

Dome of Death

by
Rigby Taylor

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Also by Rigby Taylor

The Price of Freedom
Dancing Bare
Sebastian

Dome of Death

Not for the faint-hearted, *Dome of Death* is a confronting thriller; at turns shocking, funny, romantic and thought provoking.

When the director of an Art Gallery in Queensland falls to his death from the central dome, his lover, Peter, unwillingly takes over the job. However, after rescuing a strange young man from a raging sea, Peter's investigation of an art swindle puts him in great danger. He is raped and left for dead, but escapes, only to discover that he and his new friend Jon are wanted for murder. What follows is a hair-raising chase to clear their names.

Murder, torture, cyclones, tidal surges, snuff porn shows – are but a few of the complications to be navigated in their search for justice, happiness and love.

This is an alarming, amusing, romantic tale about two young men who'd love to be as cool as James Bond in the face of extreme danger, but discover reality is not like fiction.

Gay, Thriller, Love, Murder, Revenge, Romance, Australia.

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Chapter One

Exposing oneself in public is not for the faint-hearted. En masse and expertly illuminated, the paintings gave viewers rather more insight into the private spaces of my mind than I'd bargained for. The fact that the gallery's patrons were also baring their souls with every critical utterance and every painting bought was scant consolation – especially as no one was buying!

After an hour of eavesdropping among the usual crush of wine-sipping social scramblers, I wished I hadn't. Stepping back, I collided with an elderly, shapeless little woman loosely wrapped in a sari decorated with mirrors.

'Young man!' she demanded as though I'd been caught spraying graffiti, 'Are you the artist?'

How to respond? People who call themselves artists remind me of Napoleon seizing the jewelled cap, crowning himself and living to rue the day. Such accolades are for others to bestow. If, as frequently happens, a painter's efforts delight no one but himself, then the labour has been little but therapy. Only those whose works impose order on the chaos of existence and reinvigorate flagging spirits by giving the viewer a glimpse of a less imperfect world, are worthy of the title "artist". Not being entirely confident I deserved the appellation, I responded cautiously.

'I made the paintings, if that's what you mean.'

With an impatient toss of the head that set hoop earrings and several loose chins swaying, she declared, 'Everything's too expensive!'

I smiled, bowed graciously and left her squinting myopically at a couple of frolicking nudes.

'What about this one?' demanded a businesslike young woman, jabbing her fingernail at a tree-fringed lake.

'Oh c'mon Jazmyn, we've already spent a fortune on the lounge.'

'Hope it's still here tomorrow.'

'It will be. No one's buying anything. You can get a recliner for what they're asking for this thing.' He peered into his glass. 'I haven't a thirst for art, but I've an artistic thirst.' They elbowed their way to the bar.

Before films and television arrived to bewitch the world, paintings could sway multitudes, convert sceptics and provoke intellectual war. Today, they've been reduced to decoration, and the only certainty for aspiring painters is that a market for their outpourings is not assured. I slunk to a corner, sipped my drink and nibbled humble pie.

'Cheer up you miserable bastard.' Max thumped me on the shoulder and draped a heavy arm across my shoulders. 'It's my opening too, so do us a favour and look a bit more confident - you're scaring people away.'

I shook him off.

'What's the matter, Pete?'

'How many sold?'

'It's early days. Give 'em a chance. They haven't seen a decent painting before. Wait till the red dots appear – then we'll see a panic thrusting of plastic. Hey,' he continued gently, 'I wouldn't have filled my brand new gallery with anything less than the best. The place is crowded and the reaction's positive. So either play the confident prodigy or hide your miserable mug out the back before it spoils the party.'

As usual, he was right, and as usual, it irritated. People were showing plenty of interest and at that very moment Maurice, the curator and manager of Maximillian's Fine Art Gallery, was placing a red dot on the frame of one of the more expensive works. I caught Max's eye. He shook his head, punched my shoulder manfully and breezed away.

I almost relaxed. Almost, because although my paintings were good, I couldn't shake the feeling they were outdone by the architecture. The gallery was Max's proclamation that not only was he a

wealthy connoisseur of the Arts, but also an incredibly talented architect. Individual spotlights enabled one to feel alone and unobserved while viewing the works, but the complicated internal structures were also expertly illuminated and tended to overpower everything else. I'd warned him the space was going to be too complex and competing for an art gallery, but he'd merely grinned and shrugged.

'You're over sensitive, Pete. With your paintings on the walls, no one will notice the building.'

Fat chance. I was sticking to my theory as an excuse for the lack of any more red dots. From across the gallery I could hear Max belabouring a swarm of sycophants with his Recipe for a Renaissance.

'At Maximillian's there will be no minimalist shams brimming with light, space, air and understatement. No confrontations with a pile of bricks, a bunch of desiccated radishes, sheets of rusty corrugated iron smeared in bird shit, or spilt cans of paint. Nor will it be another showroom of plastic fantasy and kitsch masquerading as art!' He flicked a glance at Conias Jackson, the owner of four such emporia of bad taste, accurately named Arte Bizarres,

'In this gallery, people of discernment will be able to purchase works of real and lasting value, products of rational minds; works of art that radiate skill, intelligence, talent, insight, self-criticism and hard work. And,' he paused pointedly, 'there won't be any mass-produced reproductions passing themselves off as limited edition prints!'

Mr Jackson turned away - scowling.

Max laughed loudly, attracting the attention of the entire gallery, and cast his eyes heavenwards with a theatrical mopping of brow. All eyes followed to marvel again at the dome of crystalline carbon floating over the thirty-metre wide, octagonal central gallery.

'It's like being inside an enormous diamond,' someone whispered.

Max clapped his hands. 'Ladies and Gentlemen, not only will Maximillian's provide you with cultural fresh air, but also the more traditional sort.' He stepped back and pulled at a tasselled cord hanging behind a bronze urn. Nothing happened. He tugged a second time to the accompaniment of a slight tittering, but the glittering vault remained unmoved. He snorted impatiently, slipped off his dark-green velvet jacket, thrust both jacket and cord at me, and disappeared through an adjacent door. Thirty seconds later he could be seen through the dome, striding across the roof.

'My god but he's sexy,' an under-dressed and over-painted woman breathed to her companion, 'and so athletic. Imagine Murray getting up on the roof like that!' She paused and giggled. 'Or dressing like that!'

She wasn't exaggerating. Whenever he thought he could get away with it, Max wore his jackets over bare, brown skin, the better to display an astonishing hardness of chest and abdomen. High cheekbones, generous mouth and a shock of dead-straight brown hair jetting over his forehead, lent a look of youthful nonchalance belied by slippery hazel eyes. His naked torso was clearly visible stretched over the dome as he fiddled with something before straightening up and signalling to me to pull the cord.

Silently, the segments separated and opened, lotus-like, to reveal the night sky. Plastic glitter was replaced by that of a myriad of stars. A spontaneous burst of applause heralded Max as he balanced on the rim between two 'petals'. Godlike, he raised his arms for silence then, eyes wide, mouth agape, he toppled forward, swimming fruitlessly in the air before hitting the marble floor headfirst with a distinct thunk-crack as his skull split and neck snapped.

Those nearest instinctively jumped back to avoid the splash as the contents of his cranium exploded. Frances, Max's wife, clutched at Maurice's sleeve, knuckles white, eyes staring wildly at her husband's body. I grabbed her arm and dragged her to the office. She was pale, but in control when I sat her at the desk. Back in the gallery, one look at the mess that had been Max sent me racing for the toilet to throw up. I was alone with my nausea.

