Winners Windows guys were hanging off every word.

Mary-Jane stood her ground. 'The laws apply across the state.'

'I haven't seen any successful cases.'

Mary-Jane coloured and stood up. 'Your day will come, Mr Robertson.'

Robertson rolled his eyes at me. 'That sounds like a threat.'

'I prefer to call it karma. Good day gentlemen.'

Time for my exit. I rose and put my hand out to the would-be mayor. 'Thank you for making the time to meet me. I'll get back to you as soon as possible and maybe we can meet again.'

Robertson winked. 'I reckon next time we can do it without the female histrionics, eh?'

I offered something that I hoped could be interpreted as both neutral and collegial.

'Can you bring the proposal out to the property next week?'

'Sure. I'll ring to make a time.'

As it turned out, I never met Bob Robertson again.

Out on the street again. There was only an hour until five o'clock. I took a leaf out of Dr Jason's book and took an early minute. In the post office, the official behind the counter was marking down merchandise – brightly coloured stationery and cook books – when I entered. He didn't look at my parcel collection card.

'The new bloke at number one The Parade. Your package is here.' A statement. He handed over a stiff rattly envelope. 'From Melbourne.' Another statement.

I wasn't really listening. The address on the parcel was new – a botanically named road in Sassafras in the Dandenongs.

He went on. 'Got the place from McG. Good bloke, that one. Maz's been around to fix the place up a bit. Smart as, that one.'

I remembered a tiny tea shop in Sassafras, its walls and shelves crowded with tea pots, cups and saucers, squat, tall, round, square, fine and white, clunky and brilliant, roses trailing traditionally over bone china, gilt edges waiting for the pursed pleasure of lips.

'Had a bit of rough time with her dad, long time ago. Needless to say, he didn't last long around here.'

Outside the Sassafras tea shop, cottages leaked along spindly lanes into the green of the rainforest. Dead ends, infused with a weight of leaves and dank sunshine. Sweet aromaed havens on a blistering forty-degree day on the plains but froze your balls off the rest of the year.

'No, mate, he didn't last long.'

'Sorry?'

The postie was eyeballing me. On his polo shirt was a badge that said 'Gordon'. The badge was as white and straight and thick as his eyebrows, his shirt as red and scorched as his skin.

'Maz,' he said. 'Her dad didn't do the right thing by her and her mum, Vi. Lovely woman, that one. Bespoke furniture so good it sells for thousands up in the city.'

'Right.'

Gordon paused. 'You look out for Maz, you hear. That's what we do around here. We look after our own.'

'What happened to her dad?'

'Whatever it was, I trust it wasn't good.'

I tapped the parcel to make my escape, but Gordon wasn't letting me go just yet. 'A bit like our Jen. Salt of the earth. Wouldn't want anyone to do the wrong thing by her.'

'Jen?'

'Jen. Jennifer Robertson. She's a testimony to the fact that genes ain't everything. We keep an eye out for her too.'

'Better be getting on, Gordon.' A thought struck me. 'My Renault's running rough. Know where I can take it?'

'Deveson's on Bluff Rd. Great mechanics. Renault might be a bit of problem. Hard getting parts.'

'I'll keep that in mind.'

The package tinked as I carried it from the post office to a street lit with sun and crowded with students. I bumped into a girl – make that young woman – glued to her phone. She took a step away but gave no other indication she'd noticed me. Further up the street the first stirrings of road rage. A horn blasted once, twice. A man's voice angry over the general hubbub.

The address on the package may have been new to me, but the handwriting I knew. Careful round vowels with picket-fence consonants. Briony.

A second louder voice up the road, familiar. I dragged my eyes from the parcel and took in the scene. McG stepped from his Ranger and advanced on a pensioner half his size. He poked a finger into the man's chest and bent in so close that the old bloke had to be getting the full blast of McG's latest beef pie. McG arched his back and lifted his arm as if he were about to strike.

A shrill whistle sounded. McG looked around, bewildered, as a wiry bloke pushed through the onlookers. The man took McG's hand in his own and held it as if they were lovers, speaking into McG's ear. A second passed, two, and I saw the fight go out of McG. He hung his head and stepped away from the old man who, to his credit, was holding his ground. The pensioner jabbed his finger in McG's chest a couple of times before stomping off to his Mazda and pulling back into the traffic.

'Excuse me.'

A woman with a twin pram. I realised I was blocking the footpath.

'Sorry.'

'No worries,' she said. She beamed as if life were beautiful and a few extra moments stuck on the street couldn't possibly ruin her day.

I stepped out of the way to let her pass and peered back up the road. I saw the small bloke direct McG to the passenger side of his Ranger, move around the front to the driver's seat and head off in the opposite direction. So much for the matey bonhomie of our local real estate agent. Sudden cold pinched at my neck and I made a note never to accept the guy's invitation to a dark alley or isolated farmhouse.

I cut the incident from my mind and headed for the ocean. I had other things on my mind. Briony. I felt a burning curiosity about why she'd contacted me after all this time. Retribution or reconciliation? If it was the latter, what did I think?

Outside St Bede's a car slowed and I heard someone yell something about something. Not distinguishable but the shouter probably felt better getting it off her chest. I walked on until I reached the *Matilda's* anchor on the foreshore. The wind was a tease, tagging, running away, doubling back to tug at my hair before springing away again. The package lifted and dropped. A faint scent of eucalyptus rose from the paper, barely perceptible in the salt air.

I slipped a finger under the sticky flap and tore the post bag open. The gift fell like an octopus over my hand, clanking in legs of metal, string and bamboo. A wind chime. It was no match for Angel Port's weather. It snapped and clanged until it was a jumble around my wrist. A brass bell on the end fretted at its fetters and tore across the grass, taking a broken string with it. I caught it in the lee of a rubbish bin and stuffed it into my jacket pocket.

There was something else in the packet – a postcard. On its face a lyre bird spread its tail feathers like its namesake. 'Greetings from Sherbrooke Forest,' it said. On the back Briony had scrawled a short note: 'Welcome to your new home. B.'

As I said, Briony had her own strange set of ethics.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The following Monday I drove back to Dunkeld Downs to provide Bob Robertson with a more fulsome business proposal. Deveson's Mechanics had pulled out all stops and had my car ready by ten that morning. After another weekend of online movies, I was only too grateful to hit the road and head north away from Angel Port.

We'd made the appointment for midday, so the pressure was on. Billy Joel's "She's Always a Woman" crooned through the car radio. I suffered through the second chorus before switching channels to an ABC presenter making mm-mm noises to a Chihuahua devotee. I switched again. A South Australian station bounced in and out with static. I switched off and cursed myself for not getting the blue tooth on my phone fixed.

The homestead's roof was a mercury shot in the sunlight. Today mine was the only car. I pushed the bell at the front door and waited. And waited. Amber and ruby light fell from the stained glass onto my white shirt. Eighty-seven minutes in the car and Robertson wasn't answering. It occurred to me that he could be somewhere on the property forking hay or petting sheep or perpetrating one of the more arcane undertakings of graziers.

A large shed housed a dusty Nissan Patrol and a tractor, but no vehicle to suggest the owner was around. Around the back the pool was clear blue, benign and beckoning, but empty. On the west side was the wisteria arbour. It was as good a place as any to wait. At its end a wrought iron seat stood in dappled light, expertly positioned for the view. Past the fields and gums the Grampians were sharp violet protrusions into a sky speckled with clouds. Insects buzzed. Grass hissed and swayed and dried in the sun. I could almost hear someone calling 'Miranda!'

I shook off the fleeting chill. A motor hummed on the main road, drew closer and faded. Another car drew near and buzzed away. In a sudden show of sunlight something glinted at my feet. It was a rose gold locket on a matching chain. It looked shiny, like it hadn't been there for long. The front was patterned with a motif of squiggles, the back had an inscription in tiny print: Darling J Forever L. I put a fingernail to the clasp and looked inside. Two faces beamed out at me, brimming with hope and love. Dr Leslie Rich was unmistakable, youthful but easily recognisable by the sharp jawline and air of confidence. The real change was in Joan Rich. The laughing girl in the picture wore a

crimson beret and a shirt embroidered with cherries. She was a long way removed from the more sombre woman I'd seen in respectable beige.

A diesel engine rumbled up the drive. I pocketed the locket and prepared myself to meet the master of the house.

Only it wasn't. A Forrester came to a halt alongside the central fountain and Jennifer Robertson stepped onto the gravel, countrified in moleskins and a limp cotton shirt. She leaned back on the burgundy paintwork and folded her arms. Not the most welcoming of gestures.

'I didn't think we'd meet up again this soon,' she said.

'I have a meeting with your father.'

She didn't respond. I thought she was waiting for me to elaborate.

'About the university,' I added.

She squinted at me. 'You haven't heard?'

'What?'

'He's not here.'

'Oh.'

I felt the irritation at being stood up. No matter how many years I had worked at PolData I had never accustomed myself to having the business leaders of the world act as if their time were more valuable than mine. Just like doctors.

'He's disappeared.'

'Oh.'

'Sorry you've come all this way. I thought everyone knew. It was in the local paper, on the radio.'

'I haven't read the paper and the local radio station is ...'

Despite the circumstances, Jennifer smiled. 'Well that's in your favour. The paper's a rag and the station's playlist vacillates between Miley Cyrus and Dean Martin.'

The full meaning of her words sank in. 'You did say "disappeared"?''

She nodded and looked past me to the main road.

'As in, no-one knows where he is?' I asked.

'As in no-one knows where he is.'

'You're kidding me! Do you have any idea where he might be?'

She shook her head as a shadow swept across the property.

'Has this happened before?'

She hesitated. 'Not like this. Sometimes he stays away overnight but he's always back in the morning.'

'So when did he disappear?'

The first drops of rain pinged into the gravel at our feet.

'He went to the Harbourside bowls club on Saturday and never made it back. Mum started worrying by Sunday night and called the police. I'd just made it to Braidwood and had to turn around. I've been searching the property but there's no sign of him.'

I recalled the empty house. 'Where's your mother?'

'Home.' Jennifer saw my confusion. 'Angel Port is home. Mum and Dad don't live at the property most of the time. Alex Evans from Penshurst manages it. Mum's at home in case he turns up. I'm holding the fort here.'

I'd only met Jennifer once, I hardly knew her, yet I felt a surge of sympathy.

'Can I do anything to help?' I meant pick up bread and milk or send flowers, maybe escort her into the dry warmth of the homestead.

She assessed me. It was line ball. From her answer I realised I'd fallen just inside the line.

'Yes,' she said at last. 'There's one place I haven't checked but you'll need to change.'

I've never been a fan of hiking. The best way to experience the hinterland, in my view, is at the wheel of a car or languishing at a restaurant for a long slow afternoon of food and alcohol. Magpies still warble and trees still sway and the air persists in sharing its odours of eucalyptus and cow dung.

Hiking in the rain is a special kind of torture. Searching for mayoral candidates in a swamp under an icy torrent in the missing person's rubber boots comes under the definition of black sites.

Jennifer had driven us to Bryan Swamp. I was grateful the name hadn't been gentrified to 'wetland'. Mud and slime by any other name. The swamp was located in the basin of the Grampians' Victoria Valley, a deep and narrowing cleft pincer between Mount Sturgeon and Mount Abrupt. In the rain the scarred basalt pylons at the mountains' crests were slick and forbidding. Whatever feeble light shone out on the plain had given up the ghost in the valley. I followed Jennifer along a bush track of sludge. If I watched my feet I was too late to prevent the slap of wet branches on my face; if I looked ahead my toes caught the roots and stones that jutted from the soil. The trees opened out at last to a marshland that stretched across the valley floor. The steel-grey lagoon at its centre was vast.

'What now?' I asked.

Jennifer peered out from under the hood of her jacket. The rain was a waterfall in front of her eyes. 'I can't see anything.'

She was right there. There was not so much as a birdwatcher or lost tourist. I hoped that would put an end to the hunt but I was disappointed.

'We'll try the jetty and the bird-watching hide. That's where dad used to take me.'

She headed off down a path through the tall reeds that, to my eye, disappeared after a few paces. I trudged after her, my boots sinking and sucking in the mud. A sweet crisp smell rose up from the reeds and the rain sounded like rice falling at a wedding. A blue heron rose and veered away.

The hide was a gruelling fifteen-minute walk to the south. Jennifer paused at its entrance, a shoulder resting on the wooden wall. There was something about her stillness that made my throat tighten. A body? I peered over her shoulder. The hide was empty except for a coke can flung under the wooden bench.

'It was a long shot,' she said.

I didn't let my relief show. Dealing with a dead daddy wasn't on my bucket list. I stepped into the hide, grateful to be out of the rain, and peeked through one of the slot windows to the lagoon. The visibility was low. Black peaks loomed in a world white with fog. A duck honked and its friend answered, neither of them visible. Stopping made me realise how cold I was. I jiggled my toes in Bob Robertson's gum boots and pulled up the collar of his hiking jacket.

'Sorry to bring you out here,' said Jennifer.

'No, no. All good. Wet feet that's all. I'm very glad to help.'

Jennifer pulled a block of chocolate from her pocket and broke me off a piece. 'I should have brought a thermos and a bottle of water, but I wasn't thinking. Sorry.'

'Stop saying sorry. You're father's missing.' I gave her a reassuring smile. Her skin sported the red blotches of cold hair and exertion. She caught me staring at her.

'I must look a sight.'

'For sore eyes.'

I saw scepticism on her face. I thought back to her father's disparaging comments about her looks at the party and wondered just how close she was to him. Maybe she'd be better off without the bastard. I'd already met enough locals who held that view.

Jennifer handed me the last of the chocolate and scrunched up the packet. 'The jetty's another two or three minutes away. You wait here and I'll have a look.'

Evidently my internal whingeing had been noted. 'No way. First the jetty and then a jog up the mountain ridge followed by a short kayak on the lake. Ready?'

It got a laugh. 'And I had you pegged for a pen pusher.'

'To tell you the truth, I don't write with pens. The repetitive movement gives me RSI.'

'There's always workers' comp.'

'I'll keep that in mind.'

The walk to the jetty was nearer ten minutes. We made our way along its shredded planks into the full assault of the weather, water bolt grey at our feet, the planks stinking of bird shit, the mountains tipping over us, and the fog thick enough for a Halloween shindig. How long was long enough before I could suggest it had been a wasted trip? A stillborn thought. Jennifer gasped and ran back to the bank to plunge knee-deep into the freezing water. I peered down to see what she had seen. There, poking from the surface, was the rim of a leather boot. She grabbed it with one hand, but the drag of mud held it firm. Then it gave way.

It was hard to see her expression in the gloom but there are some things that do not need sight. They are a change in the atmosphere, a tilting of the planet, a breath held. Jennifer lifted the boot as if it were exhibit A. Dark leather, Rossi, made in Australia. She removed an orthotic inner sole.

'It's dad's.'

I wrote off the idea of a quiet drive back to Angel Port and a night playing Scrabble on my phone. I also discarded the idea of Bob Robertson, leading business man and aspiring return-term mayor, coughing up for the research centre's work. There was a strong chance that Robertson's coughing days were over. The upside was that Victoria Bartholomew was more likely to come on board. Swings and merry-go-rounds.

Jennifer and I waited in her Forrester for the police. The heater kept the cold at bay and clouded the windows. She didn't cry. She didn't talk. Instead she leant across me and rummaged in her glove box to find an old packet of barley sugars which she rattled under my nose. I took one. It seemed the only polite way to offer my condolences.

The first officer on the scene was a woman so white her teeth looked yellow. Senior Constable Julie Badcock was from Halls Gap. Missing persons were all in day's work for her. The Grampians were flush with the skeletons of tourists setting off into the Australian bush with half a bottle of water and dinky socks and sandals. Interest only sparked when she discovered the boot belonged to the local hotshot whose name and picture had graced the police network's missing person's bulletins. She raised eyebrows devoid of colour.

'So what was Mr Robertson doing out here?' she asked.

Jennifer had been filling in all the details. The rain had eased and Badcock was taking a statement while leaning on the bonnet of her Pajero, a torch clipped to her cap.

'I don't know,' said Jennifer. Jennifer's skin had the hue and texture of wholemeal flour, the first sign I'd seen of any distress. Put the cop's eyebrows on Jennifer's face and they'd disappear altogether. 'I rang my mother but she wasn't answering. She might know. I can ring again if you like, but she's hopeless with her phone.'

Badcock's eyes suggested that anyone who was hopeless with their phone when their husband was missing was either loopy or guilty.

Jennifer caught the look. 'It's a generation thing.'

'I'll get you to show us where you discovered the boot when the team arrives from Hamilton.'

'What about Sergeant Barry?' Jennifer asked.

'Haven't you heard? Rationalisation. They pulled him out in December so now Halls Gap's a single-person station.'

'Irrationalisation more like,' said Jennifer.

'You'll get no objections from me.'

Badcock put a hand on Jennifer's arm. 'This may be nothing. Your dad may be okay. Don't think the worst yet. The only problem is that we won't be able to mount much of a search tonight. It's already too dark. But we may get lucky. Why don't you hop back in the car and get dry while I cordon off the area before anyone tramples through and ruins what's left of any sign of your father.'

I stepped forward. 'Can I help you set up the ribbon or whatever it is?'

The police officer all but snorted. 'Sorry, police business sir. Perhaps you can see to your partner.'

'She's not ...' I started, then stopped. Why, I don't know.

Badcock was right about barely mounting a search that night. Two Pajeros arrived, headlights tracking across the valley like min-min lights. It was pitch by then, but at least the rain held off. The vehicles disgorged four men, two older, two younger – three who towered over me and a fourth who was short for a copper but I'd lay a wager on him taking the others out in a boxing ring. He was sharp and hard. His muscles rippled while their bellies wobbled. I guessed he alone had resisted the standing offer of free burgers and chips for police officers.

The tallest one, grey at the fringes, put out his hand and introduced his men. 'Detective Sergeant Vic van Wiessen and with me are Detective Senior Constable Frank Diesso and Constables Mark Abbott and Jaxon Stevens.' His handshake was like trying to get it up on a night after the booze: soft and quickly withdrawn. He turned his attention to Badcock.

'Constable, what do you have?'

He listened to Badcock with his arms folded and a wry curve of his lips directed over her shoulder to Diesso, the other middle-aged officer.

Badcock finished her report. 'And I've explained there is limited chance we'll find anything tonight.'

'We'll see about that, Constable.'

‘Senior Constable.’

Van Wiessen waved a whatever hand. I heard a snicker. Next to me, Jennifer clucked her tongue. Van Wiessen didn’t appear to notice and placed a hand on her shoulder, thick and heavy as a dead salmon. ‘I know this must be a hard time for you. Your father’s a great man. We’ve had a few drinks together over the years. Don’t you worry, we’ll do everything we can to find him. Now, Mr Newland, can you run me through what happened?’

I felt Jennifer stiffen beside me. ‘I think I am better placed to give you an account.’

Van Wiessen eyeballed her. ‘Perhaps you’re right.’ He looked around as if seeing his surroundings for the first time – the black silhouettes of the mountains under the starless sky. ‘It might be better if we began our search while the weather holds. Constable Badcock, you stay here please.’

There was a flicker of bitterness across Badcock’s cheeks which she quickly smothered. ‘Yessir.’

We took the same path we’d followed earlier in the day, the constables leading the way with high-powered torches. Van Wiessen ordered a cursory inspection of the hide but it was clear the jetty was his main goal. He sped ahead with two of the men and left Stevens to light our way.

‘Prick,’ Jennifer whispered.

‘Van Wiessen?’ I asked.

‘Mainly him but I’m not discriminating. See the way he left the female officer back at the cars?’

Van Wiessen ordered the two younger officers to search the jetty and the water. The torches speared beams halfway across the lagoon, but the rays were narrow and the water was hidden by a vast sheet of dull chrome fog. Van Wiessen called them back and directed Stevens into the water. Something about Stevens’ reaction said he knew he’d be the one to freeze his arse off, but he held his tongue and pulled on knee-length boots he pulled from a backpack. As he did, the rain started again.

I felt van Wiessen’s breath on the back of my neck. ‘Nathan, if you could show him where the boot was.’

‘I was the one who found it,’ said Jennifer.

There was a moment before van Wiessen responded. 'Of course. Perhaps you can direct Jaxon.'

Stevens waded from the shore to the place Jennifer indicated. He plunged his arm into the water and floundered around. I could tell when his fingers first touched the bottom – his face screwed up and his body stiffened. I hid a smile but he wasn't so lucky with Diesso.

'Don't be a pussy, Stevens.'

Stevens ignored him and concentrated on patting around the area. Water splattered over the top of his boots. I could almost feel the freezing squelch between his toes.

'Nothing yet, sir.'

The temperature had plummeted with the rain. I pulled my borrowed coat closer and watched as Stevens skirted around the spot. In the reflection of the torchlights I could see Jennifer biting her lips.

'Aarrgh!' Stevens leapt from the water, Olympic standard. 'What was that?'

The short constable, Abbott, laughed. 'Your imagination, ya girl.'

'Your arm tired holding that torch?' Stevens retorted.

'Get on with it,' growled van Wiessen.

Stevens' wading bird impression continued. He stopped suddenly and grasped something under the water. He put a second arm under and tugged it free. It was largish and streamed with mud and water. Stevens dragged himself to the jetty and placed a grimy backpack on the boards. Jennifer dropped to her knees to inspect it.

'Don't touch it. It may be evidence,' ordered the sergeant. He waited, impatient. 'Do you recognise it?'

Jennifer sat back on her heels and shook her head. 'No. No. It's not even a brand I recognise. Deuter. German maybe.' There was both relief and disappointment in her voice.

Stevens was ordered back to his search. Over the next ten minutes he accumulated a takeaway coffee cup so old it fell to pieces, a sock, small, with strawberries printed on it, and a child's sandal. He was in for a third attempt when the visibility fell to nothing. Van Wiessen called him in.

ANGEL PORT

'I'm sorry Miss Robertson but we'll have to continue in the morning. We've already contacted the Search and Rescue Squad. ETA eight am. Here, Mark, see Jaxon gets back in one piece. Frank and I will get these two back to their car.'

He strode off, speedy for a man with a fast-food fetish, and we hurried after him, wending our way through bush and wetland, the cold prick of rain on our skin. Somewhere in the dark a water bird keened. Another responded. We humans were all out of honk and spittle.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I arrived home not long after midnight, the drive both slomo and fast forward, Robertson's disappearance a tangle of images and ideas as the kilometres fell away.

The man had his enemies. He was a businessman and a politician. The bleeding lefties hated men like Robertson who made their money by the sweat of their own hands (more or less). They rarely resorted to murder though, more likely engaging in self-congratulatory complaints over an inner city latte. Odds on that Robertson had done someone over in his business dealings. As for the political angle, true to the low esteem in which politicians are held in Australian culture, every citizen was a potential suspect, me included.

I thought about Soulio's comment on my first day of work – when a man disappears it's about a woman, either the one he wants to be with, the one he wants to leave, or both. Robertson being murdered was simply too outlandish. I was convinced he'd done a runner. The boot supported my theory. You couldn't miss it, as if it were staged. Robertson had orchestrated his own disappearance and was never going to be found in Bryan Swamp. The only flaw in my theory was the forthcoming mayoral election. Robertson had put everything into the campaign. If that was a ruse, it was a damn good one.

I'd stopped in Hamilton at a roadhouse on the edge of town to grab coffee and a shepherd's pie of doubtful age. Distracting me from the poor fare was the most recent edition of the local paper, the *Hamilton Spectator*. A story on Robertson – 'Mystery over local businessman's disappearance' – shared the front page with a story about the opening of the regional AFL season. Robertson's story contained only the bare facts of his last movements and the lack of progress made by the police to date. The search at Bryan Swamp would no doubt feature in the next edition. I'd started to turn to the inside pages when the last paragraph caught my eye. Robertson, as I'd already heard, was not the first Angel Port man to have vanished in recent times. Ignatius Stradbroke, former McMurtrie College principal, had left home with a fishing rod five years before and never returned.

Stradbroke's story was rehashed on the inside cover, with some additional news. 'Coroner declares popular principal dead' said the headline. Stradbroke had retired two years before his disappearance and had become a pillar of the local Angel Port community – president of the local tennis club and convenor of the Heavenly Summer

Fiesta committee. The police investigation had been officially closed and the coroner had that week declared Stradbroke 'missing presumed dead.' His wife Sheila and her three adult children were to host a memorial service at McMurtrie College. The journalist concluded that 'Mr Robertson and Mr Stradbroke were known to each other but police do not believe their disappearances are linked.' The accompanying picture showed Ignatius and wife Sheila in happier times. Stradbroke displayed perfect teeth over a bow tie. A sombre Sheila wore a dyed bob cut at odds with her age. I set the paper aside and headed for the car. There is something deeply satisfying about being on the periphery of a good story.

Wind greeted me at home. Power and light didn't. Naturally. By now I had those bastards at ElecServices on speed dial. The 'consultant' for the twenty-four-hour service was gracious once we were through recording my grandmother's number of teeth and the thirty-seven digit code that proved I was who I said I was.

I've just moved in and the power is off – again. You only just got it on.

I understand sir.

I am a paying customer.

I am aware of that sir and we value your business. Let me check the records sir. Will you hold for a minute?

[Synthesised bagpipes for three minutes and fourteen seconds.]

Sir, our records show that your power is still on. It certainly hasn't been discontinued from our end. Have you checked the knock-off switches?

I have checked the switches and nothing has tripped.

If you continue to have problems please call in the morning and we can send someone around. This may come at an extra charge if the problem is found to be on your property or a fault in your own appliances. Is there anything else I can help you with today?

No.

There is a short thirty-second survey on our customer service at the end of the conversation if you wish to stay on the line, sir.

I hung up and went round to the side of the house to check the knock-off switches. They were all off: power, lights, hot water. If anything, that pissed me off more.

The only consolation was that I didn't have to listen to my mate Huon dissing me about my uselessness with all things practical. I flicked the switches up one by one and crossed my fingers. Back inside I hit the light switch. The globe glared and stayed on, same for the light in the lounge room, the TV, the table lamp and the charge icon on my tablet.

Something was different. I sniffed. Shaved wood and wet cement. I circled the lounge room. The curtains were closed. I was sure I had left them open. And my current novel, *In the Winter Dark*, had been dropped to the floor. I picked it up. A corner was dog-eared at page forty-one. Something else had changed. One sliding door had been moved to the opposite wall. I relaxed. Maz must have been over in my absence.

Comfort came too soon.

The ceiling globe in the hall flickered, fizzed, and faded, followed by the TV standby light. In the reduced glow of the lamp I heard a soft thud from the back of the house. A whimper. I held my breath. A clunk, louder this time but still muted. In the absence of anything better I lifted the book and snuck down the hall. The kitchen door was closed. I put my hand to the doorknob and on the count of three pushed the door inward. A figure lunged at me from the dark. A ruckman on performance-enhancing drugs. I crashed to the floor, pain searing my shoulder as I hit the wall. I tried to twist away. The creature held me firm. With enormous effort I heaved over, but the thing went with me. Together we slammed into the opposite wall. The air went out of me. My attacker took the advantage and put its tongue to my cheek and licked. A dog. White, tan and smiling.

'Get off!' I yelled.

It slunk away and sat on the book I'd never had a chance to use, its ears alert and a wounded expression in its eyes.

As dogs went, the intruder was pretty cute. It sensed my change in attitude and padded up to put its teeth to my hand and pull me to the kitchen. The new smell that had bothered me was stronger here. Definitely wet cement. That hardly made sense unless McG had sent someone around to fix the plumbing without my knowledge. A dog basket rested on the slate floor and an ice-cream container containing dry dog food and a pink leash sat on the table. A bitch then. I noticed a note attached to her collar. It was brief: 'Away for a couple of days. Please look after Spectre. She's a Basenji so won't bother you barking. She has two cups of dry food each morning and night. You can buy her treats if you want. Your neighbour, Janice.'

I felt the rise of indignation. How dare that bloody woman – the woman I'd never met – enter my house and dump her bloody mutt on me! I considered hauling the dog to the fence and kicking it back into Janice's kingdom come. Then Spectre put her chin on my lap. I ruffled the fur at the side of her snout and, I swear, she sighed.

We hit the bed together and only then did I remember I had Robertson's soiled and soaked jacket, as well as his boots, in the back of my car. The idea of sending them back with the assistance of Australia Post and a polite note, 'Hi Jennifer, I hope you find the owner', seemed curt. I cursed the oversight and set my alarm for four hours hence, resigned to the long trek back north.

Morning. The car park at Bryan Swamp was full of official vehicles, all empty. Another hike through foliage and marsh grass to the lagoon: the trees, the sludge, the sudden opening to a vista of lake and mountain. And Jennifer huddled with a small group in the grass edging the water. She turned at my call and put out a hand as if I were the very person she'd been waiting for. There's nothing like being the knight in shining armour. Mention of the errant clothing would have to come later, much later.

'Mum,' she said. 'Nathan's here.'

Jean Robertson stood at Jennifer's right, a picture of rural elegance in navy slacks and navy parka. Only the lack of make-up suggested this was a body search. It was a shock to see her leaning against Leslie Rich. I hadn't pinned him as being the family confidante.

'It was good of you to come, Nathan,' said Jean. 'Our family certainly appreciates your assistance to Jennifer last night.'

'It's nothing.'

'Kindness is never nothing.'

It was a phrase she'd used before. She held my gaze for a moment before peering back at the lagoon where a police rubber ducky was moving slowly across the surface. The craft slowed at the distant shore, did a U-turn and headed back in our direction. Four officers, two clad in the black neoprene of wetsuits, were bent over the sides, intent on the water. The boat reached the near shore, not twenty metres away, pivoted and began its return crawl.

I was disturbed by a shout to my left. A group of officers in heavy coats emerged from a copse of trees, eyes peeled to the ground at their feet. One passed a plastic bag

to another, shaking his head as he did. Beyond them, human figures moved up and down the spindly jetty, too far away to discern who they were. A white tent on the shore flickered in the wind. It was a cold wind. It cut through my clothing like a soprano hitting a high C.