After four years as a virtual hermit, I'd forgotten how quickly human nature seeps through even the most civilised of patinas. After the first gasps of startled surprise, everyone crowded forward,

chattering and manoeuvring to get a better view, excited at their good fortune. In a world where life is usually encountered vicariously, a first-hand experience is to be treasured.

Police and ambulance were on the spot within minutes. Maurice introduced himself as the manager and trailed around behind the officers offering advice until someone told him to shut the hell up and wait in the office with Mrs Fierney.

During the following hour, names were taken, questions asked, the guests released to scatter and spread the news, and the roof and dome inspected with the aid of torches and a portable floodlight.

When I took a police officer to see Frances, her voice was slurred. She'd been drinking with Maurice and the sari-draped crone who glared suspiciously, drained her glass, and ordered Maurice to escort her to a taxi.

No one objected when I asked if I could be the one to inform Max's parents. The police didn't care for the task; neither did Frances who had never hit it off with her in-laws. The bagged body was removed, the floor cleaned, and, as Maurice was nowhere to be found, I locked the gallery and set alarms. Frances was standing in the office staring at her feet when I popped my head in to say goodbye. She looked up with a frown and asked me to come in for a minute. Exhausted, I flopped into a chair.

She leaned against the desk and said pathetically, 'Darling Peter. You're Max's best friend. You can't leave me alone in this barn. Stay the night.'

I wanted to go home, not spend the night under the same roof as a woman I despised.

She gave a dramatic shudder and dabbed at smudged mascara. 'Please? Pretty please? For Max?' She reached across, grasped my hand and sniffled disgustingly.

I pulled roughly away. I had disliked Frances at our first meeting, and nothing had happened in the interim to change my opinion. Sly flirtatious eyes, too much make-up, lank bleached hair, pushy tits, calculated little-girl charm and gushing, counterfeit innocence. I also suspected a grasping nature. The fact that most men were drawn to her like fruit flies to a rotten peach confounded me.

Max had never been open about their relationship, refusing to discuss it. I split with him as soon as he announced his marriage - an attitude he reckoned irrational. In fact, we had only seen each other two or three times a year since Frances took over his life. It was only the offer of a solo exhibition at the opening of his new gallery that had induced me to spend so much time with him over the last few months. As he well knew, it was an offer few painters would be able to resist. When I asked why he was being so generous, he'd changed the subject.

Laziness rather than compassion induced me to stay the night in the upstairs flat at the gallery. Like Frances, I was required first thing in the morning at the police station so it would save me the eighty-kilometre return trip home.

In an unsuccessful attempt to clear my mind of thoughts of untimely death, I wandered down to the beach and jogged up and down the narrow strip of sand. It didn't help, so I returned, reset the alarms, locks and security lights, and dragged myself upstairs. On the landing, I hesitated. Could I get away with simply yelling 'goodnight', or should I poke my head into her room?

Lamplight and sobs spilled into the passageway. Perhaps she really was upset? Unsure whether I was offering a shoulder to cry on or looking for one, I tiptoed to the open doorway and choked on well-intentioned words of comfort. Maurice was sprawled on his back over the king-sized bed, cursing softly while Frances struggled to bring his manhood to life. The heartfelt sobs were those of a woman mightily frustrated - her own swollen desires alarmingly on view as she bent to her toil. Maurice looked up, stretched out a hand and yelled, 'Get this drunken nymphomaniac off me!'

Frances sat back on her haunches and growled, 'This crappy little turd has been playing around with his master for the last six months, but can't bloody well raise it for his mistress. Jesus Christ! Where are the real men? Look at his pathetic little dick!' She grabbed hold of the shrunken thing and flapped it from side to side before turning to face me. Lipstick, saliva, and a scattering of her victim's pubic hairs smeared the lower half of her face. Normally sleek hair had suffered what

looked like a high voltage discharge, and a scarlet flush of anger suffused breasts and shoulders. Paradoxically, she looked more potent than ridiculous.

Maurice had been cool to the point of offensiveness while setting up the exhibition, so I derived a certain pleasure from the spectacle, but was saddened to note that a virile body did not support his manly, square-jawed face. With a greater work-to-food ratio he might have been athletic, but he had let himself go. Skin and muscles were slack and a spare tyre burgeoned where once a slender waist had surely prevailed.

Frances gave his diminutive organ of desire a last vicious tug and my eyes watered in sympathy. Maurice lunged forward, pinched one of Frances's large nipples between finger and thumb, eliciting a curse of agony, thrust his tormenter onto the floor and joined me in the doorway, hysterical with pain and embarrassment.

'You stupid, ugly whore!' he shouted, 'I'd sooner eat my own shit than fuck you! If that's the price of staying on as curator of your pitiful little provincial gallery, then forget it! Keep your fucking job. Unlike you, I am not a fucking prostitute!'

It was a moderately grand exit.

'You're fired!' shouted the furious Frances from the floor to the empty door-way, before clambering back, turning to me without the slightest embarrassment, patting the sheet beside her in invitation and throwing herself petulantly on to her back. 'Get my pillow will you, Pete?'

Almost gagging on the combined stench of lust and alcohol, I remained at the door trying not to look as critical as I felt. Only Max had ever called me Pete. She glared, leaned over the edge of the bed, scabbled for the pillow, tucked it behind her head and lay back panting. 'Christ I'll be glad to see the end of that fuck-wit.'

'Why were you trying to screw him?'

'Max did,' she snapped defiantly. 'Now I'm boss he should do the same for me.'

'It seldom works like that.'

'Shit, men are wimps!'

I let that one go, then asked innocently, 'Weren't you jealous?'

She looked at me warily. 'I thought you and Max told each other everything. Bosom buddies and all that male-bonding crap?'

I shook my head.

'Of course I wasn't jealous! We didn't have that sort of marriage.'

I must have looked even more gormless than usual because she uttered an incredulous half-laugh and stared at me in disbelief. 'You really didn't know about our arrangement?'

I shook my head.

'You've got to be the only person on the Coast who didn't!' She gave me a strange look - a compound of pity and mild anger. 'Sit here,' she patted the bed, 'and talk to me. I'm too fired up to sleep.'

'Talk about what?'

'Max, me, you, the world.'

The last person I wanted to talk about Max with was his unlovely widow. But neither did I want to go to bed and lie awake thinking. 'Ok,' I sighed, sitting on the end of the bed. 'Tell me what everyone else on the Coast knows.'

'Four years ago,' she said with complacent pride, 'I learned about a very dodgy swindle Max had got himself embroiled in. I gave him a choice - either marry me with a legally binding contract making us joint tenants of everything, or lose everything, including his freedom and good name in a corruption scandal and criminal proceedings. He wasn't stupid, so took the first option. It's been a profitable arrangement for both of us.' She hiccupped noisily, burped, giggled and scratched lewdly at her crotch. 'It was purely business. Sexually, we were often competitors.' Her voice was slurred but she didn't seem drunk. She was definitely enjoying herself.

'I've no doubt the arrangement was immensely profitable - for you.'

‘Don’t be like that. I was very useful, especially with a certain type of male client. We had to be careful though.’ She gave a sad little shake of the head and frowned at some private thought before lifting her eyes back to mine. ‘Have you ever wondered where some of the thousands of missing young men and women end up?’

I shook my head.

‘They’ve been too greedy.’ A slight shudder, and her attention wandered. After a tentative laugh she focussed her thoughts on me once more and continued brightly, ‘Now we, I mean I, am rich. Very rich and completely respectable.’

‘Respectable?’ I snorted. ‘Dirt doesn’t wash off that easily.’

She frowned angrily. ‘We were neither too dirty, nor too greedy! And we were smart enough to realise that the longer you stay on the wrong side of the law the more likely you are to get caught. We off-loaded every dodgy operation, and are now strictly legit.’