'Are you okay?' asked Jennifer.

'I should be asking you that question. How are you holding up?'

'My fingers are getting tired, but I'm hanging on.' Even now she could joke. She moved closer and crooked her arm through my elbow. Her body was warm and solid.

Out on the water the skipper pulled the boat around and cut its engine. The voices of the police officers carried clearly.

'There!' said one, pointing into the water.

'You're up Jenkins.'

The slighter of the two divers pulled down her mask, tested her gear and slipped into the lagoon. The water swallowed her. She was under for one, two minutes before she surfaced and beckoned the other officer in scuba gear.

'We'll need the rope,' she called.

Next to me Jennifer tensed. I heard her mother's soft 'oh no'.

The second diver readied his mask and tank and accepted the rope, secured to a winch at the rear end of the craft, then dropped over the side. We waited for what seemed forever before they surfaced. The woman raised a fist and rotated. The sound of the engine hauling up its catch growled across the water. I heard Jennifer's sharp intake of breath as an object came free of the surface and then an equally sharp sound as she let out her breath. The boat had winched up a bicycle.

'It's not his. Dad never rode a bike,' she said.

The search went on. It was not unlike that old saying about war: ninety-five per cent boredom. Often enough one of the coppers on the shore bent to retrieve some find yet nothing was brought to the Robertsons for identification. The stale litter of tourists, I presumed. The rain thankfully held off and there were pockets of warming sun, but Jean Robertson was flagging. We were all flagging.

On the rubber ducky's ninth or tenth loop a crew member gave a hoy and the craft stopped about fifty metres from where we stood. The male diver went down this time. The wait was short. When the water fell from him he held aloft a bundle the size of

a large watermelon. Soft lemon fluff shone out from under grime and mud. The female diver reached down with two hands and took the parcel with a gentleness that suggested it was fragile or precious or both.

‘It’s a bunny rug,’ Jennifer whispered.

She was most likely right. The size and shape and the soft fabric suggested a blanket wrapped around a baby. I choked down a prick of nausea.

We watched as the deckhand unwound the blanket. The crew sat back on their haunches. The female diver shot a look at our group then dropped her head. The other diver must have gone down once more, for his head re-emerged and he raised his hand to give a ‘come here’ signal to his partner. They dived in unison. Each held a new bundled when they reappeared, one slimy pink, the other mud-streaked baby blue.

Jennifer threw a hand to her mouth. ‘Oh my god! Oh my god!’

‘It’s alright Jenny.’ Her mother patted her shoulder and made soothing sounds. ‘I’m sure it’s nothing. I’m sure it’s nothing to do with your father.’

‘Probably kids mucking around or a sick joke,’ said Rich. ‘The world is full of people who make little contribution to the planet.’

The deckhand accepted each object one at a time and the divers went down for more. Blanketed bundles were lifted from the water one by one. By noon eleven bundles had been retrieved from a radius of twenty metres around the boat. Pink, blue, yellow, mint green. At twelve-thirty, the search over, the rubber ducky headed for the jetty and the police tent.

We waited. We heard nothing. Rich lost his patience first.

‘Really, Jean, they’ve left us like shags on a rock. It is extremely insensitive. Come on, we’re going. They can come and find us.’

He put an arm around her and attempted to shepherd her up the track to the car park. She resisted, a monolith of resolve.

‘No Leslie. We wait. I wait until I know what’s happened to Bob.’

The wait was not short. It ended when Sergeant van Wiessen, his eyes alight in a face carefully neutral, came to escort us to the tent to see what the divers had retrieved.

The sight still fills me with horror, that other five per cent of the war experience. It haunts those times between wake and sleep. Eleven babies laid out in a line. Blue eyes,

brown eyes. Olive and brown skin, pink skin and lips. Downy hair. They were in various states of disrepair and damage. A yellow baby was sporting one arm. Two pink ones revealed plastic flesh where their jumpsuits had torn. Another's head was twisted at an impossible angle. It peered with sadness at the one-eyed figure laid out next to it. Slime left green streaks across half of them, tangled in their perfectly planted hair. Mud stuck in mouths and eyes and discoloured the fabric of their clothing. Others, impossibly, were perfectly preserved – sapphire and axinite eyes sparkled, bunny outfits appeared freshly laundered, mouths curved in smiles. I could almost smell their sweet baby scents. I looked away. Somehow, those perfect babies were the most horrifying. But all of them were lifeless.

An image of James in my arms minutes after he was born came to me. I swayed. Next to me Jennifer bent over and puked on the soil. Rich put an ironed and folded handkerchief to his brow. Only Jean Robertson seemed unaffected. She stood erect, unblinking.

'What is the meaning of this?' She pointed at the babies on their rugs.

Strange to say, it was only then that I realised the babies weren't real.

They were dolls.

The sight was still sick and sickening. I wondered about the mind that had thrown those little darlings into the swamp.

Van Wiessen ignored Jean's question and asked one of his own. 'Mrs Robertson, does this mean anything to you?'

'No. Nothing at all.' Her voice was strong.

'Nothing at all? Are you sure?'

'I told you "no". How could this ... this outrage have anything to do with Robert?'

'Miss Robertson?'

Jennifer was upright, just. She shook her head. 'This is too horrible.'

'Any link to your father that you can think of?'

Jennifer glanced at her mother. There was an imperceptible shake of Jean's head. 'No. Nothing at all.'

Rich chose that moment to intervene. 'Of course she's sure. Can't you see she's deeply shocked? You've obviously stumbled onto something here, most likely nothing

more than a ghoulish joke. It clearly has nothing to do with Mrs Robertson and her daughter.'

Van Wiessen was not fazed by Rich's behaviour. 'I'm sorry you feel that way, Dr Rich. Perhaps the dolls mean something to you?'

'Why on earth would they?'

'As a doctor ...'

'Gynaecologist and obstetrician. Nearly forty years' experience.'

'Even more so, as a gynaecologist and obstetrician.'

'Nothing.'

'And what about you Mr Newland?'

I shook my head. Rich cut in. 'Thank you for your time. I'm taking Mrs Robertson home now.'

'We need Mrs and Miss Robertson to look at a few other things first and then we won't detain you.'

I was left alone with the dolls. I could see that, if you wanted to make little girls into mothers, these were the dolls to do it – at least before their watery demise. Each wore a jumpsuit that matched its blanket. Each had its own personality, a shy smile, a cheeky wink, a curl of hair, a stomach waiting to be tickled. I bent down to touch a doll with a splash of freckles.

'I wouldn't do that. They'll be chasing you for fingerprints.'

I jumped back. Senior Constable Julie Badcock had entered the tent. She crouched down to get a better look at the macabre display.

'The world is full of weirdness,' she said at last, moving to an upright position with apparent ease. 'Note, for example, the hairpin stuck into each of the jumpsuits.'

I hadn't noticed. A pin was poked through the clothing of each doll at chest level. 'Voodoo?'

'I don't think so.' She paused.

'You have a theory?'

'Hairpins are also known by another name.'

'Yes?' I prompted.

'Bobby pins.'

'Bobby. Bob.' I checked we were still alone. 'Isn't that a little far-fetched?'

'Possible, yet if I thought it why couldn't someone else?'

'What would it mean?'

'I can think of a lot of things. Not that it matters. They've taken me off the case.'

Surprise. 'You should tell van Wiessen all the same.'

Badcock snorted. 'And hear the latest snide remark about feminine intuition and whether I'm on my rags? No thanks, I'm back to Halls Gap to chase stolen Swedish passports.'

I took one last look at the dolls. I noticed for the first time that one of them was without clothes. Despite Badcock's advice I bent down and covered her nakedness with her pink rug.

CHAPTER NINE

Life in Angel Port transmuted from the lonely strangeness of new-coming to the lonely routine of not-quite-newness. Skink and I lunched together. Minh Tran in the sushi place acknowledged me on my nightly pass-bys but was always too weary to strike up a conversation. The NHMRC application was a slow dream through quicksand. Centre director Soulio occasionally propped himself against the doorframe to have a quick word. His response to my absence on the day of the Bryan Swamp search was a pleased slap on the back and predictable: 'Good idea. Keeping the family sweet.' Spectre walked the beach with me of the evening and kept my feet warm at night. Janice did not return as she'd promised and, while I growled about it, I was secretly pleased. The dog was my one true Angel Port friend.

Robertson was not found.

News of his disappearance fell from the front page to the third and then to small updates squashed between stories on school fetes and tennis trophies. Jennifer returned to her life and work in Braidwood, leaving her mother to the ministrations of friends and the blunt communications of Sergeant van Wiessen and his cohort. I rang Jennifer two or three times. There was a bleakness that the distance couldn't breach. After the polite pattern of 'How are you? Fine. You? Fine' the conversation faltered. Her father was missing, so what else could you expect? But it made calling difficult. I decided the best course of action was to wait for her to call me when – if – she was ready.

Another weekend rolled around. I discarded earlier plans of heading back to Melbourne because I couldn't leave Spectre on her own and my friends weren't the types to welcome an unknown dog.

When the banging woke me on that dreary Saturday morning I knew it could be only one person. Even Spectre seemed to know who it was. She stretched once and leapt from my bed. I pulled a jumper over my flannelette pyjamas and followed the dog to the door. McG, bless him, held up three brown paper bags clouded with grease stains. The rich smell of sausage rolls made my stomach churn.

'You're late,' said McG. 'The fish'll have scuttled off home by the time we get out there. Hey, Spec honey, how are you?' He crouched down and scratched the dog under the chin.

'Out where?'

McG waved the bags towards the beach. 'Into that silent sea. Coleridge.'

'It's freezing and I'm going back to bed.' No need to let him see how pleased I was to see his polished mug.

'Piking are ya, mate?'

I looked past the estate agent to a day that was barely morning and promised little sun. 'Piking? You come here in the middle of the night and expect me to crawl after you with no notice so I can hurl bait over the side of the boat.'

McG lowered the bags. 'Now wait on there. We had an arrangement.'

'No we didn't.'

'Sure we did. I asked if you'd fished. You said no. I said I'd take you out. So, ta da! Here I am.'

'I'm tired. Here, get in out of the cold. I'm freezing.'

The bastard virtually goose-stepped inside. He had the brisk movements and clear eyes of a morning person. His voice was like a foghorn on speed.

'You look like you had a hard night last night.'

I didn't tell him that I was hungover from tedium. The office had been empty the day before and I'd skipped the uni bar to hurry home to the dog, worried about her being alone all day.

'Social life wearing you out, is it Nate? Got too many friends in Angel Port already?' He waited. No response. 'Exactly. So how about I put on the kettle, you get dressed, we get these down our gobs and we'll be off. I've got one for the dog too. Can't have the mutt starve while we're out.'

I thought about asking him how he knew about the dog before I remembered: this was Angel Port where there were one-point-five degrees of separation. I also thought about refusing the invitation but the jibe about friends had found its mark. I headed for the bedroom. McG called at my back.

'Natey!'

I gave him a once over that suggested I was not impressed. He was unfazed.

'Take that bloody scowl off your face. We don't want to scare the fish, do we?'

'You disappoint me, Nate,' said McG. He wore a light blue jacket, the same colour as his eyes, and faded denims. Charcoal hair sprung out from under his hood.

'It's Nathan,' I said, but there was no heat in it. Sitting in the front of the boat, cocooned in my anorak, I was in that dream state that is both of the moment and apart from it.

'Natey mate. So disappointed.'

I looked up from the fishing rod I held. 'I don't see how you're disappointed. This fishing lark isn't as bad as I thought it would be. I've caught two fish – which is two more than you.' Even to my own ears I sounded comfortable, almost sleepy. I schmoozed McG with a low-wattage smile that won me a glower. 'And I haven't felt a twinge of seasickness.'

'Exactly,' said my host. 'I thought I'd have you hurling over the boat with the sharks circling and you green as. But nah, you look like you've been doing this all your life. Full of bloody surprises and not bad for a Melburnian.'

The sun, against all odds, came out at that moment. The warmth was instant. The water transformed from grey to teal. McG gave a low whistle.

'Bloody oath. With the sun on you you like one of those icons you see in those wog churches. You've even got a gold halo.'

'If you're thinking of making a living writing poetry, give up now. Here, have a drink.'

I reached over the bucket where two snapper, rose-silver, floundered in salt water and grabbed the thermos. 'You're pretty saintly yourself. I expected the boat to float on beer. But there's not a bottle in sight and the coffee is actually drinkable.'

'Two rules in life mate. Never mix boating with alcohol. And never, ever drink instant coffee. How's work?'

'Pass.'

'That's the attitude. Oi, I think you'll find there's a tug on your line.'

The line had indeed gone taut, tension so fine that I wondered how McG had noticed it. I peered into the water. Below the surface the water was an unreadable hue, not grey, not blue, not green, but an opaque shade of something that hid more than it revealed. I gave the rod a small jerk, just as McG had instructed me, and felt the weight on the end of the line, felt it pulling away and the reel whirring and humming across my

skin. The fish was a weighty bugger, bigger than the last two. I narrowed my eyes and the world with it until there was nothing but the force of hand on handle, the silver of nylon line, the frilled surface spilling and frothing, a sky clear blue with just a single doily cloud. And the warmth of McG's breath on my neck.

'Steady now,' he said. 'Steady.'

An urgent flurry of water and the fish burst like sunset into the open air, battling, weaving, twisting, desperate to pull away. Its tail hit the water and rained spray over us, icy, invigorating, salty.

'Reel a bit more, matey! Then haul her in. Now! Now!'

I took a breath, but was too late. The fish, sensing freedom, sensing indecision, gave a furious jerk and yanked the line back out, a thread launched into the sky, the fish flying to the solitary cloud, the reel growling and spewing under my hand. For a moment, stasis, a tableau – line, fish, sky, cloud, boat, man – before the tension snapped and the line fluttered into air and the fish fell in a fire of diamonds to the water and disappeared beneath the surface. Then only small ripples radiating out from its salvation and, at last, unbroken water and the limp line trailing from the rod.

There was quiet.

The waves slush-slushed against the aluminium of the boat.

A gull, wings spread wide, gave a single tenor cry.

Breeze hissed against eardrums.

Blood rushed full and fast. Slowed.

I sank back on the hard metal seat and wiped the sweat off my forehead. A china mug of coffee appeared under my nose.

'The one that got away,' said McG with a wide-tooth grin.

The coffee was hot enough to take the sting out of my hands and rich enough to give my heart a wallop.

'I almost had it,' I said. The spot where I'd last seen the fish had closed over. I sniffed in a universe of coffee beans, brine and old fishing expeditions.

McG didn't respond. He was looking landward, his eyes cloudy, locked on some vision. I followed his gaze. The land was a pile of tangled ribbon dropped on a viridian ocean. Nothing stirred or staked its claim. Angel Port was hidden around the headland

and the near shore was empty of development – no holiday homes for rich city-siders, no humble shacks, no jetties, no surfer vans snoozing together.

McG's voice seemed to come from a distance, his words as sibilant as the sea. 'She was an innocent. Didn't do no harm to no-one. I'm not sorry she escaped.' His eyes were fixed on the shoreline.

I felt that prick of cold on the back of my neck again. 'Sorry?'

He shook his head to remove the darkness from his eyes. 'The fish. Just the fish.'

McG in one-up mode was easy to handle. A brooding McG was something else altogether. I coughed and pointed to the bucket at our feet. 'So much for these two.'

McG straightened himself up and peered down at the snapper, coruscating still with life. 'No-one said life was fair.' He looked at me from under his eyebrows. 'Bob Robertson, speaking of which.'

The change of subject startled me. 'Robertson?'

'I hear you were right in the thick of things when the police searched for him in the Grampians. You do get around. Contacts in all the right places. Nice girl, that Jennifer. Pity about her prick of a father.'

'Sounds like you're not mourning his disappearance. Ooh!' I grasped the side of the boat as it lurched up then down.

'My antipathy to the great man is well known. I've been waiting for the police to knock on my door but so far they've disappointed me. I'd very happily tell them where they could put him if they found him. I assume he's finally scuppered with one of his many conquests. The police didn't find anything?'

Another swell hit. If this kept up my gills would turn green and McG could have his laugh.

'Concentrate on the horizon,' he said with a grin.

For what it was worth, I took his advice.

'So, did they find anything?' he prompted.

I had so far kept mum about the baby dolls. Van Wiessen had emphasised in his own inimitable style the need for confidentiality and maintenance of the integrity of the investigation. The discovery of the boot had found its way into the papers. Robertson's farm was practically on the shores of the swamp so a bushwalk and a bit of lost footwear

were not startling news. The babies, however, were another matter, sinister, nauseating – even now the picture of them laid to rest on their bunny rugs brought bile, extra bile, to my throat.

McG was still watching me. I decided to counter. ‘Heard any rumours?’

He shrugged. ‘Maybe.’

I waited.

‘Weird stuff.’

It figured. The town lived on rumour. ‘Look McG, I’d love to tell you but I can’t. Ongoing investigation and all that.’

‘So they did find something then.’ He put up a hand. ‘I get it, you can’t say any more. A mystery within a conundrum and so on and so forth. Tell you what, why don’t we call it a day and barbecue these babies up for lunch.’

‘I don’t fillet fish.’

‘Lucky for you I do. So how about I play dad and you play mum. Got any lemons at your house?’

I nodded.

‘Salt and pepper?’

Another nod.

‘Then we’re set. Better sit more in the middle, the swell’s up. Often does that towards midday. Don’t fall over the side. There are unpredictable currents around here. You’ll end up as shark bait.’

The water, half an hour ago a silken turquoise cloth, was now roiling around us in bruised grey and white. The front of the boat rose and fell with a drop. I made a grab for the side and held my jaw firmly shut.

McG slapped his leg and laughed. ‘You’re starting to look the colour of a ripe lime. Even that poncy girl hair of yours. If you’re going to barf lean over the side of the boat, but make it the side away from the wind or it’ll blow back in your face. Okay, secure your rod and we’ll hit the land.’

‘Not literally I hope,’ I managed to say between gritted teeth.

McG raised his eyebrows. ‘Don’t give up your day job.’

‘I can’t afford to.’

ANGEL PORT

'Welcome to the real world.'

I held tight as McG pulled the engine cord and steered us to shore. I leaned over the side of the boat and offered the sea my sausage roll.

CHAPTER TEN

Huon was a hangover from high school, back when only posh, stuck-up kids went to private schools and the Catholic girls were good for a decent perve – and maybe more – if you timed it properly and got on the train as they made their uniformed, giggling way home from the colleges in the city. Despite his best efforts, Huon had made it into uni to study economics at Latrobe and then went all out to get a perfect transcript of fails in his first year. He embarked on the fruit-picking, grape-counting, wheat-tossing circuit and, euphorically destitute, wound up a builder's mate in Albury. He took to wood, its planes and rich scents, like he'd taken to academic idleness. And he hadn't minded the New South Wales girls who were impressed by his ironic city manners and his consideration in buying them flowers. As he'd learned during his peripatetic employment, you could buy a lot with a bunch of drooping petrol-station lilies.

His wanderings had also made him a dab hand at cooking, not the White-Stilton-Gold, quandong, Wagyu-beef, King Island-oyster, organic-spelt-artisan-loaves pretention that he teased me about, but rump steak perfectly pink, baked spuds drenched in salt, and a whack of frozen peas freshly boiled.

'Get this in you,' he said, sliding a plate across my kitchen table.

Spectre was sitting next to him, her jowl resting on his knees, her eyes full of adulation.

'I suppose you've been feeding the dog steak to win her affection,' I said.

Huon rubbed Spectre behind the ears. The creature practically purred. 'No need for bribery. I simply have a way with the women.'

The kitchen heater was on full blast, for which I was grateful. The fish lunch with McG had never eventuated. A text had arrived on his phone that drew creases across his tan. With a long, lonely afternoon before me I'd grabbed Spectre's lead and headed back to the beach. The feeble warmth haemorrhaged from the afternoon degree by bleeding degree. Spectre didn't mind. There were pongs galore on the sand. She dashed through the rim of seaweed patterned into fine, lacy contortions and then out into the shallows, yapping in her own fashion at the waves, challenging the tide to stay right where it was, a tan and white King Canute on four legs, except for her it was a game, life was a game. I was coming around to her point of view.

The helicopter was upon us before I knew it, a black tadpole in the sky, the thunk-thunk of its blades blown away by the easterly. It caught up with us in seconds. I expected it to pull away but it kept apace for fifteen, maybe twenty paces, until it lifted, veered out to sea and transformed into a crotchet in the scored sky. Within moments it was not even a punctuation mark on the horizon. The beach seemed more lonely.

I almost missed the beep of my phone. Picture of a bloke wearing a red, white and blue Western Bulldogs' guernsey and a brief message.

Where the hell are you?

I replied: *Arse end of the world.*

It's not so bad.

Like you'd know.

Hurry home, darling, tea's on the table.

Despite his rise in the social stakes, Huon hadn't learned any table manners over the last decades. He cut a piece of steak the size of a Pacific island, popped a whole potato on top like an atomic test, and rammed it into his mouth.

'How did you get in?' I asked.

He screwed up his big red scaly face, made a show of swallowing. 'You remember when we used to sneak into your Aunt Leah's and steal her wine? All that Riesling she used to have?'

I swallowed. I wouldn't tell him, but the meat was perfect. 'The louvered window in the dunny. How come I was always the one to wriggle through the gap? I still remember that time she came home halfway through and we had to run like hell and didn't put the louvre back. Did I get hell!'

'They never proved it was us.'

'Good as.'

'How's the grub?'

'Not thinking of giving up your day job I hope.'

'And that's all the thanks I get for slaving over a hot frying pan.' He showed me a mouthful of masticated meat and veg and guffawed when he saw me go pale. 'You aren't going to spew are you? If you are, can you go out the back? A man likes to finish his food in peace.'

'Can't you keep your mouth shut when you eat?'

'You sound more like your mother every day. Which reminds me, how is the lovely Marj? Saved the world yet?'

Good question. 'I haven't spoken to her much. A few texts. Hey, what's that sound?'

Huon cocked his head. 'The bell sound? They're your wind chimes. Saw them lying around and thought I'd save you the trauma of working out which way the nail went in.'

'Funny.'

Huon put knife and fork to plate, made another blasted atoll, stuffed it in. A few more repetitions and his plate was an empty china sea. He gulped his beer and stood up.

'So, Newland, when are you going to show me this quaint little town of yours? I'd like to see it before dark.'

He looked large and out of place in the dated kitchen with his heavy Blundstone boots, sleeveless puffer jacket and cocky crest of dark brown hair.

'Sit down!' I said. 'You're making the place look ugly. And I'm not going anywhere until I've finished my dinner and had a dump.'

'We'll have to leave the dog. Maria doesn't like the hairs all over the car seats.'

Figured.

'Does the wind ever stop?' Huon was balancing on the rail of Rosny Lookout on the north side of town, making me nervous, deliberately. My own feet were planted on the brick pavers of mother earth.

Angel Port spread out before us like a jigsaw of disparate palettes and patterns. The surrounding countryside of dry straw undulations bisected by dusty gums. The town a grid of rusted silver and red rooves. The caravan park at the edge of town riven by the Clancy, more creek than river, petering out in a wash of sand before it met the sea. The headlands holding the town in their grip. And the bowed ocean, falling over the horizon.

'I say it again. Does the wind ever stop?'

'It changes. Can't you come back from there? It's a sheer drop.'

Huon threw his arms and legs into a star and jumped into my arms.

‘You idiot!’

‘Whatever happened to us?’ he asked. ‘You don’t ring, you don’t call.’ He gave me a resounding kiss on the forehead. ‘Don’t say I don’t give you anything. What do you mean by “changes”?’

‘The wind? It’s a breeze, a squall, a hurricane ...’

Huon raised an eyebrow.

‘...a gust, a zephyr, a gale, a bloody pain in the arse. It’s irritatingly inconsistent and changes all the time, but it never goes away. Bit like a woman.’ I laughed.

‘You can say that again.’ Huon laughed back but I sensed reticence. ‘Speaking of which.’

I cut in. ‘So Maria let you off the leash this weekend, did she?’

‘Yeah, kind of like that. I’m tendering for a big project in Hamilton and thought I’d swing your way. I have some news actually.’ He put his back to the view and beamed out of his big blunt face. ‘She’s up the duff. Three months gone. We didn’t tell anyone until it was safe. Except her parents, of course.’

‘You’re kidding?’

‘Don’t look so surprised.’

‘It’s just that ... your jet-setting life, all those holidays, going out whenever you want. Money, geez, the money you go through. And your sex life, down the tube buddy.’

I realised too late my cynicism wasn’t appreciated. It wasn’t often you saw Huon with the wind gone from his sails, not since he was a gawky teenager. In the construction industry Huon had a reputation for being as tough as nails and good with a hammer.

I changed tack. ‘Hey mate, I was only jibing. Congratulations are definitely in order. You’ll be a great dad.’

He sniffed but decided to let it pass. ‘Thanks. I’m really pleased. Surprised myself. Seems like life has been good but somehow empty until now. Know what I mean?’ He moved around so we stood shoulder to shoulder watching the view. ‘I’m a bit old to be a dad. Better late than never, that’s what they say.’

‘Never too late.’

I went to give him my hand and realised it was half-arsed so I threw an arm around his shoulder. I got two thumps on the back in return, enough to knock the wind out of the whole town.

‘As long as the little bugger looks like his mother and not you,’ I said.

‘You can say that again.’

The buildings in the town were turning pink. Huon pointed to a large white two-storey surrounded by playing fields that demonstrated that money did indeed buy its unfair share of the water supply.

‘What’s that? Looks ritzy.’

‘McMurtrie College. Posh Catholic. That guy I told you about, Robertson, who disappeared. That’s where he went to school.’

‘Co-ed?’

‘I think it is. Now.’

‘All those girls in uniform. That brings back memories.’

‘In your dreams.’

‘I don’t suppose I’ll be getting many of those when the baby comes. You always said sleep deprivation was the worst thing about parenthood.’

I thrust my hands in my pockets. ‘Mmm.’

‘Been in contact with James lately?’ Huon asked.

‘No.’

‘We saw Eve last week. She’s now got a second partner in the practice. Seems exercise physiology is all the rage.’

‘She won’t feel the loss of the child support then. That’s the one good thing about being made redundant. It cuts your child support down. I’m waiting till James turns eighteen and then I won’t have to have anything to do with Eve or the Child Support Agency for the rest of my life. Those guys have a way of making you feel like a low-life child molester every time they ring.’

‘How often do you hear that?’

The town flared rose. A moment later the colour wilted and died. The streetlights flickered on.

Huon persisted. 'You should ring James, invite him down here.'

'What's there for a teenager to do in a place like this?'

'Meet girls. Eat pizza. Text. Play online games. What do they do anywhere?'

'There is that. I think it's about to rain. When's Maria due?'

'September. Might have to miss our one day in September. What we men have to sacrifice, eh?'

'Women. They don't know how easy they have it.'

Far below a semi was making its way along the main highway, speeding up as it left the town zone, heading west. The faint grind of its gears was carried on the wind. We headed for Huon's twin cab HiLux.

'Not a bad ride.'

'Work vehicle with all the tax incentives.'

'The joys of private enterprise.'

'That reminds me, the other reason I came. I've got us tickets for the game next Saturday. The Doggies. Mark Coric has taken a corporate box. He's taken over Strategic Metro which has a business consultancy arm.'

'Yeah, I know it.'

'And he's looking for someone to lead their business development team. He told me to bring you along so you can have an informal chat.'

'Wow. Thanks. I mean it.' Boy did I mean it.

'No guarantees, but at least it's a foot in the door.'

'Of course not.' Of course not, but it was hard not to get my hopes up. This could be my ticket out of town. 'When does he want someone?'

'ASAP.'

Better still.

We wound down the lookout road and through the northern side of town. The tourist trail didn't extend to this side of the highway. The houses were smaller, mainly wood and fibro, but the yards were big. Neat-as-a-pin places abutted yards of kids' bikes, old cars and skid-marked grass. The primary school quadrangle was spiced with berries from an ancient pepper tree.

On the highway three service stations jostled for the interstate trade. Peter's Independent was closed for the evening, a single floodlight its security for the night hours. The other two were major chains with lights flaring and twenty-four hour signs. A couple of semis and a caravan were drawn up at the first. As we waited a coach pulled up in the rival place across the road. Uni students, single parents with wailing children.

We crossed the highway into the leafier streets on the southern side. Jacarandas, the odd frangipani. Roses. Old stone villas with L-shaped verandahs. A small park with a bottle green rotunda set centre stage. Only the wind showed no discrimination. It pushed the trees and taunted the few walkers on the footpaths.

'There is one good thing about pregnancy,' I said.

'Nnn?'

I cupped two hands in front of my chest. 'Tits. From a B cup to a D overnight.'

'Maria's already doubled the rack.' Huon took his eyes off the road for a moment and shot me a lewd grin.

'Lucky boy,' I said. 'Same with breastfeeding. Food bags and fun bags all in one.'

'Breastfeeding. Makes a man hungry for sustenance.'

'There's the pub in the main street.'

'Lead on Macduff.'

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Sunday morning dawned fresh and clean, bristling. I didn't see any of it. It was one o'clock in the afternoon by the time I dragged my aching head and churning gut off the bed and staggered to the bathroom. A welcome piss and then the switch on the coffee machine. The house was quiet, too quiet. I checked the rooms to see if Huon had deposited himself somewhere. On the dining table was a note: 'Tried to wake you. Off to Hamilton and then back home to look after the little lady. See you Saturday.' Saturday. The match. Doggies versus Port Adelaide. And the business meeting. Hope in a bleak year of unemployment and underemployment.

The coffee machine ground and clunked. The smell was instantly gratifying – caffeine by inhalation. My lips stung at the initial, boiling sip but the satisfaction was worth the discomfort. It set my brain in gear and I realised why the house seemed to empty. No Spectre. I hadn't seen her since I'd arrived home last night. I cursed myself for a drunken careless dolt and headed out back to let her in. The sheoak was skittish and the chimes were singing, but the dog was nowhere to be seen. Her water and food bowls were gone. I whistled and called. No response. I'd been angry at the imposition of having the dog landed on me; I was angrier now to have her stolen away.

There was a kerfuffle at the fence and a familiar raw coughing sound. I headed to the place where I had once spied Janice's slipped feet. Spectre had her nose to the wood. She jiggled as I approached and set the fence juddering like a wave at the footy. I put my eye to the gap and she gave me an eyeful of saliva.

'Hey sweetheart. Did they take you away from me, eh?'

A sad canine eye squinted back at me.

'Bugger that. Here.'

I stood up and grabbed the closest paling, wrenched it from the top. It was looser than I expected but still stiff. I see-sawed and yanked until the nails lurched from the cross beams and the plank and I fell backwards onto the grass. Spectre was on me in a second, tongue to my face and tail going ten to the dozen. There was no reaction to our reunion from the other side of the fence. A few tea towels flapped on the line beside Spectre's dog blanket. The colours of the yard were as vivid as before – flowers, pots and the grass iridescent. The back door was shut and the kitchen blind lowered.

Spectre licked my hand and gave me that doggie I-love-you look. I shucked her head and decided that she and I would enjoy a family outing after a late breakfast of bacon and eggs. I wouldn't be leaving my neighbour a note.

After a shared plate, we headed west along the esplanade. Spectre skipped and sniffed as if this were the first day of the rest of her life. We passed a shed advertising sea kayak lessons and hire, one wing of its iron doors open. Two teenagers sat on the jetty with lines in the water and tinnies on their laps. A car park billeted a few cars, either empty or housing middle-aged sad sacks like me who'd opted for the fusty warmth of auto vinyl rather than the camaraderie of a coldie at the pub.

The kiosk owner looked out from her caravan and eyed me hopefully. I took pity on her and bought a packet of corn chips. She was a barrel on toothpick legs and was itching for a conversation. I murmured a few polite responses about the weather and tried to move on. I had half turned away when something she said caught my attention.

'I suppose you heard about Bob Robertson? Former mayor. Big man around here. Gone missing.'

That was hardly news.

'There've been developments. Just heard it from a friend.' My lack of response was the opportunity to upsell. 'How about a coffee and some nice hot chips? I've got chicken nuggets too.' The smell of salt, fat and potato was enticing. She didn't wait for me to agree.

The small metal table had had previous visitors – one who'd consumed something with sauce and the others winged scavengers who'd left white blotched calling cards. I sat back from its edge. Spectre was itching to taunt the seagulls who had landed in anticipation. I let her off the lead and hoped to god she had some road sense. She bounded over the bitumen and sent the birds to flight, their orange legs and beaks brilliant against the blue.

The woman plonked paper packets on the table and took a seat. There was a streak of what I took to be fish blood and guts across her white apron. A serrated knife, none too clean, hung from her hand. 'Eat up. As I was saying, Bob Robertson. Sure you haven't heard of him?'

I swallowed. 'I've met him.'

'Really?'

'At a couple of business things.' I thought of Jennifer and wondered how she was doing. Maybe I should call again.

'You'll have been one of the last people to see him.' A statement.

I bit into a hot chip to avoid comment. Crisp on the outside, fluffy in the middle. I wished the woman would put the damn knife down. I tried the coffee, another avoidance tactic. Unlike the chips, the coffee was shitful.

'They say they found a baby out there. Perfect, a little boy, wearing his jumpsuit and wrapped in his own little bunny rug.'

My coffee went flying and added to the mess on the table. 'Say that again.'

'A baby. You don't like the nuggets?'

'They look nice and golden ... er ...'

'Aretha. But you can call me Aretha.'

Gotta laugh. 'Aretha.' I bit into one of the nuggets. The centre was moist and white but the talk of babies had my gut churning. Sensing my distress, Spectre gave up hunting gulls to push a nose into my crotch. 'The baby. You were telling me about the baby.'

'I heard they found the poor baby when they were looking for Robertson.'

'So this was when?'

'I don't think it was today. Maybe a few days ago.'

The rumour was so horrendous I couldn't let it stand. 'That's not what happened. They weren't real babies they found. They were dolls. And they might not even be related to Bob Robertson.'

Aretha sat back in satisfaction. 'As I thought.'

All those years at PoIData and I'd just been outmanoeuvred by a woman in a beachside kiosk who made coffee from a jar.

'I knew that was all rot and nonsense. Just like poor Lindy Chamberlain. If the police don't give the public information these silly rumours get around.' Aretha winked. 'Here's a bit of advice. Keep a softball bat by your bed. That's the only insurance you'll get around here. Don't rely on the police for anything. In fact, if you go see them, take the bat with you. Specially that Sergeant Peacock, a nasty piece of work that one.'

That was the sort of advice you ignored from great aunts and baby boomer has-beens. 'You can't tell anyone what I just told you,' I said.

Aretha lifted my coffee cup and saw it was still full. 'What's wrong with the coffee?'

'Nothing' I said. Thought, 'Everything'.

'You're right. I need a good barista. You're from Melbourne, right?'

There was a click and grunt as a Commodore opened and a man stepped out. He was working hard not to look in our direction as he made his way to the public toilets on the other side of the car park. I may have been wrong about the nature of the parked men's social lives. Aretha waited to speak until the man had disappeared through the entrance.

'You've got a bit of Chinese heritage there? My best friend is from Guangzhou. Speak Chinese?' When I shook her head she went on. 'In towns like Angel Port you can be a big fish in a small pond and there are always a lot of sprats swimming around you trying to catch a bit of the glory. I've seen things would break your heart. Things that should be stopped. Other things you see you don't talk about.' For a moment her eyes strayed over the toilet block. A different man was exiting.

'Mmm.' Escape. Now. But watch the knife. She was still twirling it like some lethal weapon. 'It's been nice talking. Have to get back.'

'Colin reckons you're good people and I'd back his judgement any day.'

'Skink?' Perversely, I felt my blood boil. I wasn't good people. I wasn't bad people either. What right did Skink have to go around talking about me as if I were some exhibit of morality or anything else for that matter? I was just people.

She had her mouth open to answer when I heard my name called. Sara without an aitch was strutting in our direction, trailed by three small children, the youngest a snotty toddler gripping her hand. Spectre greeted them with a wag and the children gathered around her like she was royalty. Aretha disappeared into the kiosk. I could see her busy at the fryer.

Sara beamed and pointed to the tallest kid. 'These are my three. Kaylah, she's ten.'

'Kylie?' I asked.

'No, Kaylah,' the girl piped up. 'K A Y L A H. Mum put a haich on the end because she said Nanna didn't give her nothing so she wanted to give me one.'

'And these are Bindie and Jarod. He's the baby. Aren't you, sweetheart?' She gave Jarod a tickle under the chin and turned an expectant eye my way.

'Lovely kids. You're very lucky.'

'Ain't I? Couldn't ask for better kids. And Kaylah, don't know what I'd do without her.'

The oldest girl peered at me with grey eyes mixing both pride and suspicion. 'Nice warm coat you've got there, Kaylah. I like the fur around the collar.'

'It's fake fur because you can't hurt the animals,' she replied.

'Very true.'

All three children, I saw, were rugged up in thick jackets and warm boots. Only Sara looked under-dressed for the weather.

'Nice seeing you, Sara. Better be getting on.'

'I was getting chips for tea.'

'The nuggets are good,' I said.

Sara dropped her voice. 'A bit pricey though. We get them for special occasions.'

'Here,' I pushed the carton at her, 'have these.'

She bit her lip. Behind her Kaylah's eyes lit up.

'Thanks, if it's okay.'

'Sure. Bye Kaylah, nice to meet you and your siblings.'

'Siblings?' the older girl asked. She lifted her left toe and ran it down her right thigh. Once, twice.

'Brothers and sisters.'

'That's a good word. Sib-lings. Siblings. I can use that for school.' She smiled at me, eyes bluer.

'You certainly can.'

I called for Spectre to follow and strode in the direction of home, ashamed to admit that I kept up a pace that the little ones couldn't match. Where the road bent I looked back. Aretha was handing Sara a large parcel wrapped in butcher's paper. Sara

ANGEL PORT

reached into her handbag but Aretha waved her hand away then leant in and gave the young mother a kiss on the cheek.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Technically I didn't need to make a second visit to Victoria Bartholomew. I had sent her the prospectus by email and drafted a follow-up letter to address further questions she had. But, as I explained to Skink and Jason as I escaped the office, there is nothing like personal contact. And with Robertson permanently or temporarily lost, Bartholomew was top of my list.

Forty-five minutes later I was knocking on her door. There was no answer. I sat in my car for ten minutes and watched the harbour. Today the world was steel blue – a clear sky reflected in a flat ocean. Robertson's disappearance had been relegated to the second story on the local radio news. Police continued to follow leads and were following up with 'persons of interest'. I was relieved I wasn't one of them.

Victoria Bartholomew was clearly out for the day. I slipped the hard copy of the letter under her door and pondered what to do. If I drove back to the office immediately I would arrive late afternoon. Alternatively I could see if her son Tony would honour his offer of a massage. I justified it by telling myself that he, too, was a Bartholomew.

Tony's business was one building off the main street in a ground-floor shopfront. The building had long since passed its heyday of wool-and-wheat grandeur. The interior of the massage suite was everything that grey paint and white shutters could make it. Not a soothing atmosphere, merely modern and devoid of distractions. A bell on the door tinkled as I entered. I heard a man's voice murmur and the rustle of a curtain. Tony exited one of the two cubicles, towel in hand, and walked my way, the smell of musk oil rich on his skin. He smiled when he saw me.

'Didn't think I'd see you so soon, but I'm glad you're here. In for that massage?'

'If you're free.'

'I will be in fifteen. Take a seat. If you're up for it we can go for a drink after that. Jeremy is in OSHC and I don't need to pick him up until six.'

Twenty minutes later I found myself on a concrete-coloured towel on one of the massage tables. The three greatest irritants when having a massage are fake tribal music, a chattering masseuse and weak hands. Oh yeah, and there was that woman I'd had once who kept sniffing and running her hand across her nose before returning it to my back. Tony avoided all the pitfalls. I carried my tension in my neck and shoulders

and he dug into the pressure points with an unerring ability to find the tightest points. I gasped when he hit a spot on my left shoulder.

‘Not too hard?’ he asked.

‘No-o.’

I hung onto the table and pretended courage as he found every tense muscle. When the pain had been replaced by a pleasant ache, he rolled his hands up and down my skin and gave me a quick tap. ‘There you go. There’s a lot of tension there. What are they doing to you in Angel Port? I thought it was the seachange capital of the west coast.’

‘Isn’t boredom a stressor?’ I asked.

‘Sounds like you can do with that drink. Put on your shirt while I lock up.’

Tony’s definition of a drink was a decaf soy latte in a bar overlooking the dock. I ordered the usual double shot and added wedges to share. We lobbed down in armchairs next to a retro-hip coffee table too low to be practical. Tony was rubbing his hands. I noticed how large they were and how broad his shoulders. The man was made to be a ruckman.

‘Is it hard on your hands?’ I asked.

‘Not too bad if you look after them, but the optimal is to keep the massages to four hours a day.’

‘How did you get into it?’

From the look on his face I knew it was a question he’d fielded a hundred times before. ‘I was interested in physiotherapy but I didn’t get the marks at school. I went travelling and did a massage crawl around the world. I came back and trained.’

‘Happy with the choice?’

‘Yeah. Thanks Sam.’ He smiled at the waiter as she lowered the coffees to the table. She was cute. Small, brunette, young. She bloomed pretty pink. Tony was obviously a favourite.

‘I’ll bring the wedges right over.’ She gave me an appraising look and dismissed me. Too old, too straight-down-the-line.

Tony resumed. 'I feel I help people. And it works perfectly around taking care of Jeremy.'

'And Sarah?'

'Sarah? Thanks again Sam.'

Sam shuffled the cups to make room for the wedges. The dishes of sour cream and sweet chilli sauce could have fed an army. 'No worries Tony. Need anything else, just call.' She moved to the bar, an extra swing to her rear. A nice rear at that. Tony didn't seem to notice.

'What does Sarah do?' I asked.

'She's a doctor. A GP.'

I sipped my coffee. Seven out of ten. 'That usually gives you the flexibility for raising a family.' I realised that was the sort of comment my mother made to her friends.

'It could be.'

'Eat up. The food will get cold.' Another motherism, the sort that covers difficult emotional moments. Out on the docks a crane was loading a container onto a rusting ship with a Singaporean registration. The crane operator was a black dot in the cabin.

'Sarah hasn't come back home.'

'Oh?'

Tony started to say something, stopped, started again. 'She went missing at the same time as Bob Robertson. Neither of them has turned up.'

I stopped chewing. 'You're not suggesting ...?'

'I don't know what I'm suggesting.'

'Have you spoken to the police?'

Tony gave me a blue-eyed stare. With his shaggy blond hair he was the classic Diver Dan, only bigger. No wonder Sam had the hots for him. 'What am I going to tell them? That I think my wife has run off with someone old enough to be her father? There's absolutely no evidence that's the case.'

His vulnerability is what did it. Before I knew it I found myself telling him about my encounters with Jennifer Robertson and the search of Bryan Swamp, omitting nothing, not even the dolls. Funny how time dulls your commitment to confidentiality.

Tony whistled. 'Wow. I don't know what to think now. The boot thing was on the news but I hadn't heard anything about the dolls.'

'That bit's not to be shared.'

'Sure. There's nothing that suggests Sarah was involved?'

'Correct.' I dunked a wedge into the sour cream. 'And to be fair, it's not clear that the dolls have anything to do with Robertson either.'

The door opened and Tony raised a hand to two women in matching shirts with 'Freddies' embroidered above the left breast. End of work drinks. Tony waited until they'd passed before speaking again.

'Nathan, it's not conclusive that she isn't involved with Robertson. They were a bit of a mutual admiration society. And the timing ...'

'Where did she say she was going?'

'She said a medical conference in Singapore.'

Not on the rust bucket out the window, I guessed.

Tony continued. 'I googled. There was a conference but it finished Friday. She doesn't answer when I ring.'

'I don't want to worry you, Tony, but you should contact Foreign Affairs just in case. If she is travelling internationally anything could have happened to her.'

'That's if she is in Singapore or ever was.'

'The embassy's consular people will chase it up.'

Tony dunked the last of the wedges into the chilli sauce and took a bite. He swallowed. 'I can't do that.'

'Of course you can. I can get the number for you.' I started a search on my phone.

'Put the phone down, Nathan. Please.'

I complied. 'So what's going on?'

'I don't mind for me. It's a relief. It's Jeremy. What do I say to him? That his mother went away and didn't even say good-bye? That she won't even take phone calls to speak to him? You can't say that to an eleven-year-old kid.'

'I'm sorry, Tony, I don't understand. Are you saying that Sarah's left you?'

'That's the long and the short of it. She's threatened to for a long time. She grew up in Angel Port and couldn't wait to get away. She hates Harbourside, thinks it's boganville. She thinks she's better than all of us. Me I get, but mum? Look what she's achieved.'

'So how do you know she's really left if she isn't answering your calls?'

'Her wedding ring is on the bedside table.'

People who vow they will love you forever are certifiably insane. Only mothers can claim that with any degree of certainty, and even then there are those who buck the stereotype. Think Sarah with an aitch. The maddest of all are those lovers who write the words in ink on their skin. Buy shares in tattoo removalist technology now to take advantage of every Johnno who no longer wants 'Kylie forever' displayed across his butt. And stick to engraved jewellery. It can be melted down and pawned off for a wad of cold, hard, reliable cash.

In everything that had happened I had forgotten Joan Rich's locket and was surprised to find it when I cleared my jacket pockets on the way to the drycleaner. I re-read the inscription and decided that, in the Riches' case, the 'forever' might be more than youthful wishful thinking. In the picture they looked to be in their twenties. They were now getting on to retirement age which put their 'forever', in my estimation, at around four decades or more.

The drycleaner told me where the Riches lived. An esplanade home, of course, and no more than two minutes' walk from my place. It was two storeys of white stucco with a view to die for from the first-floor balcony, very much a doctor's property, as was Joan Rich. She opened the door wearing a porridge-coloured wool dress with long sleeves and a high collar tied in a bow at her neck. Warm for the day, but elegant and spotless. Her hair fell above her collar in beige waves.

'Ye-es?'

I put out a hand. 'Nathan Newland. From the university. I was ...'

'Oh, yes. I think I saw you at the Robertsons' party. This isn't about Robert, is it?'

'No, no,' I assured her.

'For a moment there I thought you might be going to tell me they'd found him dead or worse.'

What could be worse than death, I almost asked. Paraplegia? Brain damage? And why would I, a complete stranger, come to give her tragic news? As my grandmother used to say, there's nothing so strange as folk.

'No, not at all. It's actually a little bit of good news.' I opened my hand and let the necklace dangle from my hand. It glowed pale rose in the shadow of the verandah.

Her reaction wasn't what I expected. Her face turned the colour of her dress and her hand flew to her throat. When she didn't take the locket I leaned forward and placed it in her free hand. She acted as if stung and scrunched it into a tiny ball in her fist.

'Joan, who is it?'

The good doctor appeared behind her. He raised an enquiring eyebrow above his wife's head. I saw something in her face. Nerves, I thought. Pleading. She gave me a gentle shake of the head. I smiled at her husband.

'Good to see you, Dr Rich.'

He was wary. 'Is this about ... the lake?'

'No. I've heard nothing. You?'

'I'm afraid not. So you're here because?'

I smiled at Joan. 'Just being neighbourly. Out walking and thought I might drop around to say hello.'

Joan jumped on the lie. 'Oh, how kind. Very nice of you. Perhaps you would like to come in for a cup of tea?'

Rich's hand tightened on his wife's shoulder. 'A nice idea Joan, but I think you've forgotten that we're just about to head off for Ava's netball presentations.'

'Yes, of course.' Joan smiled an apology. 'Ava is our granddaughter. She's nine going on nineteen. She lives in Ballarat with her mother. It's a bit of a drive. Another time?'

I nodded.

'How is the cake doing?' asked Leslie of his wife.

Joan giggled. 'I clean forgot. Lemon cake, Ava's favourite. Nathan, if you'll excuse me.'

She went to shake my hand but remembered too late that the locket was still hidden there. Her hand wavered. I grasped it in my own two hands and leant forward to

plant a kiss on her skin. It tasted of Pear's soap. Leslie waited until his wife could no longer be heard before he pulled the front door closed behind us. The ever-present wind caught at the collar of his shirt.

'She's very kind woman, Joan, but a little absent-minded. Sometimes I think she'd lose her own head if it weren't screwed on. Women, eh?' Rich laughed. I laughed. A ginger tabby dived at a pigeon on the front lawn.

Rich put a hand to my elbow and guided me down the driveway towards the street. 'It's rather unusual for Joan to invite people in. She suffers from mild agoraphobia. Nothing to worry about if I keep a careful eye on her.'

I hesitated, perhaps for too long. 'I think she took pity on me, a stranger in a new town.' I watched for Rich's reaction. He was sizing me up like a difficult hole on the green. Something must have convinced him that I was an easy putt. He fished his wallet from his pocket and handed me a business card.

'It's always lovely to welcome a new man into our circle, keeps us all fresh. In a town the size of Angel Port we can get somewhat insular. Joan and I are around most of next weekend. Just ring my secretary and she'll make a time. Some of these arrangements are a bit much for Joan. She doesn't always remember if she's Arthur or Martha. I can't imagine how Jean Robertson is doing with all this news about Robert. I know that Joan simply wouldn't cope if I disappeared.'

'It must be very hard.'

'Indeed. Indeed.'

I thanked Rich for the invitation and retreated along the esplanade. He watched until I was safely around the corner.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Against my better judgment I mentioned my encounter with the Riches to Skink the next day. It was the sort of entanglement I didn't want to get involved in, yet Joan's clenched fist and the tremor in her voice nagged at me. It was near the end of a long, unsatisfying day at work. I continued to feel exposed, waiting to be found out as the fraud I was. The NHMRC application seemed to be beyond my abilities.

I'd shared my failure with no-one but the tatty grey divider that separated Skink and myself. The divider stared at me, poked a long accusatory thread in my direction. A sudden, bitter anger rose up and I lunged and grabbed the thread pincer-like between thumb and forefinger. The divider tilted forward and rammed my desk into my stomach.

'Oi! You trying to ruin the furniture?' Skink popped his head over the screen.

I released the thread like a guilty school kid. There was nothing I could say that didn't make me sound like the pathetic prick I was. I pushed the table back and righted the screen.

'This here divider is state of the art,' Skink said, running a caressing hand along its top edge. 'But for you, only five dollars from roadside rubbish.' I forced a laugh but he wasn't fooled. He rose and slipped his bum onto my desk. 'What's up pardner?'

I shook my head.

'I know, Nathan, I do a lousy American accent.'

Today Skink's get-up was a checked puce shirt topped with a silk scarf in too many colours to name. He was like a humorous creature, the type we all ooh and ah over but don't take seriously. A meerkat standing erect with pop eyes or a fat warthog speeding away with an aerial tail. His hand went to my shoulder. Warm, soft.

'Nathan, you okay?'

I shook my head again to properly clear my head and Skink mistook the movement.

'So the problem?'

'No, no. I mean, yes, just a vacant moment.'

Colin didn't seem satisfied but he relented. 'I get enough of that with the academics around here. I'm relying on you to stay focused. Us non-professorial types got to stick together.'

I rolled my eyes in a complicit gesture against all things academic and tried a change of subject.

‘When’s the team meeting?’

‘Didn’t you hear? It’s been cancelled. The almighty director David has more important folk to fry.’ Skink considered for a minute. ‘Maybe you’re still not on the email list. I’ll sort that today.’

‘Thanks. Where is everyone?’

‘The ways of tenured beings, don’t ask me. Truth is, I’ve been hearing a lot of grunting and groaning. Assuming that you haven’t indulged in illicit pleasures here at your desk, I’m guessing the application isn’t going so well?’

The game was up. I chose my least preferred option and told the truth.

‘Until a few weeks ago I had never heard of the NHMRC and I had never heard the term chief investigator. I’ve written dozens of tender applications for government projects but I’ve never filled in one of these research applications before. You need a PhD just to read the background information and even then it’s not written in English. I’ve started making a list of the boxes we have to tick and all the information we need and it’s almost as long as the guidelines and I can’t get my head around how I am going to remember everything. When I upload material it never seems to fit into the template. To be honest with you, I took this job because I had to. I’m good at interviews and I bluffed my way through. I’m up the proverbial without a paddle.’

Skink hopped off the table and nudged me off my chair. ‘I thought as much. But I’ve got you covered.’

I felt relief mingled with exposure.

‘You’re bright, Nathan. You’ve got lots of experience. You’ll be up to speed in no time.’ He moved the mouse and clicked.

‘What are you doing?’ I asked.

‘Three things. First, we’ll set up a Gantt chart to map what has to be done in what period and with what deadlines. You used one of them before?’

‘Sure. People at PolData set them up and I ignored them.’

‘They’re like kids building blocks but some people like to pretend they’re real complicated.’ There was a template on the screen with vertical and horizontal lines. ‘We’ll fill in the headings and then block in the times. What are your favourite colours?’

'Blue, I guess.'

'That all?'

'There needs to be more?'

'Okay, we'll use my favourite colour as well.' His scarf suggested he wasn't fussy. 'Orange next. Now, second,' Skink clicked again, 'we'll open an Excel data file and give each major task its own sheet. First task?'

'Understand the NHMRC guidelines.'

'Okay, let's call the first sheet "Pre-application". You can name the others as you go.'

'Is the data file easy to use?'

'Simple as Simon, but just ask. And now for number three ... call in a friend. I'll email a mate of mine who is a whiz at these applications and we'll get some inside help. All you'll need is a booklet of movie vouchers and he's yours for the picking.'

'He's here in Angel Port?'

'No, Madrid.' Skink saw my face. 'Madrid, it's a one-pub town eighty kilometres inland. I spent a few years there.'

'Right.'

'Right,' Skink said, standing up. 'First have a try at adding to the Gantt chart. Are you okay? You don't look so good.'

'I had a pretty interesting – bad – experience yesterday.'

For the second time that day I spilled the truth. I told Skink about Joan Rich and the locket and Dr Leslie. He was a good listener. His face became more serious as I talked.

'I have a bad feeling about this.'

'How?'

'Nathan, there's someone I want you to meet.'

Skink led me to a green hatchback, talking on his mobile as we went. He rang off.

'All sorted. She's going to meet us there.'

'Who?'

'A friend.'

He drove us out of town, over the Clancy and its trickle of water, taking the main highway west and past the town limit sign where I'd made my u-turn on my first day. Mixed weather had dogged us all week. Today snoozed like a bitsa in the sun.

We passed through low coastal scrub, scribbles of grey wood and olive foliage, and took a road inland into state forests of straight eucalypts. We kept to the sealed road for thirty kilometres before Skink indicated left and took a gravel road. When we broke out of the trees we were above a saucer-shaped valley of pasture land. A creek captured the sunlight at the bottom, wending through a hamlet of about a dozen buildings. Skink pulled up in the car park of a stone church. The sign said 'Papkoorook Uniting Church'.

We were greeted by the caw of a crow and the smell of water.

Skink cut the engine. 'She should be here soon. She was just finishing her shift.'

'Does she live here?'

'No.'

A vee-dub arrived on our heels. I was surprised to see it was the pink-haired waitress from Cherub. Half a degree of separation, I supposed. She held a bunch of violets close to her chest. She did a double take when she saw me. The message was clear: any friend of Robertson's is an enemy of mine. She pointed at me. 'I didn't know it was him!'

Skink put up a hand. 'It's okay Mary-Jane. Nathan is good folk.'

That again. I bristled. I probably shouldn't have. Over the years I'd been called a lot of things. Briony had sniffed a few (mainly within the selfish, chauvinist genre), then bitten them back knowing that name-calling was taboo in domestic arguments. My ex-wife Eve had thought them but never said them. Read my mind. My grade-five teacher Ms Taylor had let fly the 'filthy little bugga' combo once – which had been fair enough. She'd overheard me telling some classmates that I'd seen the boobs of Mrs Chandler next door and that they were like water-filled balloons only squishier. Lucky I hadn't said I'd sneaked into Mrs Chandler's yard and peeped through her window to get a look. More than once. Over a long period.

I once had a boss who'd written in my performance appraisal that I lacked the strategic and ethical vision expected in a not-for-profit organisation. The guy, Jeff –

skinny face, long neck, and a penchant for V-necked jumpers over T-shirts – had tried to be nice about it. ‘It’s not that you can’t do the work Nathan, not at all. You’re certainly very skilled. It’s just that Northern Home Placement Services needs people who are ... well ... moral. Not,’ he’d added hastily, his face vermillion, ‘that you’re immoral. Or even amoral. Just ... er ... differently motivated.’ I had tried a half-hearted attempt at self-defence. ‘I believe in everything you do here. Battered wives do need homes. Affordable housing is vital for people to get back on their feet, to find jobs and keep their families together.’ Jeff, a finger running around the neck of his T-shirt, had the grace to say nothing about my use of the word ‘you’ rather than ‘we’. Instead he said, ‘I know you do Nathan. I just wonder about how much it really matters to you.’ That should have hurt, but it didn’t. I had experienced unconscionable satisfaction when two months later I handed in my resignation and told them I was going to the private sector for twice the pay and – a thought I kept to myself – half the moral obligations.

Mary-Jane thawed a little.

‘Are you ready?’ Skink asked her.

She led the way to the rear of the church, under an oak tree heavy with dying leaves and past a graveyard of headstones with inscriptions lost to history. At the very back, next to the creek that wove its way through the valley, was a grass circle ringed with stones. The stones looked to be river rocks, perfectly smooth and the size of babies. Or baby dolls. The thought stopped me in my tracks.

‘Nathan?’ said Skink.

I pushed the feeling away. ‘Coming.’

I caught up with him but he held me back as Mary-Jane entered the ring. She removed a wilted bouquet from one of the stones and replaced it with the fresh violets. I saw her put her hand on the stone and whisper a few words. She was solemn and I half expected her to cry but when she stood she was clear-eyed.

When she finished, Skink stepped into the circle to lay a comforting hand on her arm and gestured for me to join them. I took two paces in and remained standing, unsure of the etiquette required when invited into a druidic ring alongside a coven of graves. Another crow cawed, or maybe it was the same one. The water in the nearby creek tugged at the soil in the banks and carried it away. Mary-Jane took her time, lost to us, and finally sat herself on the grass, a hand on the stone where she’d laid the violets. Skink followed suit. I hesitated. I had my light grey work suit on and the grass was damp and speckled with dirt.

'You can sit on one of the stones if you like,' said Mary-Jane. 'They can feel the warmth and the intimacy.'

My weird radar switched on.

I sat on a stone too narrow for comfort. The explanation of why I was here was a long time coming. Mary-Jane had her eyes fixed on the field across the creek where a herd of Belted Galloways grazed. She rubbed her stone and smiled.

'Skink wanted me to show you these,' she said, waving her hand to indicate the ring. 'These are Bob Robertson's babies, or would be if they'd been born.'

The weird radar went from yellow to orange. 'Could you repeat that?'

'Each rock is one of the children we lost.'

I leapt up, horrified. 'I'm sitting on a baby?'

Mary-Jane waved me back down. 'Not literally, though we like to think their spirits are here.'

I sat back down but the stone was even less comfortable than before.

'Perhaps if I explain it this way, Nathan. This is a memorial to the children that Bob Robertson fathered but made sure were never born.'

'I don't get it.' My radar escalated to dark, pulsating red.

Mary-Jane and Skink exchanged looks.

'It might be good if you told your own story, Mary-Jane, if you're up to it,' said Skink.