She indicated the gallery, smiling strangely. ‘This place will boost finances, give us the seal of cultural approval and, after tonight’s accident, will certainly be on the map! Anyway, whatever you or anyone else may think, I’ve earned my passage. I have arrived and there’s not the slightest worry about inheritance. Everything’s mine. All the money, all the property and all the pleasure those things can bring.’

Curbing a desire to smash her face in, I said sweetly, ‘You’ve been a clever girl. However it wasn’t very smart to lose your curator and manager within a couple of hours of losing your husband.’

‘Huh! Creeps like him are two-a-penny. He’ll be replaced by lunch-time tomorrow.’

‘It’ll be hard to find someone who shares Max’s ideas on what constitutes art.’

‘Who cares?’

‘I do.’

‘Enough to screw me?’ The woman had a one-track mind.

‘Sorry, I’m discriminating.’ I couldn’t keep the sneer out of my voice. ‘You’re not into mourning the dead, I gather.’

‘My sex-life has never had anything to do with Max! And I’ll thank you to keep your nose out of my personal feelings. But if I don’t get a fuck soon I’ll tear this bloody place apart and there’ll be no gallery to worry about.’ She certainly looked ready to rampage.

‘I’ll see what I can do.’ I felt mildly chastened. My own feelings were still fragile and I’d not given vent to any loud protestations of grief. I ran downstairs for a copy of the local newspaper, found the ‘escort’ ads and used her bedside phone.

‘It’ll cost you,’ I warned, passing the handset. ‘Tell him what you want and how to get here.’

She took the receiver, shoved it at her ear, cleared her throat and in a husky voice I hadn’t heard before growled, ‘I need a fuck... How much?... You’ve got to be joking, boyo! Two hundred cash and two hours non-stop. I never pay more than that... Maximillian’s Art Gallery. Know it?... Well get on your fucking bike. You’ve got four minutes!’ Turning to me, ‘Get down to the front and bring him up, I’ve an urgent repair job to see to.’

I stared at the ceiling.

She laughed and in a sweet-little-girl voice lisped, ‘Pretty pleathe?’

I waited outside the door to the small foyer at the bottom of the private stairs leading to the flat, feeling cold and used. Exactly four minutes later a motorbike roared up bearing a leather-clad, helmeted Martian who jumped off, locked his machine and panted over.

‘I’m not too late am I? She sounded pretty awesome.’

‘No, you’re fine. Rather you than me, though.’

Upstairs, water was still splashing around in the bathroom. ‘Is that him?’ Frances yelled.

‘Yes.’

‘Well get him up and running. He’s got one minute!’

The young man was already undressed and rummaging in a small purse. He was not handsome, his nose was too small, but he was solidly built, lightly bronzed, and wore his long hair in a thick plait at the back. A gold chain and nose stud were unnecessary ornaments. The all-important instrument of pleasure, though, looked uninspiring.

‘She’s not going to be too thrilled with that.’

‘No worries,’ he grinned, extracting a small syringe from his purse. An obviously well practiced jab embedded the needle nearly a centimetre into the side of his penis before he pressed home the plunger. It hurt to watch, but he didn’t flick an eyelash. By the time he’d replaced the syringe, folded his clothes and thrown himself onto the bed, he was ready.

‘Clever trick. Do you also respond to cries for help from men?’

‘You got the money, honey, I got the tool,’ he laughed, completely relaxed.

‘How long’s it going to last?’

He pulled it away from his belly and let it slap back. ‘Two and a half hours minimum, whether or not I come. Guaranteed to satisfy.’

‘Surely you’ve got to be careful with those injections?’

‘You bet! A corkscrew cock’s just one of the hazards. One bloke I know kept it up so long that everything burst inside – he’ll never get another hard-on as long as he lives.’

‘Rather you than me!’

A transformed Frances reclaimed centre-stage by slamming the door to the bathroom. Hair sleek and glossy, face made up, stomach sucked in, nipples hard – she almost looked sexy. Taking two, hundred-dollar notes, a couple of condoms and three white tablets from a pot on the dressing table, she flapped the money in front of her reclining paramour before tucking it into the purse sitting on top of his clothes.

‘Want to feel good?’ she smiled, offering me one of the tabs. ‘Ecstasy,’ she explained to my look of incomprehension. ‘Get shot of all that aggression.’

‘No thanks. I like to remain in control of my emotions.’

She shrugged, tossed the condoms and one of the tablets to her escort who swallowed it with a swig of wine from the opened bottle beside the bed, did the same herself and dropped the remaining tab back in the pot.

‘Thanks, Pete,’ she laughed over her shoulder.

Her gigolo waved goodbye from the bed as she lunged.

The calculating bitch! All she’d wanted from me was the security of having someone in the place while she was being screwed.

Sadness sucked at life as I trudged the ten metres to Max’s room, the twin of Frances’s.

Maurice was sprawled in the middle of the double bed. Why the hell hadn’t he gone back to his own place? Surely he didn’t think...? I jettisoned the idea. My own thoughts were too jumbled to want to get inside someone else’s. A walk-through dressing room separated bedroom from bathroom. Suits, shirts, trousers and jackets on hangers. A small pile of used clothes slumped outside the bathroom door. I picked up a handful and buried my face. Remembered odours that transported me back four years to our flat. We had shared everything - bed, food, clothes, even a toothbrush. Reckoned we were one being in two bodies. With eyes closed, Max was with me. Then the horror slammed into me and I sagged to the floor. Loneliness welled and I stuffed a T-shirt into my mouth to stifle the moan, before ripping the sweet-smelling reminder of loss to shreds with my teeth. Eventually, feeling cold and stupid, I stripped and showered.

Maurice was still hogging the centre of the bed.

‘Shove over, Maurice,’ I growled when he continued to lie like a dead dog. He turned, smiled seductively and threw back the covers to display a body about a quarter as attractive as the one at that moment hammering into Frances. I nearly chundered. I was in no mood for empty lust. I was in

no mood for anything! Did no one have any feelings? What motivated these people? I felt like an alien and stared down at his flabby, repellent flesh. A careless approach to what should be our most prized possession turns me off. In no circumstances would I find Maurice's body appealing. I lay on my back trying to control swirling images of death. Maurice stretched out a hand. Repressing an urge to pummel his face to a pulp, I shoved it away.

'Are you in a shitty because I ignored you during the setting up of your exhibition?'

I leaped from the bed, ripped the blankets off him and shouted, 'What the fuck's the matter with you people? The only real friend I've ever had fell to his death three hours ago, and all you and his wife want to do is screw. What is it? Violent and messy deaths turn you on? You're sick, you know that? Sick, sick, sick! Now your lover's been dead a few hours it's OK to try and fuck someone else?'

'What's the matter with you? I didn't love him, I just wanted the job.'

'You make me puke! Did Max know that?'

Maurice gave me a look of total incomprehension and continued speaking as though explaining the obvious to a dim-witted child. 'I haven't the slightest idea, Peter. What's love got to do with it? I know Max wasn't in love with me! But it would certainly have annoyed him if I'd shown any interest in you.'

'You're mad!'

'Cut the dumb act! Everyone noticed the way he trailed around after you, laughing at your jokes, making sure you were happy with all the arrangements. He never let you out of his sight. You sure know how to string a guy along.'

I didn't want to hear that so stuck to the present. 'Well, despite your plans and self-denial, you've lost your job.'

'I hoped that if I was nice to you, you'd put in a good word for me with Frances in the morning.'

'What was that crack you made to her about prostitution?'

Maurice shrugged. 'I also think you're sexy.'

'Well I certainly don't feel the same about you,' I stated bluntly. 'Having seen you with your clothes off, I'm turned off!'