Her tale was tawdry but hardly unique. Robertson had first made overtures to Mary-Jane when she was just fifteen. She didn't have a father or a brother and thought he was being fatherly. He bought her small gifts, cosmetic purses, china dogs, hair combs, which she'd put in pride of place on her dressing table. When her mother asked her who they were from she lied and told her it was friends. She sensed her mother wouldn't approve. Then, at age eighteen, the magic age of consent, everything changed. Robertson got a whole lot less fatherly. His presents were much more expensive – perfume and scanty underwear. He'd arrange to meet her in private to present her with the latest gifts. At first he touched her on the arm and then things progressed. He told her she was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen, that they were meant to be together.

'We had sex,' said Mary-Jane. 'The first time I was nineteen. He was patient, I'll give him that. Our affair went on for about a year until I fell pregnant. That was the end of everything.'

'You consented?' I asked.

'Sure. He was older, charming, rich. I had never felt so special.'

'How did you meet him?'

'Through McMurtrie College. We were too poor to go there but they had these interschool dos and Robertson was always there. He was something big at McMurtrie?' She raised an eyebrow at Skink.

'Chair of the board for a while. He's a big benefactor as well. His company paid for the indoor pool.'

'The pregnancy?' I prompted.

Mary-Jane continued. 'Bobby, that's what he asked me to call him, had two rules. No telling and no contraception.'

'What happened?'

Mary-Jane blinked and looked away, but not before I saw the tears. 'He told me to get rid of the baby. I said I wouldn't. It was a huge argument. Eventually he said if I was going to have the baby, his baby, it was going to have the best of care. He arranged for me to see a doctor. Everything seemed to be going well until my third visit when I was told there might be something wrong with the baby and they'd have to do tests. I agreed. When I woke up my baby was gone.'

'Gone?'

'They'd taken it away from me. Terminated it. I don't believe there was anything wrong and I never will.'

I was incredulous. 'They can't do that without your permission.'

'I said that and they showed me the consent form I'd signed. It was there in black and white. The doctor had asked me to sign it before I went under. I thought it was just for the scan. I'll never forgive myself.'

'You were young, Mary-Jane. Naïve. It's not your fault,' said Skink.

A crow, again, a solitary sound. 'Was it a boy or a girl?' I asked.

'I don't know. They never told me.'

That small detail was the most disquieting. The sun had grown warmer and I removed my jacket. The stone where the violets rested was a memorial to her child. It didn't explain the others in the ring and I said as much.

Skink answered. 'Other women, other babies.'

For the first time I noticed that three other stones were adorned – one with stars painted in glitter, a second with everlastings, the sort of flowers my aunts bought at fetes, and a third with roses now brown and powdery. 'The other mothers, they come here too?'

'Some of them,' said Mary-Jane. 'Some were happy to have the stones but not visit. Jenna, one of the girls – I went to primary school with her – committed suicide. Another ODeD. Abi – you remember Abi, Skink? – she's been in and out of abusive relationships. I blame Bobby for all of it.'

Skink saw my scepticism. 'I know it's hard to believe, Nathan. I wouldn't have brought you here if it wasn't all true. If you want, I can introduce you to another one of the women.'

I put up a hand to ward him off. 'Did all the girls meet Robertson through McMurtrie?'

'Not all, but it was perfect grooming territory.'

A shadow fell. Cottontail clouds were moving in from the south. I stood as if to meet them.

'Mary-Jane, Skink, I appreciate you trusting me, I really do. And Mary-Jane I am sorry about your baby. I just don't understand why you told me all this.'

Skink rose and put out a hand to the young woman.

'Because it's still happening,' Mary-Jane said.

Except for one thing – Robertson was nowhere to be found. I had an idea.

'Is that why Robertson has disappeared, do you think? Were the police on to him or did he pick a girl too young?' The latter would certainly get him into jail, if it could be proved.

Mary-Jane sniffed. 'The police? The courts? Been there, done that. Got the expected outcome. What planet have you been on?'

Planet sane. Planet safe.

My breathing was shallow. My feet itched to be away. I steadied myself and asked Mary-Jane the obvious question. 'Why not leave Angel Port?'

'It's my town too.'

'Fair enough.' I turned to Skink. 'I'll meet you at the car.'

I made my way to the front of the church. Across the road a tractor gripped the rubble and stubble of the hillside. Watching its slow progress I realised I hadn't counted the stones in the ring. I'd bet on my life there'd been around a dozen.

Briony would have launched into one of her raves about synchronicity. My ex-wife Eve, to her credit, had no time for such new-age tripe. Her explanation was probably closer to the real one – that coincidences happen and that the human mind likes to make connections. The drive back from Papkoorook was long and strained. A K before we reached the main highway Skink swerved suddenly. A roo lay freshly dead on the road, its blood bright in the sunshine.

'Do you think we should stop? There may be joey in her pouch,' I said. Even a city boy has heard of joeys rescued from roadkill.

'Not in that one. It's a buck.'

'How do you know that?'

'The size of him. He's bloody massive.'

The incident didn't reduce the foreboding I felt. If anything, the sight of the poor innocent creature brought on a headache which started at the base of my neck and burned its way to my temple. I wound down the window and closed my eyes. The smell of salt told me we were nearing home; the stop-start of the car told me we were in the town itself. I kept my eyes closed for the last corners and only opened them as Skink drew the car to a gentle stop at the kerb of one The Parade. I found my way onto the footpath, sore at the flat glare bouncing off the suburban surfaces. Skink raised a hand, seeking some reassurance that I refused to give him, and he was gone.

The next thing: Huon's phone call. It wasn't the Huon I was used to. He sounded shell-shocked.

'Mate, some bad news. Maria started bleeding and she's gone to the hospital. I'm heading there now,' he said.

'You think she might lose the baby?'

His voice caught. 'We don't know. I don't think I could bear it if she does. She's wanted a child for so long.'

'And you?'

He paused. 'It wouldn't be good.'

'No, mate, it wouldn't be good.' I couldn't help myself. 'The footy's off then?'

'Yeah, sorry, I rang Coric. He offered another weekend. He'll hold the job until he meets you.'

Relief and guilt in equal measure. I let Huon talk himself out while I opened the side gate and whistled for Spectre to join me through the gap in the fence. She came with her raw cough and a wag of her tail and tracked me as I looped around the yard and listened to the gory details of Maria's medical problems.

'Not sure you don't have it right,' he said at last. 'Being alone is a lot less painful. Unless you've met someone?'

The name Jennifer slipped through my lips before I could stop it. I don't know who was more surprised, me or him.

'Jennifer?'

'Daughter of the local bigwig.'

'Good one. Still the business development manager to the core.'

'It's not like that.'

'Really? The local doll just happens to be Mr Big Wig's little girl. Convenient double value.' Same old banter, different tone. 'Don't tell me you've actually got it bad?'

'Don't be ridiculous. I've only just met her. And anyway, she's not daddy's little girl. The man spent half the time putting her down. She's smart, funny, that's all. Good company.'

'Ooh!'

I didn't mention that Bob Robertson had eyed me as a potential suitor and future son-in-law and Huon didn't say what I knew he was thinking: 'Beware being the knight in shining armour.' That was part of his theory about Briony. Of course I'd disagreed with him on that. My relationship with her had been more complicated than that, with more need on my part than I let on, including to myself. It was only after the door had closed

on her latest rainbow outfit that I realised just how needy. The house seemed empty before she'd hit the footpath.

I reverted to the main topic. 'The important thing is that Maria is okay. And the baby.'

'Yeah, mate. Yeah.'

When Huon rang off I knew what I had to do. I wouldn't call it synchronicity and not a revelation either. More like a good solid nudge. James answered after the third ring.

'Yo dad!' Just like I called him every day.

'Yo son. What you doing?'

'Homework.'

'Really?'

'Nah.'

It was hard to know what to say next because I didn't call him every day, or even every week. I didn't even know the name of his friends and whether the soccer season had started again.

'Your mum home?' I asked.

He cooled. 'No. Is that why you rang?'

'No, no. It was just a question. Look, you know I've moved out of Melbourne for a bit?' There was a grunt. 'I thought you might like to come and stay with me for a bit. One weekend or in the holidays. They're coming up soon, aren't they?'

I couldn't read the silence on the other end and my heart sank. I was sure he was about to say 'no thanks' and knew it was exactly what I deserved.

'That'd be okay,' he said. Syllables long and drawn out.

'Okay. Okay then. That's good. I have a mate with a boat and we could go fishing. And there's surfing just around the coast.'

'Yeah, cool.'

'I'll text you my address and everything and we'll talk about when.'

'Sure. Look dad, I've got a call coming in. Can I call you back?'

'No worries. Whenever it suits.'

ANGEL PORT

Spectre and I had come to rest on the old wooden bench by the sheoak, her head stretched across my lap. I had forgotten to mention the dog. All boys loved dogs, right? I'd tell James about her next time I rang.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The police came for me at work. They didn't call it an arrest.

Skink rose from behind the divider and planted himself on the edge of my desk, arms and ankles crossed. He gave Sergeant van Wiessen the sort of look Gough Whitlam had saved for lesser mortals. Jason stayed seated, pretending nonchalance, but his eyes bulged and he had a sudden urge to fiddle with the crotch of his trousers. Nothing unusual there at least.

Van Wiessen took in the cramped room. 'Mr Newland, I wonder if there is there somewhere we can talk privately?'

Diesso stepped out from behind him and peered at my computer. He grunted at the Gantt chart on the screen to suggest he knew exactly what I was up to. If he did he could have explained it to me.

'Mr Newland?' van Wiessen repeated.

'Not that I know of.'

'Perhaps then if you'll accompany us to the station.'

There was no perhaps or if about it.

The police station was one of Angel Port's non-award-winning buildings. Pebbled concrete slabs, circa the 1960s, covered the exterior walls. The interior walls were painted in a pale blue that sucked in the light and refused to spit it out again. Van Wiessen and Diesso escorted me to a small room with a high exterior window and indicated I should sit on one side of a grey laminex table. They squeezed themselves onto metal chairs across from me. A camera was set high up in one corner of the room.

'Do I need my lawyer?' I asked. I'd seen the line on CSI.

They didn't appreciate the joke. 'Only the guilty need lawyers, Mr Newland.'

'And what am I?'

'A person of interest.'

'Finally going up in the world.' I got a sour look and decided to quit the jokes. 'Are you recording this?'

'No. Detective Senior Constable Diesso will take notes.'

Van Wiessen drew two photos from a satchel and spread them out before me.

'Is this your car?' he asked.

Both showed images of a Renault the same dark blue and model as mine. The registration was Victorian but the number wasn't mine. Relief flooded through me.

'No, it's not my registration. Basic police work will tell you that.'

Van Wiessen raised an eyebrow. 'The number on the plate doesn't exist. It's fake.'

'I hope you're not suggesting I would be driving around with false number plates. If you check my record you'll find the worst I've ever done in my entire life is two speeding tickets.'

Dieso chipped in. 'We have checked your record. It was three speeding tickets to be accurate.'

'Where were you on Saturday a week and a half ago?' asked van Wiessen.

'I was at home, as far as I can recall. Yeah, at home.'

The coppers exchanged a look, grinned at each other.

'All day?'

'I might have gone for a walk, hit the pub for a meal.'

'How did you get to there?'

'Where?'

'The pub?'

'I walked. That's right! My car was in for repairs, at Deveson's. I didn't get it back until the Monday. You can ask them.'

'And that night?'

That was easy. 'I was home. Alone. Look, I won't be answering more questions if you don't tell me what this is about.' I rose. Van Wiessen leaned across and put a meaty paw on my shoulder.

'This car was seen in Harbourside in the early hours of the morning the night Mr Bob Robertson went missing.'

'And this is the only Renault in Victoria?'

'We have a couple of other photos you might be interested in.'

Van Wiessen pulled out four more photos, grainy, taken at night. Each was of my house at one The Parade. A van and a ute were parked in the driveway, no logos but clearly trades vehicles.

‘Can you explain these?’ asked van Wiessen. ‘That was Monday week ago.’

I shook my head. ‘I was home. No, wait, that was the night I was with you out in the Grampians looking for Bob Robertson.’

‘Yeah, and you left.’

‘Late. It’s an hour and a half at least from there and I stopped at some roadhouse in Hamilton on the way through. I didn’t get back until the wee hours. I’m sure you can check.’

Diesso smiled at me. It wasn’t a pleasant experience. ‘We have. We know where you were, but we would like to know why these vehicles were at your house at ten that night.’

‘What vehicles?’ It was a stupid thing to say. I’d seen the pictures. ‘Look, I have no idea about any vehicles at my house in my absence. When I got home they weren’t there.’

Van Wiessen took over. ‘First a car like yours is found in the vicinity of Mr Robertson’s disappearance. Then your house gets a secret delivery in the middle of the night. It leads to certain questions. I assume you have no objection to us searching both your car and your house?’

I stood again. This time no-one stopped me. ‘Yes I do. You need due cause and a warrant.’

Van Wiessen smirked and tilted his head at Diesso. His junior slapped a piece of paper on the table.

‘You’re the cause. We have the warrant.’

The coppers stood in unison, a coordinated movement. Think pegged noses, rubber hair caps and synchronised swimming. Think the rolling open-mouthed heads of clowns in sideshow alley. Except this wasn’t a laughing matter.

Two other officers joined them in their search. No prizes for guessing one was the charming and pudgy Constable Mark Abbott. The other one introduced himself as Constable Ivan Muhs, stationed in Angel Port. No Badcock of course.

They started with my car. Muhs crouched to inspect the rear then the front number plates. The blood pulsed through my ears as I envisaged him rising victorious with a false plate or a tell-tale strip of blue tape. He shook his head at van Wiessen.

‘Sir, there’s no sign of tampering. No tape marks or residue and the screws are old and rusty and haven’t been shifted in a long time. The dust and grease haven’t been disturbed.’

The Renault was a cheap, unhappy compromise after I’d lost my company Orion with my job. For the first time I could have kissed the old thing. Muhs and Diesso inspected the rest of the car from bonnet to boot, even under the chassis. I don’t know what they expected to find – an AK47 bolted to the axle?

My real unease was with the house. I couldn’t explain the vehicles. I hadn’t offered the information that things had been moved around when I’d returned from Bryan Swamp or that I’d found myself the proud babysitter of a Basenji. Better to stay shtum. Maybe that had been a mistake. For all I knew Robertson was packed in ice in my freezer with his second boot sitting slipper-like under my bed.

I went from one room to another, edgy, unable to settle, as the officers clattered and rummaged through my possessions.

‘Mr Newland?’ The voice of Muhs from the spare room. My packing boxes had been opened. Muhs held up a brass shield. ‘Darts?’

‘Yes. I won the work comp two years ago.’

He grinned. ‘We should have a game sometime. Thursday nights at the pub. You should come along.’

‘Sure.’ I let out a breath.

The search had been going on for half an hour when I found Diesso with his head in the kitchen cupboard under the sink. He kept on his haunches, shuffled to the next cupboard, groaned as he went, interrogated pots and threatened the china. It had rained overnight and the smell of wet cement was unmistakable. I squatted and checked under the table. The slate tiles there were a different colour, pinker and less worn than those on the rest of the floor. The cement around them was light grey and pristine. I felt the ugly rush of adrenaline. Only a few paces away Diesso opened the oven door and poked around inside. With any luck, the gas would be on, except that it was electric and ElecServices had probably cut the power. He pulled himself upright and put his nose to the air.

'Do you smell that?' he asked.

I forced myself not to look at the floor. 'I can't smell anything.'

He eyed me with suspicion. I kept my face neutral but the temptation for confession was grinding and weighty. I bit the inside of my mouth, clenched my hands together.

'There is the odour of pooch, Mr Newland. Or is that a bitch on heat?' He hooted. 'And in the fridge a half-used can of dog food. I hope they're paying you enough at the university?' Another hoot. 'What I don't see is the dog.'

My legs wobbled. 'Thank you for asking, officer. I was looking after my neighbour's dog for a bit. That's the sort of thing we people in the country do for each other.'

'Real neighbourly of you, but ...'

'Frank!'

Saved by van Wiessen's booming voice over my shoulder.

'Sir!'

'Take that namby Muhs out the back with you and check there. I'll inspect the bathroom.'

'Yes sir.'

I watched van Wiessen from the safety of the kitchen, conscious of the line of mould that had grown in a few short weeks along the edge of the basin. He crouched in the shower recess in the morning's leftover water. He spoke without looking back at me.

'When you arrived home from Bryan Swamp, was there anything strange or out of place that you recall?'

I gripped my nails into my palms. 'Nothing. The window in my bedroom rattles, but it seems secure enough. It wasn't unlocked.'

Van Wiessen twisted around. 'And it didn't rattle before?'

'No, the darn thing's rattled the whole time I've been here.'

'You should get your landlord to see to it.'

'Good idea.'

'I hear you and he have become quite the good mates. Not sure that's very wise, with his history and all.'

The man was baiting me. I knew it, but the question was out before I thought. 'What history?'

'Aggravated assault. Know what that is? Assault of a boy under fourteen years or of any female. Nice, huh?'

'When? When was this?'

Van Wiessen shook his head and smirked like someone who'd just won an important round. 'You should be more careful about the type of company you're keeping. Right then.'

They wrapped it up five minutes later. Van Wiessen led the way out the front, followed by the heavy steps of Diesso and Abbott. They hopped into their Pajero and didn't look back. Muhs, it seemed, had to hoof it back to the local station. The relief was making my head ache or I would have jostled him off the property.

'Thanks for your cooperation, Mr Newland. I like the wind chime you've got hanging out the back. My boyfriend's got one the same.'

'From my ex. Girlfriend that is.'

'We both know you had nothing to do with Robertson. Hell, even those turkeys know that. This was just a show of force.'

'All sound and fury, signifying nothing. That's ...'

'Shakespeare. Macbeth. We're not all bumpkins here. Some of us have seen the odd play or two, even been in them. Course, the local company sticks to the comedies. Last year I was the clown Touchstone in *As You Like It*. There were plenty of jokes about the Keystone Cops, as you'd expect.'

On his own, Muhs wasn't a bad bloke, so when he asked his next question I didn't bristle.

'The neighbour whose dog you minded. Who was that?'

'Janice from next door.'

'What do you think of her?'

'I haven't met her. I've only seen her slipper. She's a regular Boo Radley.'

Muhs looked around and leaned in, voice low. 'More like Cinderella. Underestimated by the ugly stepsisters. Everyone thought she was cleaning the chimney when she was out wooing the prince. Get my meaning?'

'A new interpretation on an old tale,' I said.

I decided to ask a question of my own when he was halfway out of the property.

'How come the police have photos of my house from the middle of the night?'

A side of his mouth skipped up and I could see the Touchstone in him. 'Have you considered someone might be trying to set you up?'

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

My tete-a-tete with the police worsened my relations with Skink. That and the trip to Papkoorook. True or false, mad, insane or positively certifiable, I didn't want anything to do with the lost babies of Angel Port and the cosy little cult that protected their memory. At work I directed my attention to the screen in front of me and the sycophantic phone calls that are part of every business development manager's dream job. Skink passed me on his trips to the kitchen and the loo. I blanked him. He wanted something I wasn't prepared to give.

My relations with Maz and McG weren't much better. I rejected McG's phone offers to catch up for hi-carb bakery items and snapped that the doors in my living weren't yet fixed and the hot plate on the stove continued to be misnamed. The soft stench of cement in my house didn't dissipate, a constant reminder of my near miss with the cops. I'd given the floor under the kitchen table another look, even tapped to see if it was hollow under the newer tiles. When that failed I tested my skill on the walls – hollow or solid? Bugged if I knew. My vocation was limited to differentiating hollow promises from solid commitments.

A weekend of straight rain stuck in Angel Port didn't improve my mood. With the Coric meeting off and the dog still living with me – so much for Janice's few days away – I bunkered down to poor television and worse nutrition.

Maz arrived on the Monday evening with a packet of runner guides and no apology. She pointedly reminded me that fixing the doors was going to be delayed and didn't appreciate complaints made that suggested she was unprofessional. I snorted out something lame and left her to it – she liked to work alone and I liked to sulk alone. I was chewing through heated-up mushroom risotto when she pulled up a chair at the kitchen table. The clean smell of wood shavings rose from her clothes.

'Got the snit on, have you?' she asked.

I grunted.

'I've cleaned up everything. I had to plane some of the wood. Warped with age. You're good to go.'

'You're not the average tradie are you?'

She bristled like a yard broom, a small one. 'This isn't another one of those patronisingly sexist comments, is it?'

'I only meant that you clean up after yourself.'

'I clean up after myself because I'm a woman. Is that what you're saying?'

I opened my mouth, closed it.

'Gotcha!'

'If I'd said that ... '

'You couldn't say that. It's like Tasmanian jokes – only those with two heads can tell them.'

'Were you jibing me about the tradie comment too?'

'Hardly. If I had a dollar for every time some clown said something like that to me. Right, I'm off home. It's been a long day.'

'Me too.'

'Poor Nathan, slaving over a hot computer. Wrangling with bureaucracy. Real cowboy stuff.'

I started to relent. 'I've made pear compote for dessert. It would be a shame to eat it alone.'

She hesitated. 'It sounds tempting but not now. Maybe another time. I've got a lecture.'

'Pear compote with King Island cream.'

'Handy with a keyboard and can cook, you must have the girls lined up.'

'Except you.'

'I'll keep you in reserve. I've got ten minutes and then I've got to run. You couldn't go a coffee as well?'

'Strong?'

'Industrial strength.' The life of a tradie is a harsh one.

She pulled up a kitchen chair while I got the coffee machine humming, waited for the drag and thunk of the pod falling through, added the milk and popped the cup in the microwave. 'What are you studying?'

'What makes you think I'm studying?'

'You said you had a lecture.'

'I'm *giving* the lecture. Surprised Mr Sophisticated City Slicker?'

I handed the cup over and tried to look abject. 'I wanted to ask you something else. The police were here.'

'I know.'

Of course she did.

'You didn't come in and do any work while I was away. Did Iain McGavisk ask you to fix anything else?'

'No. I only do what I'm paid for. Why don't you ask the man himself?'

My buried rage erupted. If I'd recently established a reputation for sniping, this was a full-on attack. My fist hit the table, rattling the cutlery. I don't know who was more surprised, Maz or me.

'I've had enough! Hear me? Enough!'

Maz leapt to her feet and held her hands out, palms warding off an attack. 'Whoa! That's an over-reaction. And not one I'm hanging around for.'

I thumped the table again.

'An over-reaction?' I yelled. 'Won't someone bloody well tell me what's going on? The police searched my bloody house. They think my car was involved in Robertson's disappearance. I'm being set up, aren't I? Aren't I?'

I was roaring now and Maz was pulling her keys from her pocket. She threw me a look of contempt. 'I don't know where you get off mate, but I'm here to do my work. I don't take crap from arseholes like you.'

Her boots stamped down the passage and the front door banged behind her.

If things weren't good then, they turned to shit the next night.

Sleep should have come easily. I'd walked to work most days for the last fortnight and trudged the shoreline every evening with Spectre to prove I wasn't trapped in the little house with the little chimney. Instead, wakefulness preceded a disturbed watery sleep of stones and Jennifers, sneering Mazes and missed application dates.

'Mister!'

I pushed the intrusion away, buried myself in my pillow.

'Mister, please!' Hissed.

I bolted upright. A dark shape was hovering next to me, black in the navy room. I screamed. It screamed back. A child's face came into focus.

'What the?' I stretched a hand to the bedside light. A girl in smiley-face pyjamas stood round-eyed at my side.

'Who the?' I started to ask, then recognised her as Sara's daughter. What was her name?

'It's me, Kaylah.'

'Kaylah! How did you get in?'

'A key, under the rock in the carport. Everyone knows it's there.'

Everyone except me. I swung my legs over the side of the bed, careful not to touch her. 'Kaylah, what's wrong? What are you doing here?'

'It's mummy.'

'Mummy? Your mother?'

'Uh, huh. I think he's going to hit her.'

My stomach lurched. 'Who? Who is going to hit her?'

'The man.' There was a sob in her voice.

'Your father?'

She shook her head. 'I don't have a father.'

I hesitated then drew her in for a hug.

'Please come. Please,' she said into my shoulder.

'Has anyone rung the police?'

'I ... I don't know. But we don't like the police.'

'Where are your brother and sister?'

The little girl shrugged. 'Home.'

'Where's your mother?'

She pointed down the street. I grabbed the phone and pressed triple zero. A voice came on in three rings and promised someone would be round as soon as possible.

‘The police will be here very soon,’ I told the girl. ‘In the meantime, show me where your mum is, okay? But when we get there I want you to stay outside unless your mummy or I tell you it’s okay to come in. Got that?’

I put out my hand. Kaylah gripped it with a fierceness that made me wince. The night was pitch, broken by the intermittent flash of the streetlamp outside number ten. We heard voices, angry, and I broke into a trot.

‘Here.’ Kaylah pointed down her driveway.

The voices issued from the backyard.

‘Stay on the front porch until one of us comes.’

She gave me a solemn nod, eyes wide as I headed down the side of the house. I went quietly, unsure what scene would confront me. The backyard was open, no trees, a few shrubs, a clothes line full of cheap washing. No people. I snuck to the kitchen window and peered through. The house was quiet and dark.

The voices came again, louder, and I recognised Sara’s voice. I whipped around. A shaft of light fell from a break in the back fence. I tiptoed across the yard and stuck my head through the gap and couldn’t help thinking it was becoming a habit. I recognised Rich’s house. It was the back view but with the same white stucco and floor-to-ceiling windows. Sara was visible through the French doors that opened onto the garden. A man’s voice cut over hers. I pushed through the gap, splinter to shoulder. The French doors were ajar. I stopped in the shadows. The scene was like something from a movie set: the soft honeys and caramels of the décor, a print of two women in long white dresses rowing over black water, a pedestal lamp with knotted tassels, and Joan Rich. She stood behind Sara, rigid in a thick dressing gown. I inched around and saw Leslie Rich with a fire poker raised in one hand.

‘You filthy slut!’ he yelled. ‘You think you can come in here and tell respectable people what they can do? My wife is worth a hundred of you!’

‘Is that why you hit her, is it? Pig!’

‘You mind your own stinking business!’

Sara looked around and yanked a table lamp from its socket. She held it up as a defence. ‘Get out Joan. Run,’ she said, without looking back.

Joan’s voice was a whisper. ‘Really Sara, it’s okay. This is nothing more than a misunderstanding. You’re very sweet to care but there is nothing for you to worry about.’

'The bastard told you to say that, didn't he?' said Sara, keeping her eyes on Rich. 'Crap that!'

'I'm not sure that language is called for,' said Joan, but it was gentle. She moved between Sara and her husband and put some steel into her voice. 'Go home now, Sara. It's not your place to be here.'

Leslie laughed. 'See, Sara, Joan is perfectly fine. She doesn't want your interference. Go now and I won't call the police.'

I'd seen enough. I pulled the glass door open and stepped inside. 'I've already called the police.'

Leslie swung around. 'What the devil?'

He looked bewildered for the briefest of moments, then his confidence returned. He took me for friend not foe. He smiled a toothy, us-boys smile. 'Glad you're here. This mad woman's broken into our house in a clear case of trespass. I've asked her to leave.'

Sara looked at me, alight with fury. 'Someone has to stop him.'

'No-one hit anyone, Sara. We were arguing, true, but that was all. Voices carry a long when the wind's down,' said Joan.

Leslie cut in. 'Off you go sweetheart.'

Joan looked okay to me. If anything, she appeared more in control than the last time I'd seen her. She gripped the locket at her neck and shot me a look of both appeal and reason. Marriages were difficult things, weren't they? Couples argued. Leslie wasn't perfect, but who of us was? The locket incident was a bad moment, nothing more.

It was a hard call. Sara, rigid and aggressive, stood in baggy tracky dacks, her hair in strings. I assumed her children had been left to fend for themselves. What mother let her child wander into a stranger's house in the middle of the night? Then again I'd seen the way Rich spoke to his wife, felt the frisson of fear on her doorstep. Joan decided it for me. She removed the lamp from Sara's grasp before taking the poker from Rich's hand. Leslie crooked an arm around her shoulders.

'I'm sorry Joan,' he said. 'And I'm sorry for what I said Sara. I know you were only trying to help. Let bygones be bygones. We're all tired and we all know that's when none of us are at our best. Right ... er?'

'Nathan.'

'Nathan.'

I stepped in front of the tableau of happy – or reconciled – marriage and put out a hand to Sara.

‘Sara, I think we can leave the Riches to it now. How about we go back to your house. Kaylah’s waiting out there and she needs you.’

Sara ignored my hand. ‘Kaylah? What’s she got to do with it?’

‘She came to get me because she heard the fighting. I don’t know where the other two children are. Come on.’

The fury left Sara. Without it she was no protector, just a skinny woman in need of shampoo. She ignored my hand, gave me the thump of her skin and bones as she passed.

‘You’re just as bad as the rest of them,’ she hissed and shot Rich a look of pure hatred, before disappearing through the French doors and across the back garden.

That left the three of us.

Joan took the initiative.

‘I’m sorry you had to get involved in all this, Nathan. Really, I don’t know how it all happened. Sara is a dear girl but not entirely stable. Who would be in her circumstances? Single parent, men in and out? Well-meaning but not always quite ...’

‘If you’re sure,’ I said.

She released herself from Rich’s grip and advanced on me with a smile that the girl in the embroidered cherry top would have recognised. A soft hand patted the top of my arm.

‘Of course. We must have you over like we promised. Would you mind if I left it to Leslie to see you out. I am rather tired. Leslie?’

‘Of course dear. I am sorry for yelling.’

Rich led me down an unlit passage to the front door. The back door was the trespasser’s entrance. On the threshold he put out his hand.

‘I never thanked you for returning Joan’s locket.’

It was too dark to see his eyes and his voice had taken on the professional, sympathetic tone his patients were no doubt used to hearing.