He drew a tart little breath, turned an unpleasant shade of puce, dragged up the doona and sneered, 'You're just a pathetic little cock-teaser, jealous that I was getting what you wanted.'

A fuse blew somewhere deep in my head. So angry I could scarcely breathe, I reached across, grabbed an arm and a handful of hair and hurled him violently to the floor. 'Fuck off home you flabby, cretinous lump of shit and stay there! Frances will send you anything you're owed.'

He stared up, uncomprehending, face grey. I grasped his arm, twisted it up his back, frogmarched him downstairs and thrust him out into the car park. The gutless creep offered no resistance. From the lounge window I could see him huddling against the doorway to escape the chill wind. Pathetic, naked, stupid. Impossible to feel anything other than contempt. I didn't want him hanging around till morning, so threw his clothes, wallet and car keys out the window. He raced around picking everything up, got into his car and drove noisily away. It made me feel better, but didn't make me sleep. What did these people value? I had no point of contact. Throughout the night, a dark puddle of unwelcome thoughts churned in my head.

At breakfast, Frances's face was a picture of serenity. With the bemused grin of the truly satisfied, she chomped her way through four thick slices of toast, two fried eggs, a mountain of fried tomatoes and cheese, three cups of strong tea and five passionfruit. I've never learnt the knack of thought concealment, so wasn't surprised when she answered the unspoken question.

'Enough exercise, and the acid in the fruit shoves everything through before it can turn to ugly flab. Anyway, you've eaten as much as I have.'

'I'm twice as big and usually work hard to burn it off. Today I've got to keep my strength up for the interview with the cops.'

'I was coming round to that excuse myself.' She looked down at her plate, began one of her 'little-girl' looks from under her eyelashes, thought better of it, laughed unselfconsciously and looked me straight in the eyes.

'Peter - I know it seemed as though I was using you last night, and I suppose I was, but I really appreciated your staying. In fact, I hope you'll hang around a bit longer. After all, someone's got to run the gallery.' The smile was shrewd.

'Is that an offer of employment?'

'Yes. Now that poor little Maurice has scampered off leaving us in the lurch, it seems the obvious solution.'

'I have the distinct impression that poor little Maurice was caught in a rather sly little trap,' I said quietly. There was no reaction, unless a sunny smile indicated something other than a guiltless conscience. I was wary of becoming involved with the woman, and too upset and tired to make a commitment, so procrastinated. 'I'll hang around till the inquest and funeral are over, then let you know.'

'That'll be perfect.' She scrutinised my face for a full minute, took my hand in hers and, visibly suppressing a smile, whispered, 'Don't ever try your hand at poker or politics. You're as transparent as air.'

Despite myself, I was starting to like her. Maybe Max hadn't been so stupid after all.

'Max wasn't a fool,' she announced with alarming prescience. 'It's only today I realise why he was so much in love with you. I was jealous, you know. All that time he spent with you.'

'You've got the wrong bloke. I hardly saw him after he married you.'

Her jaw dropped. 'But, he never stopped talking about you.' Suddenly less sure of herself she stared at me. 'Surely you realised our marriage was just a front?'

'No. I told you last night.'

'But - that's terrible,' she whispered. 'Poor Max. Poor you. What a confusion. But why?' Her eyes searched mine.

I returned the look calmly for as long as I could, but the awful realisation of what I'd refused to accept for four years slowly flooded my heart, drowning me in sadness. I had never stopped loving Max. That was why I had stuck myself out the back of beyond. That was why I spent my days alone and miserable. Why I was on anti-depressants. Why my whole life was fucked. Clouds of self-pity gathered.

Frances continued to hold my hand and gaze at me with such compassion that the lies could no longer be sustained. It hadn't been Max who refused to explain about Frances, it was me who'd refused to listen. I had rejected his approaches; blaming him for leaving me. Cold misery filled my belly. The irreplaceable loss that was Max. The void never to be filled. The years of loneliness ahead. The wasted years gone by.

Sadness, a thousand times worse because it was of my own making, engulfed my being and I dropped my head onto my arms and howled.

Chapter Two

Having seen little point in giving Max's parents a sleepless night, I telephoned them immediately after breakfast. Hank and Celia were my best, just about my only friends, although I'd seen little of them over the preceding four years. At the sound of Hank's voice my throat dried and the awful news had to be flushed out with tears. And then it was Hank consoling me.

By eight o'clock a covey of policemen were swarming over the roof, peering at the dome, admiring its construction, shouting to have it opened and closed, bustling around with knowing mouths. I went up to watch. A bucket of metal fastenings, off-cuts, screws and similar objects had been piled beside a carton of cigarette butts, lunch-wrappers, plastic drink bottles, pieces of string,

sticky tape and other residue left behind by the builders. On a blue cloth were two screwdrivers, a drill bit and a broom handle.

‘Recognise any of this stuff?’ asked the bloke in charge.

I didn’t.

Someone dusted things for fingerprints, and a vacuum cleaner sucked the area clean. The paper-bags were carefully labelled and packed in a separate carton. Eventually, everyone clomped down the narrow stairs lugging their booty and drove off to wherever one looks for truth in a pile of rubbish.

An hour later at the police station, Frances and I dictated and signed statements, were asked to remain available for further interviews, and gained the impression that superior forces were at work to protect us. When I innocently remarked that it was surely an accident, the duty constable stared at me with such suspicion I was glad a hundred people could testify to my whereabouts at the time of the fall.

On leaving the building we met guests from the previous night, summoned to endure the same rigmarole. Some smiled, others glared as though it was our fault they had to waste a morning; all offered condolences to the wealthy young widow. Back at the gallery, an army of reporters and photographers. I started to twitch. Frances pushed me inside.

‘Nothing will change the past, Peter. Go up and take a long shower and three hundred deep breaths. I’ll handle the free publicity.’ And she did. The spreads in the following days’ newspapers as well as television and radio coverage, ensured an endless stream of visitors to the gallery. Most came for a gawk at the spot from which the rich architect fell, no doubt hoping for residual bloodstains, but many stayed to look at the exhibition. By the end of the fourth day there were red dots on most of my paintings

The inquest was conducted on a cold Friday morning in a cavernous, unheated courtroom where a mousy little man, after a seemingly interminable amount of paper shuffling, interruptions and whispered asides, listened to statements from various arms of the police and selected eyewitnesses. I was glad Frances had insisted on my taking over Max’s wardrobe; I owned nothing as luxurious as his fleecy lined leather car coat, or the quality trousers and jackets. Feeling warm, comfortable and somehow closer to him, I’d never been so well dressed.

The Magistrate eventually announced that Maxwell Fierney had died by overbalancing from the unprotected edge of an opening in the roof, while speaking to the patrons of the Art Gallery below. There was actually quite a bit more to it than that, and the words were different, but it had been an accident. Death by misadventure. He recommended that access to the roof be securely locked at all times, whether the dome was opened or not. By eleven-thirty it was over and I left the place in a daze, still not believing that all the talking had been about Max. A light touch on the shoulder and a familiar voice startled me back to reality.

‘Peter, we hoped to see you. Thanks for coming.’ Max’s parents appeared to be holding each other up. They looked ill, tired and at least twenty years older than the last time I’d seen them.

‘Celia, Hank – I didn’t see you inside, sorry. Too busy with my own misery, as usual.’ We shook hands and wordlessly shared our sorrow.

‘We have missed your visits,’ Celia said without reproach. ‘I do hope you will come and see us again soon?’

‘Celia’s right. It’s a wretched shame it took this to bring us together again, so let’s not leave it so long next time.’

I could only nod and grunt something I hoped sounded like assent.