I pulled my hand free. ‘The locket?’

‘The locket.’ These last words were less benign.

'Oh, yes, the locket. The locket.'

He waited for me to fill the silence. I didn't.

'Remind me again. Where did you find it?'

A raft of answers true and false ran through my head, none of them in my tiredness seeming to be the right one. I opted for the limited truth.

'At the Robertsons' place when that girl nearly drowned. Joan must have lost it in all the to-do.'

'Of course.'

The waves on the foreshore heaved and hawed. A seagull, unaware of the time of day, squawked once.

'It's only I don't know how she lost it,' said Rich. 'The clasp seems fine. I had it checked by the jeweller.'

I backed off the verandah and onto the stone path. 'Who knows, eh? Well, good night.'

'Don't you worry yourself about this anymore. I'll call the police and cancel the call. Sergeant Peacock's a mate of mine. He's been a bit under the weather. Some recurring stomach bug, but he's back on board now. Consider everything sorted.'

The moon slipped from behind a Norfolk pine. I detected a glint of triumph and something much more disturbing in Rich's eyes – complicity.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The sea went from fat to thin, sludgy to impassioned, blue to grey. The wind kept up.

In self-imposed isolation I polished my CV, surfed the net and connected with the images of people with job-description smiles. I haunted the job sites. There were lots there, and almost none I had a shot at. I counted the days until I could point the Renault towards Melbourne. There was finally good news on that front. Huon's wife was out of hospital and the baby was safe. She'd have to keep her feet up for much of the next five months but parenthood and a healthy baby were still on the cards. More importantly, Mark Coric had re-issued his invitation to his corporate box, this time for the Doggies versus the Pies. The job was still open and I was in with a chance. In the meantime I consigned myself to the lassitude of funding applications and the avoidance of personal entrapments.

I walked the dog. The Riches' house stood white and glistening on the foreshore. I saw Sara in the street once or twice. She kept her head down and kept walking. Joan Rich passed once in her Audi and raised a timid hand. Spectre and I visited Aretha's fish and chip van so we could indulge in the chicken nuggets, sitting apart from the teenagers and the local coppers for whom it was something of a watering hole.

And then there was Jennifer. I knew it was unfair to lump her in with the whole Angel Port crowd, but I couldn't help it. There was a bad taste in my mouth and I had no desire to gargle and wash it out. The subconscious, on the other hand, can be more truthful.

It was a long, unseasonably warm Sunday. The children at the playground were a pandemonium of sound and colour, parrots swooping in mobs between the swings and whirligig. Their mothers wore singlet tops and were pinkening in the dense sunlight. Past the playground, past the grassed sandhills of memorial park, the sky was a Dalmatian pelt of cumulus clouds.

Against the sky, I swear I saw Jennifer balanced on the rust and chipped black paint of the *Matilda* anchor. She was unmistakable, a generously sized woman in a floral T-shirt. Her eyes were on the sea. Shag on a rock. Spurned daughter on steel.

I hurried in her direction through the patches of sun and shade, beneath my feet the crunch of fallen leaves. When I stepped out from behind a stately oak to surprise

her, it wasn't her. This woman was darker, fatter. She startled at my greeting and leapt to the grass to flee in the opposite direction.

In this and a thousand other ways Jennifer kept coming to mind. I should call her, I told myself. She'd light up the lonely days with some cynical quip about the latest reality TV show or the cartoon antics of the US president. The other part of me held back in the knowledge that she wasn't the sort of woman I usually went for. Admirable, engaging, but without the citified gloss. Any longing I felt was no more than a trick of the loneliness and the long days of wind and ozone.

Ozone. A word my mother had used like a mantra on that last holiday our family had taken before dad died. Instead of the usual short trip to the beaches on the eastern outskirts of the city, we'd headed north, through the ugliness of suburbs and roads masquerading as freeways. It was hot and my brother Trent and I were already bored. The travel draughts game was five pieces down. The car kept creeping north. We were ploughing between the thick grassy flats of cow country when Trent opened his mouth and started that question all parents hate, 'Are we ...?' Dad shut him down quick smart and gripped the wheel like someone out of his home turf. I knew, then, that this adventure had been mum's idea.

The rich green paddocks turned suddenly to forest. These were not the lungs of the world. They were not the forests of fairies on polka-dot toadstools sitting in sunlit glades. These were the forests of Hansel and Gretel. The car air-conditioner was on and the windows were clamped shut on dad's orders, but the smell broke through, the rank odour of ancient things swallowed or rotting in the dark tangle. Maybe bushrangers, maybe ghosts. Axe murderers waited for anyone whose car hiccupped and rolled lifeless to the side of the road. I held my breath, gripped the door handle, checked the car lock was down, checked it again. Even Trent was silent, which was the upside. Only mum seemed oblivious to the danger. She drank that forest in. Even from the backseat it was impossible to miss the vibrating tension of her body. I could imagine her eyes alight, like they were when she saw a particularly brilliant sunset or had been to one of her meetings about women's rights or refugees or fabric dyeing.

The forest stopped as quickly as it started. Without warning we were in a land of spread-eagled scrub and sand dunes and, very close, glimpses of an ocean impossibly pale. The car crested one more time and the ocean opened before us, an upside-down triangle cut into a broad valley with cliffs at either end. In the middle of the settlement of shabby shacks stood a single large building – its roof dulled red. Mum clapped her hands and dad's fingers relaxed on the wheel.

'See!' she said.

'Fair enough. You were right,' dad said.

'I'm always right.' Mum leant over and gripped dad's thigh.

'Ain't that the truth?'

'Smell that!' said mum. She had her arms out and drew in a deep breath.

'Ozone.'

The shack mum had rented was on the esplanade. It was painted a soft aqua that matched the water and its front yard was decorated with driftwood and rocks smoothed by the ceaseless wash of the waves. We kids leapt out of the car, our legs aching from the inactivity, and raced across the narrow road to where the sand drifted onto the fractured bitumen.

I kept one photograph of that holiday, perhaps, as it turned out, the best holiday ever. It was of dad. The picture was not of him standing before the glorious backdrop of beach but instead resting against a light pole in front of the big building. Above him, in proud letters, the building declared itself to be the Ozone Manors.

Now, in Angel Port, the ozone wound its tendrils around the leaky edges of my windows and found their way to my bed. Back then, the sea held endless possibilities. Mermaids, Bali-Hi, pirates, treasure. Now I knew the truth. The great sea mystery was a dreary town and a job with an outdated computer.

I rang Jennifer on the Friday. It went to voicemail. I was less relieved than I'd expected. I left a message and told myself it had been a bad idea in the first place.

Dinner was a lonely haloumi and rocket brioche roll, two actually, followed by a glass or three of Victor's Place Grenache. The company was Spectre spread across the couch by my side, her nose twitching with hope. She hadn't twigged to the fact that leftovers were unlikely. Brioche rolls were sized for small toddlers. The rest of the company was Friday night footy on the TV. It was a clash between Carlton and the Adelaide Crows. I say 'clash' but a tour of your local library might have been a better description, only more exciting. I was semi-comatose somewhere in the third quarter when the doorbell rang. I didn't know I had a doorbell. McG preferred the fisticuffs form of visitation. Spectre made it to the door first, tail wagging. I peered through the diamonds of glass by the front door, saw a vague, unrecognisable shape, and gave up any idea of security consciousness and opened up.

The light from the street lamps was at her back, but I knew immediately it was Jennifer. There was a little kick to the heart and I leaned forward and gave her a peck on the cheek.

We spoke at the same time. 'This is a welcome ...,' I started. 'Thanks for the call ...,' she said. We laughed.

I shut the door on the frisky wind and ushered her into the lounge room. She looked good – jeans, windcheater, thongs. She scanned the room and fussed over the dog.

I remembered my manners. 'Sit and I'll get another glass.'

Jennifer lifted the bottle, gave an appreciative 'mmm', but shook her head. 'I have to drive.'

'Oh.'

'Pretty much straight away.'

'Oh.' I felt a different type of kick in the heart this time, not half as pleasant. 'Oh, that's a pity. I didn't know you were back in town.'

'Looking after mum, speaking with the cops.'

'Is there any news?'

She shook her head again. 'They've put out photos and the rangers are still looking in the Grampians, but you could lose an elephant in some of the valleys and never hear it trumpet again. The wider search has been downgraded.'

'I'm sorry.'

She gave a shrug as if to say 'what can you do?' then rattled her keys above her head.

'Fancy a drive?'

I grabbed my jacket and was out the door before she could change her mind.

We drove out of town for thirty kilometres and took a surfie track through sandhills to a flat stretch of beach. The headlights reflected off the white and grey breakers. A long way in the distance a lighthouse trawled through its on-on-off rhythm. Jennifer cut the engine and opened the driver's door. The sea was deafening.

'Last one in's a rotten egg,' she said.

I looked at her, incredulous, and stuck to my seat.

She raised an eyebrow. 'Don't be a sook. No chocolate for sooks.'

She started running, hit the sand, discarding her clothes as she went. She was a big girl. Big in all the right places. I felt the punch of desire. I flung my door open and raced after her. Her foot hit the water as I pulled the jacket and T-shirt from my body.

'Dang! It's cold!' she yelled.

It didn't stop her.

She kept moving as the first wave hit her in the chest, nearly toppled her. She held her ground and chased it deeper as it rolled back. I caught up at the next wave. Cold was an understatement. Freezing, icy, numbing, ball-shrivelling more like. This wave was bigger. It reared up in a text-book tube, held and broke over our heads. I grabbed her hand as she went flying. The shock was electrifying. We roiled under water too black for sight. Jennifer found her feet first and pulled me up.

She let go and ran out to the next breaker. The bloody woman was going to get us drowned. I didn't care. I waded after her. She dived through the wave as it frothed and shattered. I followed, making it just in time, my body helpless against the current. I surfaced. The next wave was already upon us, riding high over the swell. I dove. She was laughing when I broke into the air.

'Not bad! Heave to! Here's another one.'

This one took me by surprise. I went under, my mouth full of water, my body pummelled into the sand and grit. I thought I would never make it out alive. A hand found me and dragged me upwards. I spluttered, salt water foaming from my mouth and nose. Jennifer hit my back and jerked me towards the shore. The next wave caught us and she showed me how to stand side on to reduce the impact. Even then we were pushed off our feet. The wave rolled back and we struggled onto the sand.

'Wait here. I've got towels and blankets in the car,' she said.

My body was juddering like a pressure cooker when she shoved layers of towelling and wool over my shoulders and huddled close. She ripped open a packet of dark chocolates and placed two in my mouth. The taste was heavenly.

'You're mad,' I said.

'Admit it, you enjoyed it.'

I had.

We sat in silence while the world around us heaved with noise and motion. We chomped through the chocolates and found warmth in each other's bodies. Time passed. But, as always seems to be the way, I felt the comfortable stasis move into an itch to move or speak. Mostly, I had questions. I held them back, put an arm around Jennifer, kissed her shoulder, but the questions wouldn't bide their time.

'I don't want to ruin the moment, but I have to ask.'

'What?' Her face was a pale moon, very close to mine, in the dark.

'Those dolls at the swamp. I know you told the police they didn't mean anything to you. Only, I got the impression they did.'

She made to pull her body away. I held her closer and tried to communicate support rather than control. Her body relaxed.

'No, yes, maybe,' she said. 'Just after I finished high school a friend of mine told me she'd been pregnant and had an abortion. She was drunk, we were at a party. She said the baby was my dad's.'

'Whoa. You believed her?'

'I thought she was just being bitchy. Later on I thought of other things that had happened and – look, Nathan, I don't know, you see what you want to see, or maybe it's that you have an idea then everything starts to link up even though it doesn't.'

'So what did you see?'

'Dad had always been really attentive to her. Often I didn't want to ask her over but he insisted because she was such a "nice good girl". Then, once, I couldn't find her and when I did she was coming out of my parents' bedroom. Mum wasn't home. Dad was.'

She popped another chocolate into her mouth. 'That's confidential of course. I haven't told anyone.'

Another question, more horrific.

'Your dad didn't ...? With you ... you were safe?'

She shook her head. 'Nothing like that. Remember, family is everything.' She couldn't keep the bitterness from her voice. "Can I ask you a favour? Can we not talk about this now? Can we just be here?'

Sitting next to her naked skin was the most pleasurable thing I'd done in months. Only a fool would have persisted in talk of missing fathers and dead babies. The silence

ANGEL PORT

between us was warm and comfortable. I was surprised when her lips found mine. She tasted of salted chocolate. The cold receded and would have been entirely forgotten if it hadn't been for the shrivelling effect it had on my amour.

Jennifer expressed no disappointment. She kissed me a last time. 'Let's call this entrée, shall we?'

I was all for main course, dessert and afters.

We dressed in the lee of the Subaru and drove to my place.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

'I'm not a bushwalker,' I said.

'I've got it covered.'

Smug bastard. We'd arrived at the clearing ten minutes earlier, the Ranger's wheels crunching over runnels of hard-packed earth. I'd point blank refused to go on some adventure with McG when he'd knocked on my window at the godawful time of seven am, Cornish pasties and chocolate milks in hand. Perhaps it was the modifying effect of good sex that changed my mind. I'd spent the entire Saturday with Jennifer, the night too. She'd made an early start back to Braidwood and the promise of a return visit had me feeling okay. So I'd finally acquiesced, ignoring any misgivings about being the next sucker to go missing.

McG pulled two backpacks from the boot of his Ranger and checked through the contents: food, water, torches, sunblock, spare socks, hats, and band-aids. His was also jammed with an EPIRB and a battery-operated radio. He threw one of the packs my way, pulled his own on, and then came to help.

'I can do it.'

'Give it over, Nate. The straps are too long and they'll pull down on your back. There. That's better.'

He twisted me around so he could buckle the clasp at my waist.

'While you're down there ...' I said.

'You wish.'

He stood back to look at his handiwork. I guessed what he saw – a kid dressed up for his grandmother's funeral in clothes his mother had made him wear. A few hours on the track and my boots would be less shiny and my look of sufferance would be replaced by genuine suffering. The bastard was going to enjoy this.

'I'm still not talking to you,' I said.

McG smirked. 'Perfect, coz I'm not listening to you.'

It ended as these things always did with McG – I caved.

The clearing was deserted. Grey-green plants surrounded us. The highest trees stretched up about three metres, spindly leaves whispering in the breeze. Smaller trees

that looked like wattles crowded under them. Lower still sat squat, sharp bushes and grasses that shot out from central cores and sprouted like fireworks.

‘Right,’ he said, ‘keep your hat on. We don’t want you getting melanoma.’

I grunted, which was all I could manage with the weight on my back and the strap around my stomach one notch too tight.

The trail was no more than a goat track, flat to start and, apart from the tripwire of tree roots, relatively easy going, but the density of the bush made it hot and I wished I hadn’t kept my jacket on. I squinted upwards. The drive had been a long way west and the sun was already high. I swore under my breath and reached for my water bottle. Only a limited amount of contortion required.

McG had said we were heading for the best lookout on the coast. So far there was no hint of sea or surf, just the oppressive plucking, crowding, secretive plants and the calls of birds playing hide and seek in the shadows. The ground gave way to sand at precisely the moment the scrubby forest gave way to dunes. These were stacked one on top of the other and filled the horizon.

‘Shit,’ I said.

Ahead of me McG merely jerked his head and ploughed. He hit the first sandhill as if it were a Sunday open inspection. I trudged behind swearing at the grit crunching in my boots. At the top there was a vista of more dunes. McG, bless him, was already starting up the next one. My calves took the weight of the downward run, the pack threatening to push me face first into the deep drifts. At the bottom, catching my breath, I glanced up. The next sandhill was only distinguishable from the last by its sheer height. Sand sprayed for a second into the blue sky and settled. There went my guide. I took a deep breath and followed.

If I’d been thinking straighter I would have stopped at that point and turned on my heels. But the sun was now overhead. Yellow sand was bleaching to white. My throat was dry. And the only living creature I knew for the surrounding hundred kilometres was invisible and fast-pacing it down the other side of the dune. I kept walking and topped the crest to see McG halfway up the next one. He didn’t look back, the bugger sure of himself and even more sure of me. He disappeared over the ridge.

Alone, what struck me was the silence. The wind, that ever-present companion in Angel Port, had been stoppered. Dead calm. Suffocation. I could have been the only person on the planet. Even then I could have retreated. I didn’t. That bastard of a real estate agent had made himself my lifeline.

I found him many sand dunes later, plonked on a spine of rock that poked like some ancient creature from the sand. A solo tree offered indecisive shade. The view was of more sandhills.

'Took your time,' he said, blue eyes amused. 'Time for tucker. Your lunch is in your pack.' His mouth was already full. 'Heaven, eh?'

'On a stick!'

Lunch was in a plastic box coloured frog green. It was a throwback to school days – a banana, a cheese and ham sandwich, a muesli bar and a caramel koala.

'Where's the double shot and vegan patty on a wholemeal bun?' I asked once I had breath.

'Up some ponce's arse. Drink lots of water.' He opened a two-litre bottle and handed it to me. I sniffed its rim. McG sighed. 'Tap water's not poisonous and it's a bloody sight cheaper than that pretend spring stuff. Get it down you.'

I lifted the bottle to my mouth and shook some of it over my face and down my neck.

'Steady on, mate. Don't waste it. You never know when you'll need it.'

'You've packed litres of the stuff.'

'And there's a reason for that. Right, onwards and upwards.'

'If you don't mind, I would like to forget the onwards and definitely avoid the upwards. Pity the lactic acid in my legs.'

'Off we go or we'll get caught before the weather hits.'

'I've got news for you, the weather is always with us.'

'Ooh, smartarse are we? The lookout's not far now.'

'Lead on McG. Hey, what weather?'

No answer. McG was already striding down a fall of sand.

Talk was impossible over the next stretch. The sandy trail had been blown smooth and was only traceable by the sharp, broken twigs of low bushes. Ahead of me McG ploughed on, oblivious to the scratches collecting on his shins and the sand pouring into his boots. The damn man was indefatigable. Half a dozen sliding, slippery, shaly hills later, each higher than the last, I breasted the final rise, terrified that either my heart or my pride would give up the ghost.

McG was standing next to a cairn of ochre rocks that were pocked like the plague. He turned at my approach and swept a hand at the view. It wasn't bad, but hardly National Geographic. To the east stood gnawed cliffs. To the west were volcanic rocks and flat plates of granite, dark with water. A lighthouse reared up midway along, standing on a spit of stone, a whitewashed spindle topped with glass and the carmine bonnet of its roof. A headland was blurred blue in the distance.

'South Australia. You're standing in it.'

'Wow.'

'Cape Catastrophe.'

I felt McG's sudden hot breath on my neck and twisted around. Something in the dark line of his brows and the set of his jaw made me uneasy. I flinched and stepped backwards, forgetting the cliff edge. The world teetered under my feet. McG's hands thrust out, open-palmed, and for a brief, dreadful moment I thought he was going to push me over the side. His hands curled around my arms and hauled me to safety.

'Bloody oath! You nearly took it then,' he said.

I sank to the ground.

'What were you thinking?' he asked.

I didn't speak.

'You're valuable cargo, Natey. You've got to take better care of yourself.'

He rummaged in his bag and handed me the water. I drank it like it was my last. It might well have been if not for McG. I surveyed him from under my hat. Concern was written on his face. The shadow of whatever I'd imagined had gone.

'Sorry. A bit dizzy,' I said.

'Looked like you'd seen a ghost.'

I took a while to recover. I was cold underneath my jacket, now I'd stopped walking. Or maybe it was shock. McG waited me out, only I could tell he was impatient to get on. His eyes moved back and forth between me and the horizon. At last he seemed satisfied that I had enough colour back.

'We'd better be getting on, but I need to show you this first.' He patted the cairn. 'You can see this from virtually anywhere on the beach. Make for this spot and you can find your way back to where we parked the car.'

I looked at the march of sandhills behind us and tried to cover my scepticism.
'Sure.'

'From here you just follow the markers.'

I hadn't seen any markers. McG saw my confusion and laughed. He pointed two fingers at his eyes and swivelled them to the landscape.

'Now, the lighthouse. You can get across there at low tide but there's usually only a thirty or forty-minute window. Despite you dragging your feet we've made it in time.'

'We're going over there? No way! You'd be taking your life in your hands.'

'First true word you've said all day. But trust me, you're with Yours Truly. Up you hop.'

He put out a hand and I took it, reassured against my better judgment by his hard, warm grip.

We half stalked, half slipped down the cliff face and threaded our way through the boulders on the shore, hugging the cliff line, until we made the spit where the lighthouse pierced the sky. McG struck out for it, I followed. Halfway out he halted next to a boulder the size and shape of a hippo, its surface sketched with orange lichen, and knelt on the brink of a channel. It cut into the granite, five metres across, two deep. Filled with water it would be treacherous, open as it was to the full force of the sea, but now, at low tide, it looked benign enough. Seawater hissed at its bottom, no more than ankle deep.

'This is the best place to cross. See the footholds here and here and there, over the other side.' He pointed at concave pockets in the opposite wall. 'They're natural, yet you'd think they were man-made. The boulder here is the marker. You can't miss the bugga.'

'Right.'

'Like I said, you can go out at low tide. All you have to remember is to stay for no more than thirty minutes, thirty-five at a pinch.'

'Good advice I won't be needing.'

McG was on his feet again. His large hand landed on my shoulder. In all the loud, moving universe that hand felt like awkward yet longed-for intimacy.

'Sure about that? Okay, here we go.'

He released my shoulder and lowered himself into the fissure. The crossing was without incident. McG waved me over and I turned backwards to find the first footholds and lower myself to the water and rock at the channel's base. The channel floor was uneven. The crossing was as harmless as wet boots. Still, something had changed. A diminishing of the light. Waves that no longer rolled but bruised their passage from the cold south. Remembering McG's warning about time I hurried to catch up with him as he rounded the lighthouse and made for the open sea. Here the waves were beasts, clawing at the spit, foaming at the mouth, roaring. To my right a plume of water shot without warning into the sky, a thunder of sound and movement, held in the darkening sky, then crashed with a boom back down to the rock.

'The blowhole. Beautiful yet treacherous,' said McG at my elbow.

'Like my ex-wife.'

I picked up a stone, pummelled smooth, and tossed it low across the water. It hit a steel-grey roller and plummeted from sight. At my side McG snorted like he had snot blocking his nostrils.

'Where've you been mate? You can't skim stones when there's a storm brewing!'

I reconsidered the idea of picking up another stone and peered at the horizon. It was a thickening smear of black. The prophecy of ice stung our cheeks. The first drops of rain hit.

'Let's get out of here!' said McG.

He strode away and skirted the lighthouse to the western side. I caught up with him at the lighthouse door. A key lay in his open hand – large with a looped head, the sort of key you'd see in old kids' books like *The Secret Garden*. He slotted it into the lighthouse door and pointed up the winding metal stairs where slot windows hardly relieved the gloom.

'Only time for a quickie.' He gave me a salacious smirk.

'Not on a first hike.'

The climb was no problem provided you liked heights and could balance on steps that dwindled to nothing at the centre. The keeper's room was about two thirds of the way up and was strictly utilitarian – a two-door cupboard, a small table where a kettle and toaster stood, two metal chairs, a camp bed, and a single bulb swinging from a frayed wire in the ceiling. A second staircase began at the other side of the room, heading up to the lamp itself.

‘Check out the cupboard,’ said McG.

The handle needed a bit of a tug. Inside was a miscellaneous range of necessities, from blankets to long-life milk and tea bags.

‘Right, we’d better be off.’

I turned. McG was already clomping down the stairs.

Outside, the sea was a threshing monster, rain was falling hard and sharp. The wind tore McG’s words away and threatened to steal the key from his hand.

‘I’m putting the key in this ziploc bag – it’s watertight – and under the rock just over there,’ he yelled and indicated a flat stone next to the lighthouse wall. ‘Now hurry, we might only have a few minutes. Bloody storm.’

The water in the channel had swelled to half a metre. With each new wave it surged upward, breaking white and sending drenching spray into the air. McG dug into his bag and pulled out a yellow nylon rope. He searched around until he found two rocks rammed together near the crossing point, threaded the rope through an opening between them, and tied a double knot to prevent any slippage. He looped the loose end through a metal ring on his trouser belt and pulled it taut.

‘Nate, I’m going across with this and I’ll secure it on the other side. You follow when I say. Use the rope as a guide. Whatever you do, don’t let go of the rope. The current in there is too strong.’

I looked at the channel. The water had risen another few inches in the time we’d delayed. The rain was like a sheet.

McG grasped my chin in wet hard fingers to make sure I was listening. ‘If something goes wrong when I’m crossing, don’t come in and get me. The channel rips straight back out to sea at the other end. You know where the key is. Just go back to the lighthouse and wait out the storm and the tide.’

‘Don’t be an idiot. If it’s that unsafe why don’t we both wait it out?’

‘I’d never live it down.’

‘You certainly won’t live it down if you’re dead.’

‘Thanks Mum.’

He lowered himself down the rock face. The current grabbed him and bent him like a sapling in a gale. He righted himself against the channel wall and started across the torrent. For a few seconds the water withdrew and swirled at thigh level. He made

three steps before the next wave hit. It was an avalanche of white and black that pushed him off his feet and under.

‘McG!’ I shouted.

Nothing.

‘McG!’

A second later he surfaced, two metres down the fissure. Blood mingled with salt water on his face. Reprieve would only be seconds before the next wave hit. I lunged at the rope and searched desperately for a place where I could brace myself. Behind me was a crevice in the granite. I rammed my feet into it and pulled the rope tight.

‘Go!’ I yelled. ‘I’ve got you!’

McG needed no more encouragement. He pelted for the opposite side, ignoring the pot holes and rocks that twisted at his ankles. The bank was still two steps away when the next wave rolled through, as big and menacing as the last. I felt the wave’s icy wash as it thundered past me and hit McG with its full force. The yellow line strained and started flying through my hand. I lunged forward, ignoring the searing burns, and twisted the rope around my wrists. When I looked back up McG was still on his feet, further down the channel, but miraculously upright. He waited for the swell to pass then strode against the current and launched himself up the side. The next wave coursed through as he lifted his feet to the top.

He waited for the surge to end and called across the fissure. ‘You still game?’

I hesitated. This could be it. This could be the moment when I was the next bloke to go missing. Through the rain I peered at McG. He hadn’t waited for an answer, had secured the rope around an outcrop of jagged rock and was even now pulling the line taut. Trust him or head back to the lighthouse and take my chances later?

‘Get ready!’ he yelled.

My body answered! I raced to the edge of the rock as another wave barrelled in. It was a monster. I flung myself onto all fours as it broke over me and carried on down the channel.

‘Now!’ In the gloom his teeth were vivid, his lips drawn back to show the hollow cavity of his mouth, his eyes wild.

So be it. I didn't bother with footholds. I gripped the rope with both hands and flung myself into the water, landing heavily and waist deep. A sharp pain tore at my left ankle. I ignored it. I had thoughts for nothing but the rope and the further bank.

'Another wave! Hold on!'

The new wave hit like a train. My feet lost their grip and I felt the hard bite of the rope against my chest. I was helpless, a ragdoll. The water was going to carry me away. I swallowed water and air in equal measure and prepared to go under. The wave flew over and past me and I found my feet again. Limping, fumbling, I hoisted myself along the rope to the channel wall and to McG's muscled hand.

'Now, cobber, now!'

Letting go of the rope was literally letting go of a lifeline. I hesitated.

'Now!' McG yelled. 'Another one's coming!'

I plunged my hand into his and he dragged me up over rock shards and splinters. My legs gave way and he all but carried to the lee of the hippo boulder. He dumped me on the wet rock and fell down after me. His breathing was loud, even above the roar of the water. I heaved saltwater.

'Better get out of here,' he said at last. 'The tide's still coming in.'

The granite platform swelled with water, a foot deep in places. McG hauled me to my feet and nodded landward. I couldn't put weight on my ankle and kept losing my footing. McG waited, feet planted, each time I stalled, and gave me his hand when necessary. In such a way we made our way to the cliff face and a track up its side. At the top was a car park, empty of everything but mud.

I didn't give a flying eff about the rain or McG and his harebrained schemes or his deviousness or anything for that matter. I threw the pack to the ground and fell against the wire fence as the downpour drove into my face. Warm breath told me McG was no more than a nose-width away.

'That's the second time you've disappointed me, mate.'

I scowled.

'You crossed the mighty river like a cracking SAS paratrooper.'

I waved a hand at the blackened sky and heaving sea and the breakers pummelling the footings of the lighthouse.

'That was effin ridiculous!' I gasped.

'That?' McG stood straight, the rain making an acute angle against his erect form. 'That was a piece of piss mate.'

I didn't want to trust him. I didn't want to like him. But how can you reject a drenched bloke with his mouth open to the rain and a look of wonderment on his face? I started to laugh. I was injured, soaked as a teenager at schoolies and it felt bloody wonderful.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

McG got under your skin. Maybe it was all that real estate schmoozing. Maybe it was the constant presentation of pastries and sticky buns, the gift of carbohydrates. More likely it was the bonding you got from a boys' own adventure like our lighthouse trek. We were mates again, if you could call it that. And if that was possible, I had to ask myself, why was I still cold-shouldering Skink and Maz? No good reason. Remorse hit me hard while I was trying to squeeze the latest version of the research proposal into the NHMRC template. There are only so many thes and ands you can delete and only so many contractions you can insert.

Cousin Jason, unaccountably at his desk for a whole day, was the catalyst for reconciliation. He surprised me by pulling his head out of his self-obsessed, self-congratulatory arse for long enough to detect the icy atmosphere.

'There is a decided chill in this room, cuz.' He shivered dramatically. 'Has there been a falling out between the besties?'

'Haven't you got a paper to plagiarise,' Skink shot back.

'Touchy. Touchy. Now that you mention it I do have a lunch day with a Health Sciences postgraduate with a very big ... IQ. While I'm gone you two might like to kiss and make up.' He grabbed his batik shoulder bag and left.