‘It would be lovely if you could stay with us after the – ah - dispersal,’ Celia murmured hesitantly, fiddling with the clasp of her purse. ‘You will be coming?’

I couldn’t reply. There were no words in my head. Only a vision of the Fierney’s back verandah, eucalypt-covered hills and sun on golden grass. The happiest moments of my life had been spent

there. I was deeply embarrassed. How do you respond to two people you love when you've avoided contact with them for nearly four years?

Hank was still looking at me. 'It will be a very quiet affair, just the family and one or two close friends,' he persuaded gently. 'But you mustn't feel any obligation.'

I've always suffered from teary eyes at the slightest hint of sentiment. It's a bit embarrassing in front of most people, but never with Celia and Hank.

'There is nothing I'd rather do and no place I'd rather be, than visiting you two,' I replied huskily, brushing at streaming cheeks. The lump in my throat was painful as Hank shook my hand and Celia gave me the first loving hug I'd had for years. I had to turn away and blow my nose.

'Right then, that's settled. We'll expect you for dinner tomorrow evening, and you can stay as long as you like.'

I could only nod, smile and wave as they got in the car and drove off. It took me two hours of throwing rocks as hard as I could into a sea as frustrated and angry as myself, before I could face the gallery and a fuming Frances, who had seen no point in attending the inquest, preferring to keep the gallery open.

'You knew I had an appointment for half an hour ago! What the hell kept you?'

'Sorry,' was all I had the energy to mutter.

She flounced out.

Nearly a week had passed and the empty spaces on the walls were becoming conspicuous as my paintings were bought, paid for and taken home. A search of all possible storage areas revealed no replacement stock. I'd wasted time feeling sorry for myself and things were getting urgent. I either had to find work worthy of Max's gallery within the next few days, or admit defeat as curator and close the gallery. In the absence of files, account books or memoranda, I tried the computer where I discovered a list of artists labelled Suitable. I telephoned them all. Only two had enough stuff ready, so I arranged for them to bring in samples that same afternoon. The others promised to bring in their work as it became available for a back-up collection. What the hell had the flabby Maurice been doing?

Lunchtime was spent nosing through files, keeping an eye on the half-dozen patrons, answering questions and snatching bites of bread and cheese. The finance folder covered everything from first discussions with the bank, to wages paid to the man who cleaned the windows on the morning of the opening. The gallery had an enormous mortgage. There was yet to be an entry on the credit side.

The works in the current exhibition had their own file, so I entered the money already received, as well as prospective receipts, hoping none of the promised sales would fall through. It was going to be the proverbial drop in a bucket. I was very glad the mortgage wasn't my responsibility. But then the whole enterprise had probably been designed as a tax loss. Certainly, the gallery's cut of sales appeared pitifully small when one considered rates, repairs, maintenance, insurance, my salary, someone to replace me on my day off, and wages for a cleaner.

I figured that if I pulled out all the stops we could probably run a permanent exhibition and hold ten solo shows a year. Even so, it was going to be a long time before the place was freehold, and I certainly wasn't going to get much painting done. To my surprise I discovered that didn't worry me. I guess I was in a morbid warp, determined to make a memorial worthy of Max, or some such drivel. I think I was desperate for anything to stop me thinking about opportunities lost and years wasted.

A message appeared on the screen - fax arriving. I had no idea what to do, so waited. A machine on the other side of the office buzzed and tossed out a paper.

ARTWORKS Inc. 1. August.

To: Maximillian's Art Gallery.

Our representative, Mr Ian Scumble, will deliver the first consignment of original, hand-painted works on Thursday morning, 8th August.

Please arrange reception and display as previously discussed.
Motherswell.

I'd never heard of ArtWorks, and surely no one called I Scumble would dare to deal in art! Frances had never mentioned them, and it certainly didn't seem like anything that would have interested Max. A consignment of original, hand-painted works! By whom? What sort of gallery did they think we were? It had to be a mistake so I put it aside to discuss with Frances later.

Gambling that the two artists from the list who were ready to exhibit would give us a show worth looking at, I brought up the mailing list used for my own exhibition, substituted their names, typed new dates, and set the printer to churn out a stack of invitations to another grand opening the following Wednesday. At the end of another hour they were in envelopes. I had six days. A rush, but I was sure I could manage it and Frances would be impressed.

There was just time to telephone newspaper advertisements to the local and weekly papers before Madrilene Alcona shuffled into the gallery in her slippers, dragging a leather suitcase on a small trolley. A woolly knitted hat pulled down against the south-westerly wind concealed most of her face, and an enormous quilted coat, that looked as though she had made it from a doona, did the same for her figure. I led her into the workroom, turned on the heater and offered coffee.

'Coffee is poison for the mind. It stimulates all except the creative and gentle portals of the spirit,' she remarked casually while unstrapping the battered case and laying it on the floor. 'Unless it's laced with Irish whisky and topped with cream.' The smile was cheeky.

The workroom was equipped with everything to soothe both artist and patron, so it was only a matter of minutes before the microwave disgorged a substantial toddy that Madrilene sampled and pronounced perfectly adequate.

'I wouldn't waste money on it myself,' she grinned, removing doona and hat. 'I rely on you fat cats for the occasional tipple.'

Minus the wrappings she was slim, lithe, and spread her work over the floor with the vacant concentration of a greyhound. I guessed her age to be about forty, status single, financial situation lean.

'Where's Max?'

The news was received in stunned quietude. She turned pale and sank back on her heels. 'I don't go out much and almost never bother with The News. I'm very sorry,' she said quietly. 'Very, very sorry.' She stared into her drink.

There was nothing I could add to that.

As she sipped and laid out her offerings we became chummy and I was asked to call her Mad. She obviously wasn't, but the abbreviation suited her.

I gazed in growing envy at the pieces of paper laid out over every level surface. Mad was an artist who had stuck to drawing. Each work was a masterpiece of abstraction. Not what one usually thinks of as abstraction, when the viewer has to rely on the title to work out both subject and content, but a work from which everything inessential has been removed. Her drawings embodied the Neo-Platonist concept of the original perfect tree, or chair, or whatever, which is located in paradise and manifests the essence of every tree, chair or whatever.

I was reminded of the apocryphal tale of a Chinese art student who was sent by his master to a pigsty to draw pigs. At the end of each day he presented his drawings. Each day the master shook his head and told him he had not yet understood. After fifteen years, when the benighted student was nearly insane from frustration, his master told him to remain in the studio and draw - not from any living beast, but from the well of information and careful observation stored in his head. The result was a drawing containing the essence of 'pigness'. Not one specific pig, but every pig that has ever lived. Both master and pupil were satisfied.

Mad's subjects were taken from around her home. Everyday things like a zippered, soft-leather travelling bag spilling its contents onto the floor; a table with a lamp; an open window; light falling

across a stairwell. Each drawing was complete and said everything necessary about the object. My eyes flicked from one to the other in increasing excitement.

‘How many preparatory sketches do you make?’

She shrugged. ‘Usually about a hundred. Only rough scratchings; sorting out ideas, proportions. On scraps of newspaper, old cartons, the backs of envelopes. I don’t waste paper!’ she added defensively. ‘But it takes me that long, sometimes longer to understand what it is I’m drawing. I guess I’m pretty useless really.’ She wasn’t being coy. ‘And I suppose you think they’re too small and I use too many different media?’ she sighed with resignation. ‘Other galleries don’t want them, they say they’re too simple and I should stick to one medium. But I can’t.’

‘They are wonderful drawings,’ I told her firmly. ‘I want them all. The only problem is they have to be framed by next Wednesday’s opening.’

After a quick stare of undisguised shock, she hastily gathered them together. ‘Well, I don’t really know whether I want to sell them. I thought I did, or at least I wanted someone to tell me they’re good, but now... don’t think I can bear to part with them. Sorry. There’s too much of me in them.’