'Prick,' I said.

'Prick,' said Skink.

I laughed. He laughed. I suggested a hamburger in the refec, my shout. The old Nathan only ever slacked off when it was a 'business lunch' with a 'potential client' at the company's expense. The partially reconstructed Nathan was happy to pay for a meat rissole in a white roll as an apology. Next, Maz.

I made it to Angel's Breath not long before closing. The name swirled on the window above an emerald wheelbarrow filled with hot-pink blooms. Inside there was the usual offering of flowers and balloons, dolls and teddies. I recognised the young lad at the counter, the lead singer in the uni band. He was certainly a looker and had the blond wave over dark roots that spelled the word 'sex'. The three giggling uni students at the counter were literate enough to read that message. His father was serving a middle-

aged woman who dressed like all the money went on the kids. I hung back and breathed in the mixed sweet fragrances of cut blooms and dewy ferns.

'So that's a wrap,' the father was saying to the woman. A bunch of black roses sat on the counter between them.

'It's seems very cheap to me for roses.'

'How about doing me a favour, Beverley? On Monday, when they're all out of the house, buy yourself a cappuccino and a nice piece of carrot cake with the change.'

She hesitated. 'If you think so.'

'I do.'

The father beckoned me over when the door closed behind her. 'Poor woman,' he said. 'I'm Fabian and I'm guessing you're the new guy at the uni.'

'Nathan.'

'What can I do you for, Nathan?'

I hadn't thought that far ahead. I remembered a previous flower-giving episode when my mother had oohed and ahed over lilies. 'Lilies, a bunch.'

Fabian's smile faltered. 'Lilies? Do you want them delivered?'

'To go. I need them today,' I said.

'Today. I see.' His expression became harder. 'A conventional choice.'

'Conventional?' I asked, nonplussed and not a little angry. Where had all his affability gone?

I considered upping and taking my wallet with me but he was already fiddling with a cluster of flowers, head down. The blooms were large, the petals milky white funnels that reminded me of folded linen serviettes from my childhood, the leaves long, sleek and scoop-like. In each flower a single yellow stamen stood erect like something Freud would have dreamt about. I put them to my nose.

'Don't bother. Arum lilies have no scent. Lilies are funny like that. Some smell as sweet as – like the oriental trumpet lilies.' Fabian pointed at a bucket of purple and white flowers like curled stars. 'But the arum lilies are all about the look. That'll be twenty-five. Friend of the family?'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Your connection with Ignatius Stradbroke.'

‘Stradbroke?’ I remembered. The McMurtrie College principal who’d gone fishing and found himself the bait. Today must have been his memorial service. ‘You’ve got me pegged wrong there. These flowers are for a friend of mine, Maz.’

From hostile to amiable in a maiden hair’s breadth. So Stradbroke was another one on the hate list.

‘Maz, the chippie? Excellent.’

‘And can you arrange flowers for interstate, Braidwood in New South Wales?’

‘Consider it done.’

‘I can pay up to a hundred dollars.’ There was finally some money in the bank. I had a sudden inspiration. ‘And make that two bunches of lilies to take with me.’

Maz’s house stood in a row of artisan and home-industry cottages. Organic skin products were advertised on a sign out the front of a grey bungalow on the downside of the street. Thai massage was promised by the house next door. Maz’s immediate neighbour was a toymaker, wooden trains and dolls in cotton and lace dresses adorning the windows. Maz’ house fitted right in. It was a neat yellow cottage with blue trim. A garden seat made from twisted gum limbs sat on the verandah under a pile of chequered cushions. A sign out front advertised Vi’s Bespoke, her mother’s furniture business I assumed. There was no sign of Maz’s van or of any other vehicle. I penned a note on the back of a supermarket docket, some quip about chipping away at friendship, and left it and the lilies on the door mat.

My next stop was Janice’s. No car there either. All to the good. After my second knock I checked the street and made for the carport, lilies in hand should someone challenge me. A mop and a bucket leaned against the house wall. An old wardrobe was jam-packed with building materials and tools – a rake, open packets of nails, a drill set, wood glue, an old table tennis net, its claws rusty. Slate tiles and a half-empty bag of cement were lined up against the fence. I opened the gate to the backyard. Spectre’s kennel was tucked under the pergola, empty of its owner. Two items of clothing hung from the clothesline. I thought about my mother’s ruse after dad had died, hanging out his old clothes to make it appear like a man still lived there.

I tiptoed to the kitchen window and peered in. The kitchen had been replaced more recently than the beige eighties monstrosity I was renting. Sleek white benches were clear of everything except a toaster and a kettle. Where my table stood there was

only empty polished floor. I didn't hear the man in the leather jacket. With the tats. And the protein diet.

'Oi! You! What do you think you're doing?'

I spun round. The bloke was big. A red beard hid half the name of a death metal band printed on his T-shirt. He had Spectre on a lead. It was the dog who saved me. She yapped that peculiar Basenji yap and wagged her tail.

'Spectre girlo. I've missed you.'

Spectre yapped again and strained to get to me. The man looked from me to the dog. He relented a little. Only a little. 'You didn't answer my question.'

'Flowers, for Janice. I live next door.' I raised the lilies as exhibit one and pointed at the hole in the fence. Exhibit two. 'I also babysit Spectre. Janice doesn't appear to be home. I don't suppose you could pass these on?'

He looked at the white trumpets suspiciously. 'Guess so.'

I thrust them at him and edged towards the gate. 'I'll be off then.'

'You want the dog?'

Spectre was straining at the lead to get to me.

'Sorry, not now. I've got somewhere I have to be.' I didn't offer the information that I didn't have an invite to the next place either.

My mobile beeped at that moment and I jumped. I would have ignored it but the bloke looked pointedly at my pocket. I gave what I hoped was a casual smile and pulled the phone to read the message. It was brief: *Sorry is a pub meal. Maz.*

'That can wait.' I don't know why I told him that. 'Ciao.'

Ciao? A death-metal fan built like a brick shithouse scowled at me and all I could come up with was 'Ciao'. I felt his eyes on my back the whole long walk down the drive. I refrained from turning at the end and waving him a toodle with my fingers.

The memorial service for Ignatius Stradbroke was held in the McMurtrie College chapel. It was the full catastrophe – priests in dresses, spears of flowers, the school choir in frilly white collars, drafted bored students in school uniform, and the who's who of Angel Port in their Melbourne Cup best. I was a gate crasher and sidled to a spot four rows from the back. I looked around. Pink-haired Mary-Jane was holding the hands of

two young women in the back row. I would have liked to have dismissed her as a lunatic, no doubt the madness the result of grief, but a lunatic all the same. Only she seemed grounded in some odd way I couldn't pick. Skink sat shoulder to shoulder with Sara without an aitch on the pew in front of them. His clothes were unusually sombre, extending only as far as emerald green and sapphire blue. Between all of them, not a damp eye.

At the front were the invitees. A woman with a perfect bob turned to whisper to a couple behind her. I recognised Sheila Stradbroke from her newspaper photo. Next to her sat Dr Leslie Rich and his wife Joan. The guy certainly got around. Jean Robertson sat two rows behind. I craned forward but could see no sign of Jennifer. The grieving widow put a tissue to her eyes and turned back to the altar where the priest was doing something weird with a brass incense holder. Half of the congregation knew when to sit, stand, kneel, chant or sing. It was arcane bullshit to me. I rose quietly and stepped outside as the family streamed forward to blow out a tall candle on a pedestal. Here endeth the life.

The congregants spilled out onto the lawns ten minutes later, the town a spread of rooves and trees below them. Mary-Jane caught sight of me where I'd taken up a position off to the side. She faltered, then pointed me out to her friends. Aretha, chicken nugget expert and coffee destroyer, joined the group and gave me a quick wave. I returned the favour and asked myself why the hell I'd come and why the hell I'd stayed. Perverseness? Curiosity? Because of Jennifer and her missing father and the horror of drowned babies?

Mary-Jane and her group were joined a moment later by McG and Skink, then Sara and the postie Gordon, with a proprietorial hand on her shoulder. A cosy bunch. A rock in a stream. A force field. Some kind of magnetism held them together but repelled all others. McG caught sight of me and broke away.

'Crossed any mighty rivers lately?' he asked.

'I'm still coughing up seawater.'

'You know you're alive.'

'Speaking of which.' I nodded at the chapel.

'God rest the bastard's soul.'

'You're sure he's dead then?'

'Missing presumed dead. The coroner's words not mine.'

There were maybe a hundred people milling around. A teacher patrolled confiscating students' phones and an elderly couple offered their commiserations to Sheila Stradbroke and the family. We found a clear space by a bed of yellow roses, their scent flibberty gibbet in the breeze.

McG nodded at the crowd. 'Half of them hated Stradbroke, the other half didn't know him.'

'What camp does his wife fit into?' I asked.

'Both.'

One of those bloody McG answers. I let it go as the elderly couple moved aside for Bev, the nervous rose buyer, and a man, considerably younger, stiff in a pressed grey suit. Sheila Stradbroke glanced up and caught my eye. She couldn't place me and offered a smile. I saw something there – freedom, perhaps, or relief. Maybe McG was right.

'Skink told me you went to Papkoorook.'

'I didn't ask to go there.'

'He wouldn't have taken you if he didn't trust you. Who do you think arranged for the girls to meet Robertson? Dear old Ignatius.'

A gust of wind grabbed at McG's hair and sent autumn leaves skittering at his feet.

'Like a ...' I peered around to make sure no-one could hear '... a pimp?'

'He – they – were too clever for that.'

'Skink said it was still happening. Stradbroke's been gone for five years, so how's that work?'

'Succession planning.'

'Who?'

'We have our suspicions.'

It was an incongruous conversation for the cool burn of the sun and the dense smell of rose oil. My work jacket was a refuge. I pulled its collar high and inserted the buttons into their holes.

'Someone must have known what was going on and gone to the board,' I said.

'Someone did, the deputy principal. Robertson was chair of the board and the other board members – nearly all men – put her accusations down to a particularly nasty case of menopause.'

'Come on, McG, that's positively deep south.'

'Welcome to the deep south. Three months later she failed her performance review.'

Half the mourners had dispersed, tucked in their air-conditioned cars and rolling into the first golden blush of sunset. I made to leave too. McG grabbed my shoulder. I winced.

'You can let go, McG. I have no idea what's happening here. I don't want to know. You, Skink, whoever. Leave me out of things.'

He dug his fingers in. 'Someone has to look after our girls.'

'They're not my girls.'

McG pinned me with baby blue eyes and dug deeper. He let go without warning. I fell back a step and groaned at the unexpected jolt in my left ankle.

'Don't ever touch me again,' I said.

'What are you going to do, go to the police? No, sorry, not possible. Did you hear that our local sergeant is on extended leave? Some serious allergy. Unheard of, that type of anaphylactic reaction from a simple bunch of carnations. He's been transferred by ambulance to Hamilton. Terrible, the things that happen. Constable Muhs is acting in his place.'

I smelt smoke and turned to see the priest, in mufti, emerge from the rear of the chapel. He had a fag in one hand and a mobile in the other.

'Your *girls*,' I emphasised the word, 'seem pretty safe to me now, providing Robertson doesn't magically reappear.' I watched for a reaction, got none. 'In psychobabble they'd call that closure.'

'In psychobabble I'd call that crap. You think it's over for them? You think they're not scarred for life?'

'Let me get this straight. I come in, I do my job, I go home. Chapter closed.'

McG smiled. He knew better than me where we were up to in the story.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

When David Soulio invited me into his office the next morning I thought that was it, I was getting another farewell handshake. I was about to find out how they did it in the tertiary sector.

Soulio leant back in his chair and started off with his standard question about how I was doing.

‘David, if I could explain about the NHMRC thing.’

He waved away my interruption.

‘It’s not about that, Nathan.’

‘I’m making progress on the investment side of things. Only yesterday ...’

‘As I see it, Nathan, we haven’t seen you at the bar on Friday nights. We’re a little worried you might be hiding yourself away. Why don’t you join us this week? Same old crowd.’

‘Great.’

Soulio indicated a plate of Kingstons on the coffee table. ‘Take a few biscuits with you to get through the afternoon and we’ll see you with glasses up Friday around five.’

And so I was dismissed, but not in the way I had expected.

Friday night at the bar was much the same as the first time. When I arrived I found the usual group ensconced around a low table. Jason hadn’t been lost to any of the pretty young things yet. Prof Environment was drinking coffee and looked like she would have been better off with a Bex and good lie down. Skink shuffled in his chair like some school kid desperate for the home bell. There was little cousinly love in the air between him and Jason.

ABC 24 was on the TV next to the bar. A person with white teeth was speaking but you couldn’t hear the words over the music and the shouting. A news strip about the rugby – who cared? – rolled across the bottom of the screen. Tonight the music was piped although a drum kit and a couple of electric guitars on stands promised live music as the night wore on.

‘Music students again?’ I asked.

Soulio poured me a glass of red and nodded.

'Any good?'

'They're better than the animal husbandry students,' he quipped, tearing open a packet of chips and offering them around. 'Glad you're with us. Hope you're making progress. If you can get the application on my desk by Monday.'

'I've got one investor locked in.'

'Ms Bartholomew. A great benefactor, very community-minded. Don't forget, anything you need, just come on in. I have an open door policy.'

I smothered a laugh into my glass. Colin had only that day explained about Soulio's open door policy. The door was open but there was nobody home. The talk wandered through what everyone would be doing in the semester break to a recent council decision about parking in the main street and then into the inevitable gripe about workloads and funding.

'Isn't that right, Jason?' Soulio asked about some point he'd just made on travel expenses.

Jason's eyes were on the TV screen where the Minister for Home Security was speaking in front of the story title: 'Government deports 15 suspected terrorists'. He ignored Soulio's question and pointed to the screen.

'About time. We've been too lax. We should send those people back to where they came from.'

'Who?' asked Skink.

'The terrorists. The government's sending a whole lot of them home.'

'Suspected terrorists.'

'They're getting rid of the Muslim extremists. This is the terrorism century. I heard a great paper on that last week in Canberra, a lecture by a visiting fellow at the Lowy Institute.'

'I believe it's the Asian century,' said Prof Environment. Her name? It escaped me again. I couldn't ask and I doubted she'd approve of being called 'mate'.

'Not anymore,' said Jason.

'Come on, Jason. China is the economic powerhouse. India won't be far behind. And look at the numbers of Indonesians and others who'll soon be looking for middle-class goods. They're modernising while we're digging up coal.'

'They're no better for the environment.'

Prof Environment shook her head as if at a non sequitur from a particularly annoying undergraduate. Jason turned to me, appealed.

'It's everywhere, right Nathan? It's not just towel heads killing towel heads anymore.'

I'd heard the tertiary sector was full of over-funded, politically correct types. Jason was the test that proved the rule.

'Terrorism is not new,' I said and hoped that Skink or Prof Environment would weigh in and save me. The last thing I needed was to walk in on an argument about Muslims. Soulio, bless his heart, took up elder statesman role.

'I don't believe we can use the term 'towel heads', Jason, but you do have a point. Terrorism has reached epidemic proportions. Nowhere is safe. Even the women are suicide bombers, hiding bombs under their burkas. Remember that Indonesian woman – she took her children with her.' There was a chorus of tuts. 'You're not safe anywhere anymore.'

'Except in Angel Port,' I quipped. I was ignored.

I noticed that Prof Environment had moved ever so slightly away from Soulio. She was sitting washboard straight. 'How many Australians were killed by terrorists last year in Australia?'

We shook our heads, as she knew we would.

'None,' she said. 'How about in Afghanistan?'

Again, head-shaking all round.

'One,' she supplied. 'Now, how many women were killed by their partners or former partners last year?'

'One hundred,' said Skink, like he was interrupting the big kids. Jason snickered and then covered it with a sip of his wine. Skink ploughed on, his words unusually quick, crammed together in his urge to get them out. 'One hundred that we know of. And that doesn't include the ones merely beaten up or sexually assaulted. Or the ones who are permanently scarred or who kill themselves later on.'

Prof Environment's gaze jerked around and took Skink in. It was if she'd seen him for the first time, as if they'd passed some threshold together.

'You're right, Colin,' she said. 'And it doesn't include those children killed, raped and abused. And not one of them, not one, gets the same news time or the same ministerial bloody statements as one so-called terrorist they catch with a suspect mobile phone. And don't get me talking about the abysmal resourcing and the court system.'

Soulio let out a long, slow breath. Followed it with one long, slow shake of his head. He placed a hand on her shoulder. 'Of course you're right, Meghan.'

Meghan. That was her name.

Soulio continued. 'Although I don't believe that takes away from Jason's point. It is reasonable to say that this is the terrorism century.'

Meghan stood. Her hand may have been shaking. I hadn't noticed until now how thin her wrists were. 'Domestic terrorism, David. Now, with apologies, I'm off. It's been a long week.'

She fumbled for a moment, drew her coat around her shoulders and made her way between the drinkers to the exit. Jason shot a wink at Soulio but looked quickly away, as if his eyes had been drawn by one of the half-clad undergraduates – which they probably had been. Soulio kept his eyes on the swirling liquid in his glass. I put my hand in the peanut bowl and drew out a handful of nuts. When I looked up Skink had me in his sights, an open, direct kind of look that I couldn't properly interpret. What went on his head was a mystery. First impressions were he was an open book. Later impressions suggested someone more circumspect, even secretive. I rose.

'Next round's on me,' I said.

When I returned with four glasses the tension had passed and the talk was about eighties music and the relative merits of Duran Duran and Spandau Ballet. Not a subject I cared about but I launched in with some point I'd heard on the radio about the difference between them being similar to the difference between English Breakfast and Irish Breakfast tea. That got Jason's pulse racing and I sat back in the safe port of conversational trivia.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Maate. A text message.

I typed a single ? in reply.

At front ur bldg. B there. McG

It was one of those typical McG texts – short on finesse, high on demand.

No effn way

I have Berliners

The office was empty. Skink had taken a leaf out of his cousin's book and worked half his hours on full pay. Soulio may or may not have been in his office down the corridor. The PhD student's anguished typing was absent. What could it hurt? My decision, I told myself, had nothing to do with the Gantt chart that mapped my ever receding deadlines.

I texted back *Ich bin* and found my way through the tall oak doors. McG was deep in conversation with a solid bloke on the other side of the rose bushes. I saw a parcel change hands, box-shaped and wrapped in plastic. The man turned at the sound of my footsteps. Gordon from the post office. Nice to know there were still places that offered personal service. He acknowledged me with an incline of his head and made for the front of the admin building.

McG raised three paper bags in the air and grinned. 'What took you so long?'

'I have important work to do.'

'Not like Melbourne though. Miss it?'

'Sometimes you need a change.'

'Even when you don't ask for it. No, don't glower at me. No harm in getting sacked. Happens to the best of us. The real problem is the buns have gone cold.'

'They're meant to be ...' His face lit up with a gotcha smile. 'Very funny. Hand them over.'

'Please would be nice.' He stuffed a bag in my hand. Sugar rattled in the bottom. 'Get this in ya gob.'

I shimmied the Berliner over the lip of the packet and took a bite, a second and a third. 'Wow, this is good.'

'Good, but not as good as they used to be. Harp's got a new baker and he's not quite up to scratch. I gave him a list of things for improvement he says he'll try out.'

'I'm sure that was welcome.'

McG nodded, no rancour, no irony. 'Yeah, I thought so.' There was jam on his cheek and a glob of dough at the corner of his mouth. 'Eat up. You've got to get going to Hamilton. Lucky it wasn't your right ankle that got injured or we'd be in a pickle.'

My teeth were halfway into the bun, too far for retreat and far enough for commitment. I tore a piece off and swallowed it whole. 'What do you mean *you've* got to get going?'

McG wasn't wearing the usual snake-oil suit or the sideshow swagger. Head to toe was black. He licked the sugar from his lips. 'Better get a move on. I've parked your car in one of the bigwig's spots.'

'My car? You've got *my* car?'

'Well it wouldn't be mine, would it? Hurry along.' He half sprinted down the rose-lined path and I heeled. My old Renault was surrounded by pristine, youthful corporate vehicles.

'What's all this about McG?'

'Hop in and I'll tell you. I got you a beefsteak and mushroom pie for the trip.'

I stopped three metres from the car.

'No.'

'This is important, Natey.'

Something unpleasant rose in my throat. 'Nathan. You call me Nathan.'

'Is that so? You think you're doing alright in this town all on your own? A lot of it is down to me. So get going.'

'I'm not going anywhere. You can bully me all you like. That's who you are, right, a bully?'

McG clenched his fists and the paper bag in his hand crumpled. Gravy and sauce dripped to the bitumen. In two strides he had me backed up against a shiny Cruze. I felt my anger rise. I pushed off the duco and shouldered him away. He flung the bag aside and balled his right hand at kidney level.

'What are you going to do?' I hissed. 'Hit me? True to character, you bastard!'

'You bloody ...'

'Who's the big man, eh? Go on, do what you do best. I saw you on the street that day. I saw you with that old bloke! Wow, picking on pensioners! A really big man!'

His eyes flared. I raised my hands and stepped backwards, came up short with the car at my back. McG threw his fist in my direction. I swung upwards to deflect the blow. Braced for the impact. Found air. Looked around in panic. McG's fist was fixed in space. He had pulled the punch at the last moment.

'Oi! What's happening here?'

Geena, the security officer, was racing across the car park. Built like a brick shithouse but with the speed of gazelle. She pushed herself between us, arms straining.

'That's it gentlemen.'

Her eyes went from me to McG and back again. A small shake of her head told me she was handling the situation now. I lifted my arms up, bent at the elbows and palms out in the sign of surrender. Geena's thick fingers pulled McG away.

'Iain, you know you can't let things slide like this.'

I noticed a group of students gawking from the other side of the car park. I stared them down and they hurried off to Human Behaviour one-oh-one. So much for book learning.

Eventually McG's breathing slowed and Geena deemed it safe to step away. She folded her arms over her breasts and watched as he gathered himself together. There was something pitiful about him. He turned to me.

'I'm sorry, Nathan, sorry. There's no excuse, I'm a complete prick.'

The appeal in those big blue eyes would have weakened the toughest of nuts. I didn't consider myself a nut. 'That's something we agree on.'

Geena cut in. 'It's Chance Bradbury, isn't it Iain? Your buddy?'

She pulled a phone from her pocket. It was answered almost immediately. 'Chance, Geena from the uni here. Yeah, yeah, good. I have Iain McGavisk here with me and he needs to talk. Sure. I'll hand him over right away.'

She gave McG the phone and ushered him to a free parking space four cars down. Only then did she address me. 'He has an anger problem. He's been good for years now. If he hit you, you can press charges.'

It was easy to see that pressing charges was the last thing she wanted. I considered calling her bluff. Hard to do when your legs are threatening to fold. I shook my head.

'He never landed the punch. He stopped himself.'

'Look, was this about you going to Hamilton?'

'What the hell do you know about that?'

'What do *you* know?'

'I'm not playing this game.'

'It's not a game. Trust me.'

Yeah, trust me. I'm a security guard with a uniform a size too small.

'McG might have gone about it the wrong way,' she said, 'but it's important. It would be enormously helpful if you could go to the Hamilton hospital to pick up a package. It concerns someone special who needs a bit of help.'

'Like insulin or a dialysis machine? Maybe the odd heart transplant?'

She looked sideways. 'Kind of, but you get the picture. They reckon they couldn't think of a better person to do it.'

'Who's they?'

'Us.' I swung round. McG was standing at my shoulder, his phone conversation ended. 'All of us. We think you're the best person for the job.'

He tried the renovator's dream smile on me and failed. He was looking too sorry for himself.

'I stuffed up, Nathan. You don't have to do anything you don't want to do.'

'Gee, thanks.'

'I'll be honest with you.'

'Real-estate-agent's honest or honest honest?'

'Hurtful. Truth is, it's Joan Rich. We know what you did for her, going over there. We know you rang the police the next day as well.'

I'd told no-one about the abortive phone call to the Angel Port police the following morning. If Muhs had been there things might have gone differently. Instead I'd been transferred to the delightful Sergeant Simon Peacock who'd assured me

everything had been sorted. 'Hang on,' he'd said. There'd been the sound of something unpleasant, like someone hoicking or barfing, before he'd resumed, his voice raspy. 'Sorry about that. Had Chinese last night. Think the prawns didn't agree with me. Anyway, where were we? Oh yeah, case closed.'

'Fat lot of good that did,' I said to McG.

Geena put a hand on my shoulder. 'Perhaps this time it will be different. Perhaps this time you can really help Joan. If you could see your way to doing it, we would be very grateful.'

Joan whose locket I had returned and whose small secret act of defiance I had foiled. The woman in a high-collared dress on a hot day.

The fool that I was I exhaled and agreed.

McG grinned under his contrition and opened the back door of my Renault to drop in Gordon's package. 'Don't stop on the way. Time is money.'

I reversed with care, avoiding the temptation to give McG a good push with the bumper bar, then put the car into drive and headed towards the exit into the main street. Before I turned I glimpsed McG and Geena in the rear-view mirror. They were holding hands.

I stopped in a place codenamed Hicksville, famous for its public conveniences and a beverage retailed as coffee. And to waste some time just to put one up McG. Pyrrhic but you have to take your victories where you can get them.

Tony Bartholomew called when I was sixty kilometres out of Hamilton and fighting the fatigue of cows and paddocks.

'It's good to hear your voice,' I said, and meant it. 'Are you in Angel Port or ringing from that jewel of the south, Harbourside?'

'Very droll. You sound like you're driving.'

'I've got you on speaker. I'm on my way to Hamilton.'

'And you're dissing Harbourside! I'm ringing because I have news.'

'Oh?'

'Sarah's turned up. She rang and I've also received a letter from her lawyer. She's in Melbourne and is not coming back to Harbourside or the marriage. She's already started at a practice in Beaumaris, can you believe it? This time it's for good.'

He was well rid of the woman, but I couldn't say that. 'I'm sorry.'

'It's a relief. It's going to be hard for Jeremy.'

'Why the lawyer?'

'It's about custody or whatever they're calling it these days.'

I hardly knew Tony; I only knew that his son was the centre of his life. 'And?'

'And she's happy for him to stay with me during school terms but she wants him to go to her for the majority of the school holidays and the occasional weekend.'

'How do you feel about that?'

He hesitated. 'It's better than I could have expected. I thought there might be an all-out fight and with her earning more and being the mother ...'

'You're the main carer.'

'That doesn't usually count.'

The car hit a pothole and shimmied to the left. I righted it and checked my rear-vision mirror. A clear road in front and behind. Tony continued.

'I'm going to agree to her proposal. I have Jeremy for most of the time. I'll miss him when he's not here, miss him like hell, but it's important he has contact with his mother.'

'I'm pleased for you, I think.'

'It's early days but, you know the woman I told you about, the one I met when Sarah and I separated that time?'

I didn't remember, but I didn't say.

'She's still around. We've kept in touch. Nothing like that,' he was quick to add, 'just the occasional email or phone call. It's too soon to launch into something again but the spark is still there, on my side at least.'

The big question, although I was sure I knew the answer. 'Is Sarah with Bob Robertson?'

'That's why I rang you. She was surprised to hear he'd disappeared. She'd gone to the conference in Singapore and then caught a plane to Dubai of all places. As far away from me as possible, I presume.' He laughed, no bitterness detected. 'Angel Port news doesn't lead the headlines over there.'

'Not to mention Australia.'

'Exactly. Sarah did say something that I thought might be useful.'

I waited.

'You know she was a GP here? Hang on, I'm just unlocking the car.' I heard a beep and a click. 'Right. Sarah had two patients, young women, who came to see her when they were pregnant. Both young and both single. One told her that Robertson was the father, the other wouldn't say but Sarah was pretty sure it was him from the way the girl talked.'

I had a vision of the circle of stones and Mary-Jane of the pink hair and violet flowers.

'Neither of them showed up for their next appointment. She rang them. One sounded scared and said she'd gotten rid of the baby and hung up on her, told her never to ring again. The other laughed it off.'

'Do you know their names or when this was?'

'Their names, no. One was recent, last year I think. The other was a few years back.'

'So someone got to them?'

'I wouldn't put it past Robertson. Child support is pretty pricey, not to mention his unsullied reputation as good man around town. For my money the girls got off lightly. Imagine being linked to that guy for the rest of your life because you had his baby.'

Imagine being his daughter, I thought.

'This might sound crazy, Nathan. It's about those dolls you mentioned. I have this gut feeling they're linked.'

'Abortion is not illegal. And the dolls looked like real newborn babies, not foetuses.'

'Good point, although foetus dolls are in short supply.'

'Also a good point.'

I heard the car engine start on Tony's end. 'I'd better get going or I'll be late. I have a stressed-out mother of five first up.'

'If Sarah's suspicions are right, why was she friends with Bob?'

'God only knows. I never understood the woman. Let's catch up soon. I enjoyed the other day.'

'Me too.'

'Oh, and mum's on board with the research providing Robertson stays lost.' He rang off.

The kilometres slipped by, cow, fence, tree, repeat. I reflected that the Sarah who had everything, even an aitch on the end of her name, had just ceded the most precious thing in her life, her son. I speed-dialled James.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Skink was wearing board shorts, a checked shirt and desert boots. He unstuck himself from a plastic seat and led me from the hospital reception area to a passage where sage linoleum curled up the walls. The long drive had gnawed away at my goodwill and consumed my patience. I got straight to the point.

‘Have you got the package?’

Skink shifted his weight from his left foot to his right. ‘How much has McG told you?’

‘Nothing except it’s some type of medical equipment for Joan Rich.’

‘Where’s your car?’

I told him.

‘Can I have your keys?’ he asked.

‘What for?’

‘We’ve got someone to load the package.’ When I hesitated he added, ‘It’s medical. It needs special handling.’

Against my better judgement I handed the keys over as an orderly slipped by with an empty bed. Skink held out the keys to guy.