I sat back, understanding exactly what she was feeling.

When I made no protest, she looked up through narrowed eyes and demanded as though to test my judgement, ‘Which one do you like best?’

‘The bag,’ I replied without hesitation. It called forth all the times I had moved; the partings, anticipation, sadness and small death that is every farewell, the potential re-birth that is every journey, every arrival. With coloured pencils, ball-point pen, black ink applied with pieces of stick, and several other techniques I had no way of working out without watching her in action, she had transformed a portion of a sheet of drawing paper into every traveller’s bag. Light flickered over clasps and zips, shadows suggested contents not visible. It was the paradigm of all well-used, well-loved holdalls.

‘Mmm. Perhaps you do know what you’re talking about. What price do you think they’ll fetch?’ Her eyes narrowed when I told her. ‘In other words, I’ve been working for about five cents an hour. And then there’s your cut. How much is that?’

‘Thirty percent.’

She thought for a while, re-arranged some of the drawings, selected three, one of which was the holdall, and replaced them in her folder before raising her eyes.

‘OK, you can have the rest. There are only three sizes and I have mounts and frames for them all at home. I didn’t bring them in because I wanted you to see the drawings unadorned. You can pick up the frames and mounts and bring me any paper work tomorrow. Come at eleven.’

She lived in the coastal hills so I could call in on the way to Celia and Hank’s. I made out a receipt for the drawings, which she scanned absentmindedly and thrust into her bag.

‘I’m being picked up in five minutes. Tell me exactly how Max died.’

I kept it brief, then showed her the dome. She gazed up and around for a minute.

‘What a beautiful space,’ she whispered. ‘When Max described it I knew it would be like this. He was a remarkable man. My drawings will be very happy here.’ She looked around again as though irritated. ‘But Max wouldn’t stumble and fall,’ she said sharply. ‘He was too sure-footed. He would never trip himself up. I’ve made a drawing of him. Do you want to see it?’

I nodded, shocked at the truth of what she’d said. Max would never trip. But he had! I’d seen him wobble on the edge and fall. I thrust the thought away. She handed me the drawing and my heart lurched. The sketch, for it was little more than that, showed Max standing in an open French window, the light from outside so strong that his left side dissolved into the glare. Only the right half of his body had been worked up. He was naked, balanced, confident, laughing and secure in himself; not looking directly at the viewer, but including us in his energetic embrace of life. I sagged to a chair.

Mad’s gaze was unreadable. ‘Did I capture him?’

I think I whimpered.

She placed cool fingers on my neck and whispered, 'It's yours - if you want it.'

I couldn't speak. The silence was broken by a car horn.

'That'll be Brian and the kids. Must rush. See you tomorrow.' Wrapping herself in the doona, she headed for the door.

I raced after her, pulled her into a rough hug and kissed her on the forehead. 'Thank you, Mad. I will treasure it.'

'I know.' She ran to the late-model station wagon in which husband and two teenagers were waiting, waved breezily, and was gone.

I barely had time to store the drawings before an elderly, portly gentleman arrived, armed with a photograph album and one large parcel.

'Bill Smith,' he declaimed, a well-manicured hand held out on a stiff arm. I shook it and introduced myself.

'Bad about Max. Hope the gallery stays true to his vision,' he rapped.

'So do I. Maybe your work will assist that to happen?'

He stared at me suspiciously as though seeking sarcasm, then opened his parcel. It contained a large oil painting. He placed it on one side of the gallery and led me to the opposite wall where I was obviously expected to pass judgement. The painting was beautiful, full of tantalising textural effects and a subtlety of colour I thought no longer existed, but I had no idea what I was looking at. No matter how I turned my head it remained an exquisite object without meaning. When the silence began to crystallise on the air, embarrassment loosened an honest tongue. 'I love it, what is it?'

'Someone scratching their armpit. Look, there's a bit of one finger, the nail of another, a fold of skin, the tones of flesh - it's all there,' he ended irritably, as though pointing out the obvious to an imbecile.

I looked again and it was - a delightful, intelligent and perfectly executed puzzle. I browsed through the photographs of his other works and eventually deciphered three more - a segment of an eye nestling into the fold of a lid, the back of an ear, and bits of toenail and toes. There were also several that looked altogether more risqué. Bill wasn't talkative, had no desire to pass the time of day and appeared impatient to go. Within a few minutes I'd signed him up and arranged that the following Tuesday morning he would deliver his paintings, ready to hang, with a list of titles and prices for the catalogue.

At five o'clock I ushered out the last visitor, a surly woman, annoyed there was nothing to buy and clearly unimpressed by an invitation to the opening of the next show and my promise that it would be even more exciting than the one she'd missed. I closed and locked the doors, cleaned up and went up to my room. The envelope containing Mad's drawing lay on my pillow but I didn't dare look.

Later, perhaps. I put it carefully away, donned one of Max's track-suits, jogged to the Post Office, mailed the invitations, then sweated it out for an hour along the beach.

Cold and hungry I staggered home drenched by a squall. Frances was still out.

Chapter Three

Friday morning dawned cool, windy and grey. Scattered coastal showers, the forecast had predicted, with the chance of an unseasonable cyclone heading our way in the next few weeks. The cyclone was hard to take seriously, it was at least three months too early and they never came this far south. With a curious lightness of heart, probably related to the fact that Frances had still not returned from her frolicking, I decided to close the gallery for the next five days, reopening for Mad's show.

I spent the morning painting large, colourful notices informing prospective customers that we had sold out and would be reopening with 'More, Bigger, Better and Equally Exclusive Art Treasures at

five-thirty on Wednesday the Seventh of August'. Artistically draped along the inside of the enormous front windows, they were visible from miles away and a damned good advertisement.

My poor old Holden's battery had leaked its charge into the moist coastal air and refused to turn over the engine, so I fossicked in Max's desk and found the keys to his station wagon. Being at the wheel of a Mercedes was tantamount to an exalted encounter with the future. I wasn't driving; I was whisked along in a magic box experiencing none of the tensions I usually associate with getting from A to B. Except I lost my way. The motorway underpass clearly marked on my map didn't exist when I arrived at the spot, and it was eleven-twenty before I pulled up outside the Alcona's in the hills overlooking the Coast. A high, creeper-festooned wooden fence hid most of the house's brick walls and steeply tiled roof, from which protruded three dormer windows. A press on the bell brought Mad's voice to the tinny loudspeaker embedded in the gatepost.

'Who is it?'

'Peter Corringe.'

'Oh.'

An electronic buzz released the latch, and five wide stone steps led down to a partially opened, heavy wooden door behind which Mad was waiting, tightly wrapped in her eiderdown. The street gate slammed behind me.

'Ah, Peter,' she murmured anxiously, with perhaps a hint of panic.

'Sorry I'm late. I got lost.'

'Oh, that's nothing. Everyone does. At least the very few people we invite here.' She hesitated a few seconds longer than necessary, looking lost and apprehensive until I began to think I'd made a mistake and hadn't been invited after all.

'If it's not convenient, I can come back another time. Or if you'd rather not see me here after all, then you can just bring the frames and mounts to the gallery on Tuesday. Don't worry about it. I understand. It's not easy inviting total strangers to your house. I'm exactly the same.'

She looked at me warily, came to a decision and opened the door wider.

'Come in out of the wind. It's silly to talk here on the steps.'

I followed her into a small room, over-furnished with two high-backed, heavily carved wooden chairs, an elaborate oval table in polished wood, and an alarming, antique wardrobe encrusted with inquisitive cherubs disporting themselves in an exotic jungle of rampaging vines, leaves and flowers. A full-length mirror, tucked behind four Corinthian columns, appeared to lead directly to the nether world. A yellowish rug - a splash of vomit on the polished wooden floor, did nothing to dispel the gloomy excesses of the wardrobe.

It was not the sort of room I would have associated with the creator of the beautifully restrained drawings nestling in my office. She smiled absentmindedly, sat in one of the chairs and gestured vaguely towards the other. I lowered myself into the monstrous thing, and was stabbed in the back by a gargoyle.

Mad giggled charmingly. 'Sorry, I should have warned you. The furniture in this room was my mother's. Classic Gothic horror don't you think?'

'And as uncomfortable as it looks.'

'We spend no time here, so it doesn't matter.' She adjusted herself more comfortably, leaned forward slightly and said gently, 'I realise it's difficult for you to talk about Max, but he was a good friend to both of us, and... I simply have to talk to someone or I'll go mad.'

It seemed churlish to refuse so I gave a noncommittal grunt, which she took as permission to continue.

'Max wasn't on very intimate terms with his wife, was he? At least that's what I gathered from things he let drop when he came to visit.' Her face was a picture of genuine concern. 'How has Frances taken his death?'

I found the question intrusive and couldn't think what to say.

‘Come on, Peter,’ she cajoled. ‘Do the rich and leisured feel the same as us? I spend all my time cooped up here drawing, and lose touch with the outside world. What did she say when she saw Max fall?’

Invasion of privacy is an irredeemable vice. I figure if gossips are happy to receive and broadcast rumours about others, they’ll have scant regard for my privacy when I’m out of the room. Were I asked to catalogue the deadly sins, Gossip would head the list.

‘Max’s widow’s state of mind is her own affair,’ I replied coolly. ‘If you’re concerned, why not telephone and offer your condolences? Although I doubt she would appreciate such an intrusion from a stranger.’

‘Not a complete stranger,’ Mad countered with a cheerful smile, impervious to my reaction. ‘I met her once in town, and I’ve drawn her husband - naked.’

‘But not her,’ I snapped.

‘True. But I wonder about his Will. He had plenty of money. Does Frances get it all?’

I stood stiffly, impatient to get the frames and escape from this woman’s curiosity. How, I wondered, could I have been so wrong about Madrilene Alcona. My first impressions are usually pretty accurate.

She leaned back in her chair, pulled a worried frown and smiled gently. ‘How about Max’s parents? They must be taking it hard, losing their son? As a mother myself, I can feel for them. Do they have any other children? You can tell me, Peter, I’m very discreet.’

‘Mrs Alcona,’ I said, not bothering to conceal my contempt, ‘if you’ve invited me here to pry into the affairs of others, then you have wasted both my time and yours. Let me have the frames and mounts and I’ll be on my way. The gallery will communicate with you in due course.’

She smiled sweetly, tucked her legs into the folds of the eiderdown, wrapped her arms around them and giggled softly, ‘But I hoped you’d stay to lunch.’

I was spared a response by the front door bursting open to admit a large, good-looking man, a tall gangling youth, and the two teenagers of the previous afternoon’s station wagon. The man greeted me like an old friend.

‘Hello,’ he boomed, pumping my arm energetically, ‘you must be Peter. I’m Brian. This streak of pump-water is Jeff, and the two clones are Der and Dra. I hope Mad’s invited you to lunch?’

I glared at the four healthy, sane-looking people, wondering what oddities their exteriors concealed.

‘Yes, dear, of course I have,’ Mad answered in the most ordinary of voices.

‘Excellent! We’ll go up and dismantle ourselves. See you in a few minutes.’ They bustled out.

‘Der and Dra? Dismantle? What’s going on?’ I snapped, determined not to waste energy on anger at what was beginning to look like some sort of stupid family game.

‘Alexander and Alexandra - our twins; dismantle, as in disrobe. A mantle is a type of clothing. It’s a family joke. The children are home early because there’s a half-day holiday for a reason known only to the school.’

I allowed myself to look as irritated as I felt.

‘Peter, I’m sorry. I got cold feet when you arrived. Yesterday I was convinced you were a certain sort of person; an impression confirmed by your reaction to my drawings; especially the portrait of Max. But... when you arrived today I panicked. Our family is odd. At least most people would think so. Of course we don’t. We’re more or less self-contained and need no one else, although Jeff is starting to kick at the traces.

I’m worried sick about gossip; it could destroy everything. That’s why I asked you those stupid questions, to see if our privacy was safe with you. I’m paranoid about it. Brian trusts my judgement - I was right about Max, you see, and told him you were just as nice. Just as healthily broad-minded. It was very important that I hadn’t made a mistake about you before admitting you into our family.’

‘I can understand your caution,’ I replied, mollified but unconvinced. ‘However, your family doesn’t seem odd to me.’

‘When Brian says ‘dismantle’, that means no clothes. We like to be naked around the house - always have done, and can’t be bothered with guests who are uncomfortable with that. Der and Dra have odd habits. We have an unusual house-plan, by European standards that is, and an outlook on life which is so much more liberal than anyone else we have ever met, that I wonder sometimes whether we have made a mistake. But I am happy! We are all happy, so it can’t be totally wrong. Anyway, now you have a slight idea about us, are you staying to lunch?’

‘Curiosity will not let me refuse, as long as the rest of the house is warmer than this overdressed cool-store.’

Mad gave a delighted giggle. ‘I guarantee it. I’ll be in the living room when you’re... dismantled.’ Her impish grin remained floating on the air as the inner door closed.

Having discovered the function of the hideous wardrobe and wearing nothing but a sickeningly certainty I was going to be greeted by jeers and laughter from five elegantly dressed Alconas, I pushed through the door into a cosily warm living area. Mad was stirring a pot on the stove, naked except for a frilly apron. She smiled a welcome.

‘I also never wear clothes at home, if it’s warm enough,’ I confided, eyes scanning the enormous room that appeared to occupy the entire ground floor.

‘Take a shower while I finish preparing the meal,’ she offered, pointing to a door in the far wall.

I made good use of toilet and shower, in that order, relieved at being able to ensure I wasn’t going to smell ripe – or worse – at lunch.

Clean and relaxed, I returned to the main room. It was exactly the sort of place I would build for myself, if I had the money. A vast, yet cosy space divided into kitchen, dining, lounge, four study areas, and a smaller chat-space. The door opposite the bathroom opened onto a stairwell leading both up and down, and another gave onto a study containing a desk, computer, a TV, and a sofa that looked as though it could be converted into a double bed. The view from the windows of the main room was less interesting than I’d imagined. We were one storey above the ground, but low enough to ensure privacy. Fences and neighbouring roofs and trees obstructed any potential view. An in-ground pool, patio and lawn tennis court bordered by trees and flowers, turned the place into a mini-resort.

Jeff burst in from the stairwell, fronted me with a smile, shook my hand as vigorously as his father, and asked in a surprisingly deep voice, ‘Do you like the house? What do you think of me? Mum says you’re as nice as Max. Are you?’

Innocent effusion makes me laugh. I stepped back and looked him up and down as if making a serious evaluation. Jeff was tall, stringy, blue-eyed and topped by a shock of auburn hair. His muscles would fill out in the next year or so and he’d become physically attractive, but facial bone structures were not prominent and it would take only a thin layer of fat to make his face shapeless and dull.

‘Question one: from what I’ve seen, the house is perfect. Two: your indisputable attractiveness will always depend to a certain extent on your lively character, and you must never get fat. Three: of course I am. How well did you know Max?’