‘Renault. Visitors car park at the back,’ said Skink.

The orderly didn’t miss a beat. He swept the keys up and was gone within moments, leaving the hum of air-conditioning in his wake. My hands turned clammy. Before I could object there was a ping. Skink glanced at his phone and started back the way we’d come.

‘Let’s go to the café. I could do with coffee and a sandwich and I’m sure you could too.’

‘I’m not sure about all this ...’ I started

Skink cut in. ‘We’ll be good to go in about fifteen minutes.’

The café was a squeeze of tables and chairs near the main entrance. An ancient shrivelled woman in lavender, matching hair, took our orders and told us she’d bring the order to our table. I remonstrated. It was like asking one of the patients to get out of bed and administer their own medication. She waved my assistance away.

'You are a dear, but I ain't dead yet. And here's a prediction, I'll be puttering along long after you've rolled up the towel.'

There was something about her attitude that reminded me of Maz. I winked at her and was gratified when she tssked me away.

Skink had selected a seat with a view of the entrance. I had to be satisfied with a faded print of a British seaside. Behind the counter the lavender lady rattled the cups and plates onto a tray designed for weightlifters. Skink checked the entrance, glanced at his phone, repeated the pattern.

'Maz?' I said to Skink. 'What happened to her father?'

'That's random.'

'Just thinking.'

'You're an interesting beast, Nathan.'

A non sequitur. Gotta love those. You get them from politicians answering questions that were never asked and from people who lack either the intelligence or the social skills to follow the line of a conversation. And narcissists. I doubted Skink fell into any of those categories. I asked again. He checked the foyer, checked his watch.

'Maz and her mum, Vi, they're good people. Like you. Well,' he laughed, and for a moment his tension softened, ' a *little* like you. Vi earned the money, Ben spent it. When she complained, he hit her.'

'She went to the police,' I said. God help me. Even then it was a statement, not a question. Even after Rich and Joan and the silence of the local coppers.

'Sure. Sergeant Peacock – he was a senior constable then – had a talk with him and sent him on his way. Vi was informed a week later that her forthcoming exhibition at the council chambers was postponed, indefinitely. Old Bobby boy was mayor then.'

I gave a non-committal shrug. Police report. Cancelled exhibition. Another non sequitur? 'And Maz's dad?'

Skink gave me his own version of a non-committal shrug, only his eyes were bright and earnest in his dark skin. 'Disappeared, with all the money they had left and debts all around town. The good news is Peacock's leaving. Seems he has an allergy to something in the town. We have an allergy to him, so it works out perfectly.'

There was a shout from somewhere inside the hospital. Skink peered past me. The automatic doors swished open and Skink stiffened. I twisted my head to follow his

gaze but the source of his anxiety had already disappeared, was only a rap of purposeful footfalls down the corridor. Skink bent over his phone and texted at speed. He leapt up.

‘We’re going now.’

‘What about our food?’

‘Time’s run out.’

He trotted to the entrance and outside. The lavender lady looked up from our tray.

‘Sorry,’ I said. ‘Seems like we’ve run out of time.’

She scowled. ‘Trouble with your generation. Impatience. What do I do with this lot?’

‘You got a dog?’

She scowled harder. ‘I’ll give it to someone who needs it and is a damn sight less ungrateful.’

Fair call. I made after Skink.

He was in the specialists’ car park. And he was nervous. Call me a slow learner. Until that moment I had taken the whole fiasco at face value.

‘Skink, does this have anything at all to do with Joan Rich?’

‘Yes, oh yes. It’s all about Joan.’

I stopped behind a black Saab, leather interior, flawless duco, and folded my arms. ‘Skink, I’m not going anywhere until you tell me what’s happening here and what I’ve got myself into.’

I had him and he knew I had him. In this negotiation I held all the cards. There was nothing stopping me from hopping back in my car and hiving it back to civilisation. Except I’d handed over my car keys. Damn.

‘The thing is, Nathan, McG wasn’t completely honest with you.’

‘There’s a surprise.’

‘The fewer people who know the full details the better, the less chance anything gets back to Leslie Rich.’

‘Why is that a problem?’

'He'll try to get Joan back.'

'Get Joan back?' The light dawned. 'Hold on, we're helping Joan leave her husband. That's pretty straightforward. Why all this clandestine, cloak-and-dagger bullshit?'

'It's not that simple. She tried to leave once before. It turned ugly.'

'Hold on, are you telling me that Joan Rich is here, in the Hamilton hospital?'

He nodded.

'Why? What's happened to her?'

'He really beat her up this time. He's never going to stop.' He jumped as a BMW pulled up into one of the reserved bays. A woman in a navy suit and court shoes stepped out. 'Can we talk while we walk?'

'Sure. You mean he won't stop until he kills her?'

Skink laughed. It was dry. 'Hell, no! Men like Leslie Rich are too smart to kill someone. Besides it's about control. It's hard to control someone if they're dead.'

Our transition from the medicos' car park to the visitors' was easy to pick. The utes and old Holdens lowered the tone.

'When did he beat her up?'

'After you went around there.'

My heart stopped. 'Me?'

'You. You, Nathan. It was the locket you brought to her house and then, when you turned up the other night, Leslie went ballistic. He accused her of disloyalty and having an affair with you and a whole lot of other crap.'

'That's absurd!'

'Abuse has its own logic.'

Skink's phone beeped and he set off again between the rows of cars. 'We're off. Quick!'

I ran after him. 'Where are we going?'

'Janice will tell you.'

'Janice? Frigging Janice?'

That's when I saw the woman in my car.

She wore a camel woollen dress, off-white scarf and dark glasses under hair waved in beige. Her head was lowered, her eyes on her hands clasped in her lap. Joan Rich?

‘Me?’ I said to Skink. ‘I’m the one driving Joan?’

‘Kind of.’

‘Where’s Janice?’

‘Hop in and get going. Take the road back to Angel Port and she’ll direct you from there.’

Loud voices struck out behind us. Skink pushed me behind a plumber’s van in the adjacent park. At the hospital entrance the BMW woman was placating a man. The man was tall, silver-haired and unhappy. Dr Leslie Rich. The woman put a hand to his upper arm. He resisted then let himself be guided inside.

I felt the pressure of Skink’s hand on my shoulder. ‘Nathan, please. I – we – know we are asking a lot but it could be Joan’s one chance.’

The sun was hot. Sweat dribbled between my shoulder blades and down my back. I wasn’t the good man Skink kept telling everyone I was. Before me stood a genuinely good if slightly barmy man and he had appealed to me for help. I sighed.

‘Okay.’

That was the second time today I’d caved. Briony would have been pleased with my community spirit. She would have said the seachange had done me good. Skink’s relief showed as he grabbed my hand and shook.

‘Thank you. You’re a gift. Really, thank you.’

‘Just one question. Why are you involved?’

He shrugged. ‘I was lucky. My father was the gentlest bloke on earth. Others are not so lucky. It’s the right thing to do.’

It was a thin explanation yet it struck me as the truth. He put his hand to my back and propelled me into the car. Before my bum hit the driver’s seat he was gone. I crunched the gears in my nervousness then reversed with more care than normal, terrified that Rich or a hospital official would block our way. The coast stayed clear and I took the far exit and headed south.

The streets were full of school traffic. Mums were lined up outside low cyclone-wire fencing, the majority on their mobiles. Buses were pulling out to roll away the

kilometres to outlying properties. I braked at a school sign and dribbled over the white and black strips of the zebra crossing. Slow wheels and racing heart. The fifty sign was one of those mirages – close but forever out of reach. When it finally came I put my foot down and felt the satisfying lift as the car picked up speed. The eighty, the hundred and we were out of town. Next to me, Joan remained silent, kept her head down. I wondered for the first time if she was in pain.

The cop car took me by surprise. It was parked on the other side of the road, waiting for valuable traffic infringement revenue or P-platers let loose from school. My eyes leapt to the speedo. Right on one hundred, nothing to worry about there. I was nearly past when the Pajero executed a textbook u-turn and swung in behind me. I eased off the pedal a little, hoping the incident was purely coincidental. It didn't feel like it. The vehicle edged closer, too close for comfort. No friendly bumper-to-bumper kiss. Near a cross road scored with tyre marks the Pajero was no more than a metre from the Renault. It stayed that way for two or three minutes, tagging me, precision driving at its best. A pick-up flew past on the other side and then the police vehicle jerked out from behind and into the oncoming lane, drawing alongside, elbow to elbow.

I looked across. Senior Constable Diesso snarled at me from the passenger seat, his offsider Abbott at the wheel. The passenger window went down and Diesso made the sign for me to follow suit. I complied, easing off the accelerator.

'Business in town?' he called over the ruckus of tyre and engine.

'Yeah,' I managed.

Diesso laughed. 'Speak up Mr Newland. I can't hear you!'

'I said yes!'

Up ahead a fuzzy image clarified itself into a car, heading our way. I lifted my foot from the pedal. The Pajero matched my pace but kept to its lane. Sweat made the steering wheel slippery in my hands.

'How's the girlfriend?' called Diesso.

Not a lascivious grin, not quite. He was peering over at my passenger. From the height of his vehicle I guessed he couldn't get a proper look at her. For her part, Joan Rich kept her head turned away.

'A bit old even for you!' said Diesso. Abbott sniggered.

The approaching car was now no more than four hundred metres away. If this was a game of chicken, then names weren't going to hurt me. I braked and swung the Renault towards the edge of the road.

'Keep 'em hanging Nathan!' Diesso yelled.

Abbott bit down on the accelerator and the Pajero cut in front, missed us by mere inches and roared off. I hit the dirt hard and skidded to a halt in a low ditch. Somewhere an insect buzzed. The smell of warm grass competed with the smell of car exhaust. The oncoming sedan barely slowed. It pelleted past, a young guy at the wheel. No way was he going to have 'bawk bawk' directed at him.

Joan put her hand out and touched my knee. 'Bastards!'

It was not a word I'd expected from someone like Joan. It wasn't her voice either. The woman swung her face to me.

'Call me Janice,' she said.

She wasn't Janice either. The clear skin and red hair escaping from under the beige wig were someone else's entirely: the abalone diver's wife, Ramona. A thousand thoughts went through my mind, none of them comforting. There was the first tang of bitterness. Ramona must have seen it in my face.

'It's an important thing you're doing, Nathan. We need to keep moving. Trust me.'

I looked over my shoulder in the direction of the town and then ahead to where the paddocks would eventually give way to salt and the low, tangled scrub of the coast. I wasn't feeling the warmth of Hamilton and certainly had no desire to cosy up with the likes of Abbott and Diesso. Choice was limited. I reversed the car out of the ditch and pointed the car in the direction of Angel Port.

Ramona kept her counsel. Plenty of time for me to seethe and consider my options. The countryside was flat and featureless, so unrelentingly fawn, that you could kid yourself there was no end to it, one of those nightmares you can't wake from. We passed a farmhouse surrounded by the capital el of a verandah and the fallen punctuation of dead machinery. A mob of cows were black and white splotches in a dun paddock.

'Turners' place,' said Ramona. 'Good people the Turners.'

Like I cared. My goal, I'd decided, was to dump my passenger where she wanted, then cut and run. I accelerated twenty over the hundred speed limit to prove my

indifference. Ramona's dress and scarf were ruffled and fussy to within an inch of their lives, but she was calm, oh so calm, so infuriatingly calm. I held the speed for a few more kilometres for pride's sake and then eased off. No point adding a speeding fine and demerit points to what was already a disaster.

It was a contrary sky – clear on one horizon, stained with cloud on the other. My suit – it seemed days ago I was at work and not just that morning – felt oppressive. I indicated onto the verge.

'What are you doing?' Ramona's tone was sharp.

'I'm hot. I'm taking off my jacket.' It came out grumpy, and why not? I was grumpy, worse.

'The temperature will soon drop.'

'Then I'll put my jacket back on.'

It was cooler out of the car. I took my time folding the jacket and removing the creases, laying it on the backseat next to Gordon's package. Ramona had her glasses off and was peering at the road behind. She gave me an apologetic smile.

'Sorry about all the secrecy, Nathan. I'm sure you understand.'

'Yeah, Leslie Rich is a wife-beating arsehole.'

'And the rest,' she said.

Whatever, I thought, as I pulled the Renault back onto the bitumen in a spray of gravel. 'Tell me. Where is Joan Rich? Was she even in the hospital?'

'She was there alright. Broken ribs and a collapsed lung this time.'

'Won't her husband force her to go home?'

'That's what happened in the past. This time her sister's flown in from Queensland. They left half an hour before we did.'

'Won't Leslie find out from the hospital staff where's she gone?'

'She wasn't formally discharged.'

'I thought there were laws about mandatory reporting?'

'That's for children. Not for a woman if says she "fell down the stairs".'

I let a few more kilometres roll by. 'So why are you involved in all this?' I asked.

Ramona fidgeted with the edges of her sleeves, peered out the side window. 'Skink and Mary-Jane tole you about the girls. Young women, I should say. Andy's daughter Gigi, my stepdaughter, was one of them.'

A smear loomed on the road ahead.

Ramona didn't look back at me for a response. I didn't give one. 'She's been off the rails ever since. She's in Sydney now, in the self-medicating scene.'

I knew people in Melbourne in the 'self-medicating scene'. It didn't necessarily have anything to do with trauma and most certainly had nothing to do with Mr Robert Robertson. More like party central.

'What does Andy think about you being involved in all this?' I asked.

A pause. 'He doesn't know.'

'Andy and Bob are all buddy buddy, right?'

I felt Ramona's eyes on me this time. There was a pleading in her voice I never expected to hear. 'He's not a bad bloke, Andy, a bit rough around the edges, but good at heart.'

'Good, but cosies up with the man you reckon ruined his daughter's life? Yeah, right! And you stay with him. So this is little more than a conscience-salving episode?'

'That's not ...'

The smear on the road converted into a mob of sheep. A couple of kelpies yapped at their heels and a farmer with leathered skin wove a two-fifty CC at their backsides. I braked.

'Damn!' Ramona punched the dashboard. 'Damn, damn, damn!'

She twisted around to inspect the road behind us. For the first time I realised she was scared. There were creases across her forehead and her pupils were dark holes. I caught her fear.

'What's wrong?'

'Nothing.'

'Is someone following us? Is Leslie Rich following us?'

It seemed impossible. We had left him long ago at the hospital and I'd seen no sign of a tailing vehicle. Impossible or not, I wasn't taking any chances. I beeped the

horn. The farmer pulled his bike into an arc and spied us from under the shade of his hat.

‘Bruce Turner!’ said Ramona. ‘Stay here. I have an idea.’

It took Turner a while to recognise Ramona under her disguise. I knew when he did. He leaned forward and pecked her on the cheek, laughed as his hat fell back from his head. They huddled as Ramona chewed his ear. He gave one nod, two, and they shook hands. Ramona raced back to the car as Turner whistled to the dogs and the mob of sheep made its ponderous way to the roadside. Turner raised a finger from his bike handle as we inched past and sped off.

I checked the rear vision mirror. Something glinted at the point where the road met the horizon, lost to sight when there was a shrill whistle and the kelpies herded the sheep back onto the road. Next to me, Ramona relaxed in her seat.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Angel Port was not our destination.

Ramona directed me onto a two-lane road signposted to Nelson and the South Australian town of Robe. The road curved over creeks, around hills, through trees, past hamlets that looked a lot like Papkoorook. Once, as I lowered gear to surmount a hill, I glimpsed a car entering the valley behind us. We were over the crest before I could make it out. Thirty kilometres after that we took a left that brought us onto the coast road. Ramona pointed west. It didn't take an MBA to work out where we were headed. It was the gloaming by then, the sky lit with a rainbow of pastels and the birds squawking and squabbling in every tree. Light caught the leaves of the gums as if they were flame trees. The last turn came quickly and, of course, led to the Cape Catastrophe lighthouse.

The car park was empty except for a single white sedan, South Australian registration. It held no occupants and I wondered if some adventurous holidayers had been foolhardy enough to cross to the lighthouse ignorant or careless of how treacherous the tides were.

I cut the engine, pulled myself from the car and hobbled to the fence line, my left ankle stiff from the drive. The sea whispered and played, nothing like the furious monster I had confronted last time. The lighthouse dozed underneath its vermilion roof. The South Aussies were nowhere to be seen. Drowned probably. What's that old joke? One less Croweater ...

I jumped as Ramona's hand landed on my shoulder. The wig and fussy clothing were gone. Glossy red hair fell over the fine stitching of a checked shirt.

'I'm going to leave you here,' she said.

'How? Oh!' The SA car. 'And I just drive off into the sunset, right?'

By way of answer Ramona held out the package McG had dropped in the car earlier. I'd all but forgotten about it. A metal box wrapped in plastic.

'Actually, Janice wanted you to take this to the lighthouse and wait with it in the keeper's room until someone comes to collect it.'

'You can stop with the Janice bullshit!'

Ramona blinked.

'And how come I'm taking this – whatever it is – over there and not you? I've done my bit and I'm out of here.'

'It's best if I don't take it. I'm too close. Keep it in the plastic.'

Out west the day was shouting its last hurrah. The heat of the day was receding, replaced by the mixed messages of autumn. The tide was a long way out. The lighthouse blinked into motion. A triangle of light flared over the ocean, flared again and rested before striking again.

'What's in the box?'

'Nothing much.'

How many times had I warned Briony about not being used up by other people? She had countered that she didn't mind watering the plants/babysitting the rat/visiting the mother/driving to pick up the children from school in a suburb thirty kilometres away while stopping en route to surprise them with doughnuts. Minding, I would say, wasn't the point. The point was respect.

'We respect what you're doing,' said Ramona, as if reading my mind.

'I don't know what it is I'm doing.'

'Here.' She proffered the box once more. 'Take it.' There was an urgency to her entreaties now.

Still I resisted. 'I want your assurance that I'm not getting involved in anything criminal.'

'There's nothing illegal in there, Nathan. You're helping right a wrong.'

She glanced at where the road entered the car park and, reassured it was silent and empty, splayed fine fingers across the top of my arm. 'Please Nathan.'

It was that final appeal that made me acquiesce. I reached out. The box was lighter than I'd expected.

'You know where the key is?' asked Ramona. I nodded. 'When you go in, lock the door behind you. Then wait. There are enough supplies there to get you through a few hours, and some old novels.'

To my surprise she leant forward and kissed me on the cheek. I savoured the faint haze of sweat on her skin before starting down the track to the beach. Gulls, settling for the night, rose around me, squawking and complaining.

Ramona's head popped over the side. 'And Nathan, you remember where that cairn is? The cairn that marks the bush track at the end of the cove?'

'Why the hell?'

Ramona had already stepped back and out of sight.

The trek to the lighthouse was remarkably easy, even with the slight swelling in my ankle. The water in the channel was toe height and calm. The key was under its rock. The lock turned smoothly. The stairs to the lighthouse keeper's room were sound and the room itself cosy, the sea a distant dull roar through the thick walls. I switched on the overhead globe and laid the metal box on the table. I left. I had played my part and I was leaving. Ramona and Skink and McG could give all the orders they liked but I wouldn't be hanging around like some pussy waiting for my mystery date. I locked the lighthouse door and returned the key to its home. The light was falling fast. The channel was a little deeper than on my arrival but gave no problems. In no time I was back at the base of the cliff.

Something made me hesitate. At first I thought it was my imagination. An intrusive sound. It transformed into the hum of an engine, barely audible over the waves. There was a sudden burst of headlights from the clifftop that cut across the granite table to the lighthouse. I hadn't been wrong. I flattened myself against the cliff as a figure strode into the light and threw a giant silhouette across the shoreline.

I didn't need to look. I knew it was Dr Leslie Rich. He'd come for his wife and instead he was going to get me, her so-called lover and co-conspirator. You didn't need a psychiatric specialty to know he wasn't going to be a happy man.

I wouldn't be any good in a war. Quick reaction to save life or brain freeze? Brain freeze every time. It was only an accident that saved Rich from seeing me. I was under an overhang of orange earth held together by cushion bush roots. Through the tangle of roots I saw him peer over the edge to where I hid. Seeing nothing, he stepped back out of sight and bellowed over the landscape.

'Joan!'

It was then that I realised my mistake. The dull light of the keeper's room was a caramel glow in the night.

'Joan! I know you're there! I can see you!'

I heard footsteps moving away from the cliff and the sound of a car door. The decision I made wasn't a conscious one. My limbic system at last said, 'Run!' I ran.

The first part of the spit was in relative darkness, below the line of Rich's headlights. I made for a low fissure of rock and tracked along it to the nearest boulders. I couldn't go over them, that would make me too visible. I'd have to find a path through them. I spied a low crevice and fell to my stomach to wriggle through. On the other side was a flat rock hidden from the cliff. I half rose and jumped onto it, felt the reverberation of pain in my left foot, kept going. The hippo boulder got in my way. I ran into it head first, jarred my neck, tasted blood where I'd bitten the inside of my cheek. No time to worry about that. The channel opened up all of a sudden, a black chasm filled with black water, how high I couldn't tell. I paused on the rim.

'I'm coming Joan!'

Rich's voice startled me. He was closer than I thought. I spun around and jumped into the water, calf level now, and dragged myself across the current and up the other bank. In my panic I hadn't considered the lighthouse's nightly vigil. It caught me in its backlight – flash-flash, delay. Behind me Rich shouted. I didn't look back but fled to where I'd left the key. The rock was slippery and I raised it on the third attempt, fumbled with the plastic and ran to the door. The key turned and I tumbled in. I pushed the interior bolt into place and fell back on the heavy metal.

The break of waves and the throbbing of my heart stopped me from hearing Rich's approach. A wave of sound and vibration flung me forward. Another one. Rich was banging against the door with something a lot less benign than the flat of his hand. He kept going. Pound on pound, the sound reverberating through the tower. I covered my ears and made for the stairs, terrified he'd succeed in breaking in and use whatever it was he wielded on me.

The keeper's room felt less cosy with the crashes rolling up the stairwell. I spotted a hatch in the floor. I flung it closed and pushed its rusted bolt across. Instantly the noise was quieter, yet no less threatening for that.

Rich hit the door five or six more times. A strange silence followed the last swell of sound. I waited until it receded and then edged alongside the landward window, hoping I'd see the good doctor's receding back. No such luck. He stood ten metres from the base of the lighthouse, peering up.

'Joan!' he yelled. 'I know you're in there. I saw you.'

Damn, I'd forgotten the light a second time. I cut it and waited a few seconds before approaching the window again, keeping to its side.

'Joan!'

Rich was a black figure, backlit by his car's headlights. He raised an object in his hand – a car jack if I was not mistaken – and hit it hard three times against his palm.

'Joan. They told me you were here!'

His cold fury penetrated the walls of the tower. I shuddered, made no other move.

'You disappoint me Joan! No-one is coming to save you. Everyone knows you're useless, no good to anyone, not even to your own children.'

He hit his hand one more time.

'Joan! Come home now and I'll forgive you.'

Receiving no reply he returned to the door. The clangs resounded again, a sure steady rhythm designed to terrorise. I put my hand over my ears and crouched on the floor.

The sudden silence was as terrifying as the echoes. I strained to hear if Rich had broken in, to hear if his feet were flying up the metal steps. I scabbled up, my eyes on the hatch, terrified it would open, and grabbed the kettle, aware it was no match for an iron car jack. I waited. There was no sound, no squeak of hinges. When I finally concluded Rich wasn't on his way up to kill me I tiptoed back to the window.

Rich was still out there. He was not alone. Two new sets of headlights beamed out from the clifftop. They lit him up like a sideshow target. The lights flickered as figures moved before them, reminding me of a shadow puppet show I'd seen as a kid. One set of lights went off, then the second. Only Rich's headlights were left. Then they too were cut. The world was shades of grey.

My night vision is not the best so the events outside were hazy. A faint squawk and flap of gulls as they were once again unsettled. A shadow on the rock table. A glint of something by the marker boulder. Smudges that expanded and contracted alongside the channel, or maybe not, maybe a trick of the eye or a spray of water. A flick of something in the air and, a long minute later, something solid on the near side of the canal. The object pulled itself upright and transformed into a human figure. A second figure materialised alongside, then another, another, and another until they formed a line along the edge. At some unseen signal they moved forward.

I checked back on Leslie Rich. He was still at the foot of the lighthouse, a straight figure, his back to me, the jack dangling from his hand.

He didn't move as the line advanced upon him. With my eyes adjusted I could make out small differences in the five – one was tall, one wide, one tiny. Something glinted in the hand of the one on the right, a knife maybe. Another wore a jacket that emitted the odd spark, like reptilian scales. In every other way they were indistinguishable, faceless, shapeless and sexless in black clothing and hoods. Dripping wet too, no doubt. Not that that stopped their procession, incremental as it was, barely perceptible. All at once they had traversed the rock shelf to within metres of Rich, close enough to restrict his movement, too far for physical contact.

'Who are you?' called Rich, his voice hardly carrying above the sound of the waves.

There was no reply.

'Who are you? What have you done with my wife?' Fear roughened his voice.

The gang of five kept its counsel. At a second invisible signal they fell into an arc formation, tight, and moved closer to Rich. He retreated. They advanced, shepherding him around the lighthouse. He continued to fall back, lost his footing, found it, stumbled backwards over shattered ground.

'Get away from me!' he yelled. He swung out with the bar but they were too far away.

I squeezed up against the window to get a better view as Rich disappeared around the exterior wall. His ring of attackers disappeared a moment later.

It never occurred to me to go to Rich's aid. Scratch that. It did occur to me, of course it occurred to me. What human being wouldn't have such a thought? But it was not possible. There were five unknown assailants out there, armed with I don't know what. Even unarmed, the numbers weren't in my favour. And I honestly never thought it would end like it did. I'd heard enough to accept that Rich was an abusive husband and I'd now seen it with my own eyes: Rich banging the door, hefting a weapon. He needed a good scare; he needed a serious disincentive to track down his wife and force her back home. That's what I told myself.

I raced to the window on the sea side as Rich and the pack came in sight. The same formation – a lone man retreating before a circle of five hooded figures. They kept moving and were soon past my field of vision, even with my shoulder hard to the cold

glass. I looked around the room, desperate, and saw the steps leading upwards. I raced for the lamp room.

The stairs were the same as those below, metal and sharply twisted. There were maybe twenty or thirty steps in all. The top was closed off with a hatch. I pushed with one hand, then two, until the heavy wood gave way and I could pull myself up. As I entered the lamp flashed and in quick succession flashed again, followed by a pause in which I looked around. The lamp room walls comprised eight glass panels with the lamp mounted on a platform at the room's centre. It was a newish monster, all mirrors and enamelled metal and electrical warning signs. No smell of kerosene or whatever it was they used to use to light the lamp, just the sharp scent of salt, dust and rust. Long gone were the days when a keeper lit the flame manually and watched over it like a mother with her infant.

The double flash came again, and the pause. I found a spot away from the direct beam and peered out to the long black sea. The flares had ruined my night vision again and I had to wait for the next flashes to see anything. On the first I saw Rich, his hand holding the car jack aloft. A second revealed the pale oval of his face pinned on the five shadows crowding him, less than human, more than spectres.

A pause.

In the next flash Rich twisted around in panic at the thurumph and spray of the blowhole at his back. Even from where I stood the sound was like a sonic boom. The world went dark and lit up again. Rich flung himself into a crouched position as if hit. Behind him the blowhole shot crystal power upward like a stage set, splintering the air.

The dark.

Light. Rich reeled around and stumbled towards his assailants. Light. The mob advanced.

The dark.

Light. Rich lunged for freedom. Light. A tableau: attackers, rock, man, white water, black sky.

The dark.

Light. Rich leapt to his right. Light. Rich flailing before the blowhole.

The dark.

The blowhole reared up. Her waters broke over Rich. Terror sharpened his face.

The dark.

A flash and Rich was gone. Twin flash. Barren wet rock.

The long dark.

In the next few flashes the figures retreated. One flash and they were near the edge of my vision, the next they were gone. I stole a glance landward then looked back to sea. In the flashes, nothing human, nothing but water and rock and sky. I peered back to the rock shelf. I detected shadows and movement, nothing I could be sure of. I looked back to sea. A spout of water was brilliant white in the lighthouse flash. The next flash the bedrock was awash with water. But there was no Rich. I turned back to the shore. Maybe a movement closer to the cliff. Maybe. Back to the water and the blowhole. Nothing. I ran to the top of the stairs, put a foot on the first rung but decided against it, ran back to the windows, keeping away from the blinding flash of the lamp. Had Rich already found safety at the base of the lighthouse when I'd turned away? Had he emerged, a shaken figure, humbled, but alive? Was that dark shape over to the right him slinking away now that the terrifying hunt had finished?

I waited and watched until my eyes were gritty. After an hour, I gave it up.

Hell, I don't know how long it was before I gave up my vigil. It could have been an hour. It could have been three. Time was immeasurable. But there was a point at which I knew there would be no rebirth for Rich. The rocks on which the lighthouse stood were nailed to the earth and would not roll away.

I put a hand to the iron railing of the stairs and tried the first step down. It was a clumsy movement, my feet numb and my legs stiff. I drew in a breath. Breathed out. Breathed in again. Found the rhythm of the light – in out, in out, pause – then made a slow careful descent terrified that I'd topple down into the darkness. The steps seemed steeper and thinner than when I'd climbed them. I misjudged the last one, hit the keeper's room floor with a thud and lost my footing. For a time I lay on the floor and felt only the renewed throb of agony in my foot.

The decision to stay in my tower was not a conscious one. Call it inertia. Call it self-preservation. Outside was ugly and threatening. Inside a lock and a bolted hatch stood between me and whatever lurked out there. At some point I slept. When I woke the world was greying to daylight and I was lying on the keeper's bed with a rough blanket over me. The struggle to return to sleep was quickly lost. The day claimed me and with it the night's horrors.

I found my feet and forced myself to look outside. The windows offered a narrow, grimy, birdshit view each way, one seaward, one landward. Leslie Rich was absent from both. No Rich. The two words dogged me like a mantra. No Rich. No Rich. No Rich.

The anger burst through me. I grabbed the thin mattress of the bed and thrust it against the wall, then picked up the bed itself and flung it backwards. Its metal frame clanked against the stone and bounced off the floor. I wrenched the cupboard open and paddled the contents onto the floor, like a dog digging a hole in the sand. The teabags flew from their box and sprayed across the room. The milk carton thumped to the wall and started dribbling. Papers and tinned food flew.

'No Rich!' I shouted.

Still infuriated I lifted the toaster and hurled it to the floor. My hand was on the kettle when I saw the metal box I'd carried over the day before. Was it only yesterday? I kicked it across the narrow space. There was that satisfying ring of metal on metal as it hit the frame of the overturned bed and came to rest on its side against the wire mesh base. Only then did I stop, the wreckage all around me.

That metal box, that wily Holy Grail McG, Skink, Ramona and whoever bloody else had lured me with. I tore off the plastic cover. It had a lock but when I tried the lid it opened easily. Inside was shredded paper, the type you use to protect precious cargo. I swirled my hand to find what else the box held. The answer was nothing. All packing and no substance. I clanged the lid shut and kicked the box aside once more. It hit the cupboard and rattled to silence. No-one was coming to collect it. It was the messenger they had wanted in the lighthouse, not the message.

I hadn't been a decoy. I had been bait.

I scrambled down the stairs, bumping shins, missing steps, and fell into the heaving world of sky, sea and rock. I had made a few steps towards the channel when my conscience got the better of me. I made a u-turn to skirt the lighthouse and found my way to the blowhole. A wave rolled in, hit the fissure, and burst through the gap. Not that high, not that frightening. The sea had calmed during the night, transformed itself into the aquamarine of holiday snaps. Further out at sea the waves rose and fell like a mermaid's sleeping breast. No Rich.

Duty done I made my way to the channel. The water was three-quarters of the way to the top and, when I tested it, ripped my hands in the direction of the open ocean. That meant delaying, a long excruciating delay in which I feared the arrival of the police or tourists who would link me with Rich. I found a low rock and lay behind it, away from

any prying eyes on the cliff, and felt strangely subdued by the sun on my back. Clouds started on in and the loss of the sun brought me to my senses. The tide was ebbing but still hip-deep but I knew I could wait no longer. I plunged backwards into the channel and pulled myself across the flow, losing a few feet to the undertow but arriving not far downstream from the marker boulder. I clawed my way back and found myself on the opposite bank, wet and safe. A quick peek told me the way was clear and I made my way as fast as I could over the rocks to the cliff track leading to the car park.

By the time I neared the top there was nothing left in my legs or my lungs. I peered over the ridge. A red sedan, spick, low-slung, was parked at an angle to gain the best view of the western promontory. A man with his back to me held a child on his shoulders. They were laughing. The car was vaguely familiar, the man's back tugged at my mind. No, I couldn't place it. Imagination, I told myself. I ducked back down and prayed the man hadn't heard my heart pounding and wouldn't come in search of me. My instinct was all for survival. I slid back down to the shoreline and hid under an overhang until I heard the car start up and I was alone.

I didn't make the trek back up. I'd seen what I needed to. My car wasn't there. I knew where it was. McG's exhortation to remember the cairn of pocked stones was no idle chatter.

I found my feet and headed east along the beach, over the tumble of rocks and the pools of water and up the skinny path to the cairn. It was a bronze beacon on the clifftop and I leant my hip against it to get my breath. It was all I could do to take a last look at the Cape Catastrophe lighthouse before I turned inland.

As McG had said, there were markers for those with eyes to see, blue metallic strips nailed into bushes and the occasional pine post. I rose and fell with the sandhills for what seemed eons, past the place where we'd lunched, through sand drifts that pulled at my feet. At last a flat greyish ribbon of scrubland rose from the sand. My destination. I limped up one last dune, down its back and into the fuggy shade of the forest. I don't think I'd ever appreciated trees so much in my life.

The car park was my oasis and my Renault, parked in the half shade of a sheoak, was my shelter. The door was unlocked, the keys in the ignition. On the passenger seat was a two-litre bottle of water and a lunch box containing a banana, a cheese and ham sandwich, and a muesli bar. No chocolate koala this time. I fell into the driver's seat and put the bottle to my lips.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

I took the long way back to Angel Port, heading west, north, east and finally south with the vague hope that it would separate me from the events at the lighthouse. Once or twice I pulled into a layby where rubbish bins overflowed. It was partly to be seen by the truckies or caravaners who shared the space. It was also to delay going home. Despite my efforts I eventually made it there, having no memory of the deceleration to eighty, sixty and fifty, not recalling the main street and the sushi shop or St Bede's. My mind came onto high alert at Bishop Reserve. I circled the park slowly enough to allow me to scan my street. It was empty: no stray cars and no police officers camped at the door. I turned into The Parade and into my drive with one thought in mind: pack and get the hell out of town.

I was congratulating myself on my escape and had the key in the front door lock when the sound of an engine threatened at my back. I swung round as a car door slammed and a black figure loomed up.

'Nathan!'

I put an elbow up to shield myself.

'Nathan! Thank god you're here!'

I recognised the voice. 'Jennifer?'

She materialised into something solid and fell into my arms.

'They've found him! They've found dad!' she sobbed. 'He's dead.'

The body of Robert Robertson AM, chair of Robertson's Rural Holdings, former mayor and current mayoral candidate, had been found on Mount Abrupt, a long hike from Bryan Swamp. He was in full bush gear, his backpack torn and twisted on his torn and twisted back, a walking stick metres away down the slope.

I handed Jennifer a cup of tea – milky with two sugars – and waited for her to continue. She put her hands around the mug for warmth and lost herself in the steam. The mug was the colour of wattle and had been a present from Briony from the tea shop in Sassafras. I gave a low whistle for the dog. It would have been the perfect moment for Spectre to plonk her bum on Jennifer's feet and warm the woman's broken heart. But the dog was gone.

‘The police reckon it was an accident,’ she said at last. ‘His body was found about a hundred metres below one of the lookouts. There are warning signs all about and a guardrail.’

‘Who found him?’ I asked.

‘Constable Badcock, the one from Hall’s Gap. I guess she knows all the danger spots out there.’

Good old Badcock.

‘So Badcock thinks it was an accident?’

Jennifer gave me a sharp look. ‘That’s a funny question.’

My face must have said something I didn’t want it to. I rose, made a fuss of pulling cheddar and salami from the fridge to make toasted sandwiches, kept my back to her. I didn’t trust my voice or my ability to dissemble. Behind me I heard quiet crying and the slow sip of tea.

‘The tea’s good. Thanks,’ said Jennifer.

There is something wonderfully soothing about the smell of grilling cheese. I breathed it in while keeping an eye on Jennifer. Her eyes were the colour of new eucalypt leaves, the same colour as the sleeveless puffer jacket she wore. My heart went out to her.

‘I’m sorry, Jennifer, I really am. Whatever your father did or whoever he was, he was your father.’

‘Thanks. I knew you’d understand.’

We ate the sandwiches in silence, the bread golden brown with melted butter as it should be. Small talk eluded us. My mind was too preoccupied with images of Rich backing up to the blowhole, of hands guiding Robertson to the edge of the mountain. The sandwich lodged in my stomach. My yawning suitcase was like an itch.

‘Nathan, are you okay?’

I opened my mouth and closed it again. I wasn’t bloody well okay, I was bloody pissed off and terrified I was going to be implicated in a murder, maybe two murders. There are many kinds of bullshit in this world. My favourite, frequently sprouted by Briony and hinted at by my ex-wife Eve, is that white, middle-class men don’t understand what the rest of the world suffers. They meant what women suffer. The real point was, they weren’t me. Skink had tried the same bullshit on me, pretty rich given he

was also a middle-class bloke, whatever his songline and however far across the highway he had been raised. Tough shit.

Okay, I don't know what it's like to be denied a taxi or a drink because you're Indigenous or what it's like to have some dickhead feel you up at work because you've got tits. So shoot me. That doesn't mean I don't care. And it doesn't mean I don't believe something's wrong in paradise. But none of that gave McG and Skink and their little cabal the right to lure me to Cape Catastrophe, to bloody well put my life on the line and make me a witness to Leslie Rich's fall into that effin blowhole. Rich was an arsehole. He deserved punishment, but not that and not in that way. That's what laws were for. Sergeant van Wiessen was his own kind of arsehole, true, but retribution was rightly his and those of his kind.

'Nathan?'

I shoved my plate away and scraped my chair back across the tiles, gouging marks into the slate and not caring. The chair clattered to the floor. I opened my mouth again and at that moment saw Jennifer's face. On it I read fear. The anger went out of me and was replaced by shame. I leant forward and took her hands in mine as gently as my mood would allow.

'I'm sorry, Jennifer, so sorry.'

'You're crying,' she said, solicitude replacing alarm.

'I'm sorry.'

'Sorry for what?'

'Sorry for your father. For everything.'

I felt her hands squeeze mine. 'You're not to blame. Hell, if anyone should be sorry, it's me, dragging you out to the lake when we hardly knew each other. You must have wondered who that mad woman was.'

'No. No, it's not that.'

Her voice gentled. 'So, what is it?'

I withdrew my hands. That was the one question to which there was no right answer. I've just seen your dad's mate being murdered. I think your dad was done in too. They did terrible things to young women. They beat their wives. Saying any of those things was impossible. Saying anything at all was impossible. I righted my chair and sat back opposite her.

‘Nathan?’

I took a breath in. ‘Sorry, Jennifer. This is all about you, not about me. I guess I’m sorry for what you’ve been through, for losing your dad. I can’t explain why I got so emotional. There are things at work.’

‘I know it’s been tough. I heard about the police.’

I gasped at that. ‘Yes, yes, I didn’t want to say anything. After all, it’s not your fault, but that was a bit of a shock. Being a “person of interest” isn’t much fun. Bastards.’

‘That’s something we agree upon. Here,’ she pushed my plate towards me, ‘eat. You know the joke about the narcissistic cheese? He looked in the mirror and said, “Hallo me!”’.

I groaned, but she had broken the spell. The urgency to leave bled away and I found myself being led by Jennifer to the bedroom. The blue curtains shed watery light across the quilt. Outside there was the flick-flick of wisteria, but inside the air was warm and still. We went to bed fully clothed and started by tracking each other’s tears. Mine were dry now – a channel emptied – but Jennifer’s flowed afresh. I kissed her cheeks, her eyelids and the base of her neck where some of the moisture had collected. She slowly quietened and brought her lips to mine. They were briny and soft. She raised her arms and I pulled her jumper over her shoulders, then her cotton shirt. When no piece of clothing was left between us I stretched my body over hers, protecting her, held that position for as long as I could manage before desire overcame us and I entered her. It was slow, piercingly intimate, ending not with shouts but with a gentle exchange of names. I held her close and she fell asleep almost instantly, her face a pattern of both grief and happiness.

I didn’t sleep but I dared not move in case I disturbed her. That only made the need to stretch a leg, scratch behind my ear or roll over more acute. I looked at her across the expanse of the pillow and felt defeat. I was falling in love with the daughter of a man I believed to have been murdered. I could whisper sweet nothings into her ear – all true – but could never tell her the true truth. If it was the true truth. I couldn’t even tell her my suspicions. Not the best foundation to build a relationship on. And I should know, I was a master at laying down chalky concrete. I kissed Jennifer on the forehead and drifted off for a moment, waking with my cheek on hers. I settled my arm more comfortably over her and let sleep take me. The big questions could wait until morning.

I woke to the beep of electrical appliances. The power must have gone off again during the night but had now returned. I rolled over to check the time and realised that the bed next to me was empty. The house had that stillness that only the absence of another human being, or a Basenji for that matter, can create. I checked every room all the same, padding from one to the other in bare feet in the early morning light. There was no Jennifer and no note. The flat terrible feeling took me by surprise yet I knew it was the for the best. I knew I couldn't stay. Yesterday's urgency was back. I had to get out. I pushed thoughts of Jennifer aside. Love or not, the truth could never out.

I hobbled my way back to my bedroom and pulled my suitcase from under the bed. That's when I saw the large oblong package leaning against the wardrobe. Inside the brown paper was a framed picture, the lighthouse painting from the Cherub Café that I'd seen the day I'd been there with Bob Robertson. Mary-Jane's signature was in the bottom corner. When I'd first seen the picture I hadn't been able to decipher the sub-text, if that's what you called it. In my bedroom's turquoise light, the patterns resolved into rings and ellipses, randomly interwoven, one perhaps a crown of thorns, one of stones, one watery and ceaselessly flowing. I pushed the painting against the wall, bent on destroying it and not destroying it at the same time, go figure, and started the methodical process of packing. Socks. Jocks. Shorts. T-shirts.

It took me a while to register the noises outside my window, the sound of metal hitting metal and men farking. I peered through the curtains to see two men and a removals van going about their business in Janice's driveway. Movement at the station. Before I knew it I was out the front door and intercepting the smaller of the blokes, a wiry blond, as he wheeled a trolley towards Janice's front door. His mate, a supervisor type wearing a turban, leant against the van with arms and legs crossed, watching me with suspicion. I waved a hand.

'Hi! I was wondering if either you want a drink. Tea, coffee?' It was the first thing that came into my head.

The small guy shook his head. 'Nah, we won't be long. This is a light load.'

He was right. It was a pitiful load. More than two-thirds of the truck was empty.

'If you change your mind.'

'Thanks.' I waited a heartbeat as if the question had just occurred to me. 'What about the dog?'

He sniffed the air. 'No dog as far as I know?'

'Where are you taking the stuff?'

'Storage,' growled Mr Supervisor. 'What's it to you?'

I delivered what I hoped was a winning smile. 'I feel a bit embarrassed saying this, it's only that Janice, who lives here, she borrowed my toasted sandwich maker and I wanted to get it back. Perhaps she forgot?'

The man couldn't care less if my neighbour was skiving with a forty-dollar appliance. He waved me inside. 'It's all the same to me mate. You can go and get it, if it's there.'

I didn't ask twice.

Janice's house was the mirror image of mine. I waited for the trolley guy to lift another load and snuck into the lounge room. Brown velour couches and sliding glass doors, these ones kennelling etched hounds forever denied the morsel of rabbit or duck. I peered out through the bay window. The men were on smoko. The trolley pusher pulled a salad wrap from a battered lunchbox; the other guy hunkered down with an iced coffee. Timing.

I crept across to the main bedroom, light-headed, unreasonably terrified. What were the removalists going to do if they found me? Pack me in a box and put me in a tin shed somewhere? I steadied my breathing and looked around the room. A striped quilt lay folded neatly on the bare mattress of a double bed. The wardrobe was empty of everything but a pair of slippers (large size, genderless), sand and fluff. A shopping docket forgotten on the carpet was for nothing more exciting than bread and peanut butter.

I didn't bother with the spare room. The kitchen was my real destination. McG's stories of cellars had my imagination working overtime. A growing dread gripped me, convinced me that Ignatius Stradbroke had to be lying in lime under Janice's kitchen floor.

The kitchen was as I'd seen it from the back window. Wide white benches and polished pine boards the colour of Manuka honey. The toaster and the kettle were gone. And no toasted sandwich maker, of course. I walked to the centre of the room and took a closer look at the floor boards. There was nothing to suggest any of the wood had been replaced and there were no telltale shiny nails or wood shavings, no sharp smell of fresh-cut timber. I traced the boards to the edge of the cupboards and walls, to be sure, but there was nothing to see. If the former principal was there, it was beyond my skills of detection. I made my way to the kitchen window. In the backyard the clothes line was

empty and the dog kennel was gone. As far as I could tell, the place was a body-free zone. I was free to go.

I made my way to the front garden, riddled with sweat. It wasn't until a voice hailed me that I remembered the two blokes.

'No luck?' asked the supervisor guy from the back of the van.

'Uh hum.'

'Women, eh? Give 'em a toaster and they want a house.' He looked past me to his partner peering at a mobile. 'Oi, Gibbo, get a move on! You don't get paid to sext your girlfriend!'

'It's not my girlfriend. It's yours!'

I slipped past.

The rest of the packing didn't take me long. Half of my belongings were still in boxes and could be sent on later. Right now I didn't care if I never saw them again. I forced myself to do one more walk-though. In the backyard the sheoak whispered sweet nothings to the rainbow bench. No more bakery delights there. The bloody wind chime tinked and tonked. The gap in the fence had been repaired. Spectre wasn't going to come through there any time soon so they could fix all the fences they liked.

I went inside and retrieved the last belonging I wanted, the coffee machine. The table was skewwhiff and I moved it a few centimetres so it was square with the slate floor tiles, careful not to look at the mismatched tiles that lay beneath. I took one last look at the yachts sailing their glazed voyages between the living and dining rooms, endless crossings under the lintel where no storms threatened and only calm, unruffled seas prevailed. A bungalowed haven.

The nausea hit. I made it outside and bent over the scratched lawn to leave McG an acrid, yellowish message.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

At dusk, approaching from the west, Melbourne was the fairy city. The towers rose from the plain enchanted. Gold, copper, platinum, silver, bronze; post-magic wands granting wishes to the jacaranda sky and the charred tessellated earth. It was the promised city, the freeways raised to part the suburbs and allow safe passage to a secular salvation.

The sun slid inch by glorious inch behind the land. Sparked for a moment and was gone.

The newer dusk was rose, coral, geranium, lilac, musk. The city a forest settling, glowing with rest, reprieve, repast. A sweet garden where the fairies retired, their muted voices reeling you in, pulling you on, drawing you, seducing.

The newer dusk lingered. It transmuted rather than disappeared. One drop of black at a time. The sky now the colour of Bass Strait water, now the colour of granite, now the colour of mangrove mud.

The Renault knew home was that precious-metal soft-pastel city. It swooped up and over concrete and tarmac, lifting to the heights of the Westgate Bridge to where, only just then, the millions of LEDs and neons flickered on. I resisted the urge to put my foot down to speed into my city. Nice and steady, I told myself. You're safe now. You know where you stand now. Sure, you have no job. But you have knowledge and networks. You have Mark Coric's card in your pocket. And you know how things are done. It will pan out.

A sign for Port Melbourne loomed overhead. I swerved left and plunged into the suburb. The road was black in its newness. It rolled around and under the freeway and brought me into a district of old engineering stinks and the sweetness of well-watered shrubs, of brick factories planted in weeds, bungalows with bricked paths, of multi-storey apartment blocks over cafes, and parks ceding the day's heat from soil rich in industrial waste.

I slowed for the first red light and lined up with the end-of-day traffic. Tired people in suits, drumming fingers, eyes ahead. My people. We inched forward on the green light and I wound down the window to soak up the engine revs and the scrunch of tyres over hard surfaces, the voices, the staccato jabbars of radio jocks. The air was perfumed with petrol and unnamed chemicals and, undeniably, with water and brine, oilier, thicker, less pure than the salty smell of Angel Port, but sea-y all the same. The

mixed air was an affront, barely mitigated by the familiar sounds encasing it. I felt betrayal. When I'd left that damned hick town four hours ago it had been soft with a late autumn glaze, bursting with the slush of wind and wave and the shrieks of children on the playground. I gritted my teeth. It was no more than momentary dislocation, I told myself, like the seconds after you wake and have no idea where you are or, worse, you know where you are but wish you were back in the dream. This was real, good real. The hard, dirty energy of the city was thick on my skin. I gripped the wheel and kept driving.

I came to what I was looking for. Up ahead, on the other side of Williamstown Road, floodlights were illuminating the Port Melbourne footy oval, my old club. I drew alongside. I could hear boys shouting. Training was on.

Now that the AFL was the big-bucks, big-publicity big league, the local teams were happy to get almost any attention. I drove through the gates without a hitch and found a park near the rails. There were about thirty or so other diehard fans sitting by the pickets and up in the old stand. The new clubhouse, alpine lodge meets inner city community centre, was dark and empty. Past it the city towers cut paths between the stars. I breathed in, sighed. The grass had the rich wet smell of coming winter; it absorbed the spiked attention of the two dozen or so men passing balls between them. I watched them hand ball and run, hand ball and run, mark and kick, mark and kick. They were a shiny, shiny bunch in their black skins and hodgepodge of singlets. I leant back on the warmth of the car bonnet and let the rhythm take me.

The boys were lined up for a scratch match when I felt the pulse of my phone in my trousers pocket. It was after eight. I'd lost track of time. It was a number I didn't know. Soulio demanding why I'd been a no-show at work? Someone with a sub-continental accent and a great phone or bank or NBN plan? I ignored it.

The ball went up and the two ruckmen flew. The ginger got his hand to the ball and pushed it down to a short but muscular lad. He was swamped immediately by two of the opposing players. Ball and cheek into the dirt. They wrangled and the boy punched at the ball to pretend he was clearing it. The umpire blew a whistle for a throw up.

My phone vibrated again. Irritated, I pulled it from my pocket. Still a private number, but a message this time. The ruckmen went up again, the ginger continuing to show good form. He punched the ball clear into the wing where a guy who was all leg grabbed it from the air and started sprinting towards the goals. He bounced the ball once, dodged a player, came round, bounced again and, just as a defender stormed at him for a good old hip and shoulder, kicked the ball to one of his team mates blissfully

alone in the forward fifty. A mark, right in front of goals. Perfect. The player moved back for the run-up. The ball rose, looked a beauty, then lurched to the left and went through for a point. Groans and a mouthed eff from the kicker.

In the hiatus I looked at the message. Huon. *Don't forget the Coric meeting tomorrow. 1 sharp. Gate 2.*

Shit, I had forgotten. The phone beeped again before I had a chance to answer. A different number.

Four words. *We have your son*

I froze. I read the words again, not believing them.

We have your son

No mistaking it.

For a moment stasis: men, ball, goalposts, floodlights, city towers, sky. Pounding in my head. Instant pain behind my eyes. The lack of oxygen kicked in and I gulped in air. Awful images whizzed through my brain. Nanoseconds later came blankness. I couldn't think. Failed to act.

I heard a shout on the oval and was startled to see a couple of players shirtfronting each other. Another player joined the fray, then Ginger was in on it, dragging the latecomer away.

My fingers started working. *Who is this?*

Maybe it was a wrong number. Or a sick hoax.

The answer was immediate. *McG. Who else?*

That bastard McG had my son! Were they going to use him as bait too? All for the greater good? I wrote back.

I'm calling the cops

The phone rang before I pressed send. I jabbed it on and yelled.

'Listen here you arsehole. You do anything to my son and I will personally come out there and wipe a blade across your throat. You might think you're the bloody moral police but you have not right to do anything, anything to my son. You and your petty vigilantes better let him go right now.'

The person on the other end of the line was silent, then, 'Dad?'

'James?'

'Dad? Are you okay?'

It was the voice of my son, shaken, unsure, the voice of a teenager trying to be older than he was. 'James, are you okay? Have they done anything to you?'

'Who? No. They're great. We're getting pizza and watching a video until you get back and then McG said we can all go fishing together tomorrow. I think that's pretty okay.'

Going fishing, a euphemism for something too unspeakable. I didn't say so. 'Who's "we"?' I asked.

'McG, a guy called Skink who says he works with you, and a woman who's a carpenter.' He dropped his voice to a whisper. 'I can't remember her name. Her and her boyfriend and his son, Jeremy. The kid's kind of cute but he keeps following me around like a bad smell. There's also this cool surfer dude who's a florist. Reminds me of grandpa Leverington. Remember how he used to have the hothouse with all the orchids and things?'

I heard him sip and swallow.

'And, Dad, you didn't tell me you had a dog. Spectre is wicked. You should see her with a tennis ball, fast as.' The enthusiasm fell from his voice. 'Everyone's really nice and all. It's just ... '

Here it was, here was the bad news. 'It's just what, James? Tell me what.'

There was the sound of footsteps and I got the impression he was moving to some place on his own. 'It's just that I was hoping you'd be here, that's all. And er I didn't tell mum I was coming. But it's the end of term and I thought I would surprise you with a holiday together at the beach.'

A holiday together at the beach. James and I. I wondered how tall he was now. Was he at that age when they ate like horses and grew out of their jeans every week? My body started to move of its own accord. I tucked the phone between shoulder and ear and leapt into the car. The ignition worked first time and I yanked the gear into reverse. I took a last look at the shiny boys on the field and made for the exit. Four hours back to Angel Port. If I drove straight through and there were no hold-ups on the road I could be there around midnight.

'I'll be back tonight. As soon as I can,' I said.

'Great,' he said. I heard relief and happiness.

'I can't wait to see you,' I said, putting as much enthusiasm into my voice as I could. 'Save some pizza for me. I'll ring your mum and make it square with her. Okay?'

'Okay.'

'See you soon. First, could you put McG on?'

There was a delay. I put the phone on speaker and launched into the traffic. It was a dog's breakfast to get back onto the M1. The evening traffic was banked up at the first set of traffic lights. The girl in the car next to me was crying, mascara making tracks down her cheeks. Her boyfriend was drumming his fingers on the steering wheel. The McG I got on the phone didn't sound like the one I knew. He sounded tentative, even fearful.

'Nate?'

'You hurt my son in any way and I will come after you! I will make you pay right up that arse of yours. You might be the big boy in Angel Port but in the rest of the world you're nothing but a cheap bully.'

'I'm not like that. I'm not.'

'Yeah? Mr Pensioner? Conviction for aggravated assault? I know all about that. Assaulting kids and women.'

Hesitation.

'I wasn't convicted. I wasn't even charged.'

'Threatened the victim so they wouldn't talk? Was it a kid just like James?'

'No!' A deep breath before he went on. 'No, no. Nathan, it was my wife, my ex-wife. We had a row and I lost my temper. I did raise my hand but I never hit her, although that's what she told the cops first up. But it was bad enough, that's when I knew I had to do something about my temper, when I saw the fear in her eyes, making a woman feel like that. You want to know about shame, I can tell you all about shame. But I would never touch a kid or a woman. Never. I've regretted what I did to Jessica every day since. She was right to leave me. And I've spent a lot of time trying to make up for it.'

'It's only pensioners and mates you threaten then?'

'What I did was wrong. I can't take it back. I wish I could. I'm sorry Nate, really I am.' He paused, a thought occurring to him. 'Mates. You said mates. So, we're all good, Natey?'

A ute cut in front of me. I cursed it under my breath and eased back to make room.

'I'm not N-.' I gave it up. I knew in my gut he wouldn't hurt James. None of them would. 'Let's just say I'm on my way.'

'You'd better hurry. You go and the whole of Angel Port livens up.'

'Meaning?'

'The local gynae, Leslie Rich, committed suicide.'

'You don't have to tell me this; you know you don't have to tell me.'

'Geez, that sounds like an accusation. You know and I know, Nate, that I never laid a hand on that man, though the bugger sure as hell deserved it.'

I felt a chill but kept silent.

'You still there?' asked McG.

I grunted.

'Police say the good doctor walked into the sea near Cape Catastrophe where we took that hike. They found a suicide note in the lighthouse. He'd really messed up the place apparently. Paper everywhere, furniture upside down.'

A red light. The lullaby of engines filtered through my wound-up windows. McG continued.

'Rich's confession was on shredded paper. The police had to tape it back together. They've also found a whole lot of paperwork that suggests he conducted several abortions without the mothers' consent.'

'How did they get hold of those papers?' I managed to ask.

'I understand Joan Rich is assisting with the investigation.'

I passed through the intersection on the second green light and followed a line of rumped factories to a bunch of containers that promised exotic destinations.

'That's not all,' said McG. 'I have a confession.'

My heart constricted.

'When you were out at Lake Bryan that night I got some mates to fix up the dodgy tiles in your kitchen. They fried up a feast and used the facilities. Hope that was okay. Bit of a win-win. No invoices, no tax man involved. Hope it was no trouble.'

'No trouble! The cops thought I'd knocked Robertson on the head. They searched the house.'

'Yeah, I heard that. Though I can't see how that relates to a little home maintenance. I guess you heard they found him, Robertson.'

I didn't reply.

'Dead as the Aussie cricket team. Out on Mount Abrupt. Walking and fell. You've seen the terrain. Beautiful yet treacherous.'

I couldn't think of Robertson without thinking of his daughter. Something lost. 'Have you seen Jennifer?'

He paused. 'She came by your place.'

'Oh?'

'Hurt that you cut and run without a word. But don't you worry. I've made things sweet with her. Told her about your mercy dash to Hamilton to get my insulin and how you had to hive off to Melbourne because of your mother's poor health. She sends her love.'

So that was how he was going to play it.

'Insulin? You don't have diabetes.'

'I don't advertise it. Anyways, give Jennifer a call. My charm can only assuage her for so long.'

I indicated right to overtake a pair of pensioners in a Corolla. A coach honked at me.

'So, Natey, when are you coming back? We're missing you already.'

I didn't give in that easily. 'I'll be back around midnight,' I said. 'You look after my boy properly until then.'

McG became chipper. He couldn't maintain contrite for long. 'You never thanked me for fixing that window in your room.'

'What the?'

'Yeah, all it took was two pop sticks jammed in the frame. No more rattling. Am I a genius or what?' When I didn't reply he changed the subject. 'We'll take the lad fishing tomorrow. I promised him some of those Berliners from Harp. They took my advice and they're really up to scratch now.'

'I'm not staying long,' I said as a tarnished glass building fell away to my right.

'We'll see. The main thing is you're coming back. The place is a shit sandwich now you're gone. Skink's thinking of pulling the plug. Sara from your street – you know, with those cute little tackers – her daughter baked you a cake and is real pissed it stayed on your doorstep. And I haven't got anyone to make me feel superior when we're out in the tinnie.'

'I gotta go. I'm just about to hit the freeway.' I put my foot down. 'And I'm not staying.'

'Course you're not, mate, course you're not. And Natey?'

'Yep?'

'Your lad. He's a handsome kid. Sure he's yours?'

'Fuck you.' I rang off.