‘Pretty well. He came round whenever he had an hour or so to spare. The last time he was on a high - kept talking about the excellent artist he had booked for his gallery opening, and promised to bring him to visit. But now it’s too late. He’s dead...’ Jeff stopped and stared out the window. ‘I... I can’t get my head around death. Max is the first person I’ve known who’s died. Its so... so final!’ He turned back to me and his eyes were moist. ‘I’ll never forget the way he wouldn’t stop talking or keep still, even though mum was trying to draw him.’ Jeff visibly shook off his mood, grinned and added, ‘Dad says we have to live in the present and be grateful for past experiences.’

‘And good advice too.’

‘Yep. I’m glad I knew Max. He was the most handsome and interesting man I’ve ever met.’

‘Until today.’

‘Naturally.’

‘Our relationship is going to prosper.’

‘Good - I fancy you.’

‘That was quick.’

‘I’m precocious.’

‘I’m twenty-eight.’

‘Maturity becomes a man.’

‘Immaturity’s illegal.’

‘I’m seventeen and legal.’

‘When you’re a fit young man of forty-nine, I’ll be an elderly codger of sixty.’

‘Yuk.’

‘Quite.’

‘I wasn’t considering a life-long attachment.’

‘Unfaithful! And we’ve only just met.’

Jeff burst into laughter and I turned from the window to face Der and Dra who had entered during the exchange. Their almost identical faces, framed by longish, dark-blond straight hair, were serious as they stepped forward extending cautious hands. I had to glance down to see who was who. There was no mistaking Der’s manhood, it outshone Jeff’s and mine by several orders of magnitude. Dra’s breasts looked scarcely different from her well-muscled brother’s pectorals and, despite slightly larger nipples, she emanated an androgynous quality that was equally attractive. Neither would have to rely on character alone.

‘How do you do, Alexander, how do you do, Alexandra,’ I said, attempting to match their seriousness.

‘You may call us Der and Dra.’

‘Thank you. You may call me anything you like, but don’t call me late for dinner.’

They smiled with the politeness of those who have heard such chestnuts before. It was astounding how alike they were. Same slightly square jaws, prominent cheekbones, full lips, olive complexions, deep-set brown eyes under arched eyebrows, strong necks, broad shoulders. Involuntarily, I glanced down again to confirm Dra’s sex. Narrow hips and well-formed legs. She could have been a boy.

‘That’s the first time for ages that Jeff’s been beaten,’ she said earnestly. ‘Did Mum teach you the game?’

‘I didn’t know I was playing one.’

‘Oh,’ said Der dismissively, ‘then it doesn’t count. I thought he gave in too easily.’

‘Gave in?’

‘We go on and on making silly answers till one cracks up - he’s the loser,’ Der explained.

Jeff put his arm around my shoulder, ‘I didn’t give in, I was just being nice to a guest and potential lover.’

‘Does Peter know you have designs on him, Jeff?’ Brian had joined us.

‘He does now.’

Brian looked at me with a half smile to gauge my reaction. He was as tall as Jeff, but solid. A tough and fit looking customer – obviously the twins’ father. Brawny arms, thick chest evenly coated with short brown hair, strong legs and sporting a light, seamless tan. Mad had chosen a solid rock on which to build her family. He must have been at least forty, but looked in his early thirties.

‘Well, I guess forewarned is forearmed,’ I laughed, shamed at my lack of originality.

‘But not fore-skinned,’ interjected Dra quietly peering at my groin with what appeared to be academic interest. ‘Are you Jewish?’

Everyone looked at what was one more reason to hate my parents. I had never been able to forgive them for that infant mutilation. None of my friends had been cut and I remained embarrassed by it. Luckily, it was a neat job.

‘No, just stupid parents. Does it offend you?’

‘Of course not! It’s just that I’ve read about male and female circumcisions and other rites of passage to adulthood, and always thought they sounded grotesque.’ She squatted down for a closer inspection. ‘Yours is the first circumcised penis I’ve seen, and it’s not horrible, it looks neat, clean, and... somehow honest.’ She stood up and smiled at me innocently. ‘That sounds stupid, doesn’t it? What do you think, Mum?’

Mad hung her apron on the back of a chair and joined us. She was thin, but not unhealthily so. The only hair on her body was on her head, a frizzy black confection like a demonic halo. Small breasts and nipples, narrow hips for a woman, shapely legs and a light tan rendered her one of the few mature women I had ever found physically attractive. Standing beside Brian she reached only to his shoulder.

‘What do I think of what, dear?’

‘Peter’s circumcised penis.’

Fearing ridicule, I glanced quickly around but the three men were taking Dra’s observations seriously, and were waiting for Mad’s opinion. It wasn’t a joke; they were genuinely interested. However, the concerted attention of five people was beginning to have its effect. How far did their liberal outlook go? I wondered.

‘I like it,’ was Mad’s considered judgement. ‘It’s... sort of innocent. Nothing concealed.’

‘And what does the prospective lover think?’ Brian asked with a grin, delighting in my discomfiture. The object of everyone’s attention was swelling visibly.

‘I agree with Dra. Innocent, honest and straightforward - like me,’ he replied smugly.

I quelled the urge to cover my erection. If they weren’t embarrassed, why should I be? ‘It only looks innocent beside Der’s magnificent manhood.’

‘You’re joking! I prefer to look like a human, not a horse,’ Jeff scoffed.

‘Your’s would look larger if you still had your foreskin,’ consoled Dra earnestly.

‘And consider the aesthetics,’ laughed Mad. ‘You’re the lean, elegant type, Peter. Anything larger would look ridiculous on you.’

‘And it obviously works perfectly,’ added Brian. ‘About thirty percent of Australian men suffer from impotence.’

‘We’d better stop,’ laughed Mad, ‘before it bursts.’

They laughed and I laughed. It was funny and natural, not rude and dirty. I relaxed, they sensed it, and our friendship was sealed.

‘The meal’s ready, so everyone to the table.’ Mad bustled across to the stove.

‘Have you ever worked out the percentage increase in volume, circumference and length of your penis from flaccid to fully erect, Peter?’ asked Der thoughtfully as we moved towards the dining area. ‘I’d say your ratio was much greater than mine. My cock may be larger than yours when soft, but it hardly increases in size when erect. We could compare them with water displacement.’

No one was laughing. They were taking Der’s suggestion quite as seriously as they had Dra’s earlier interest. Mad was right, they were odd. Deliciously so. Odd in the way I’d frequently wished my own family to be. Intelligent, curious, articulate kids with parents equal to the task of rearing them; and having a liberality of spirit to match. Natural creatures savouring their existence, untainted by duplicity and without the slightest hint of lewdness. I was enchanted. Here were Rousseau’s sauvages innocents – except they were educated and eloquent.

‘Can it wait till after lunch?’ asked Mad, placing plates on the table. ‘And perhaps Peter isn’t really interested.’

‘If it proves Der’s monster is no better than mine, I’m all for it. I dislike feeling inadequate.’

‘Don’t we all?’ Jeff concurred.

‘After lunch then,’ adjudicated Brian, turning to me. ‘Red or purple?’

‘Red or purple what?’

‘Towel.’

‘Red.’

He handed me a red towel. 'We each have our own, ensures clean seats.'

Mad treated us to a delicious meal of game pie, fresh fruit and vegetables, and yoghurt. It was an extended meal as everyone had plenty to say about what they'd been doing and there was discussion on every topic. By the time the dishes were done and the frames and mounts had been sorted and loaded, it was getting late.

'We'll have to do the experiment another time, Der. I'm expected for dinner at Max's parents place and if I leave it any longer I'll be late.'

'That'll be better actually. I've thought of a few refinements, so need time to set it up. When are you coming back?'

I shrugged.

He stared at me intently for a second then blurted, 'Are you the bloke Max was going to bring to visit us?'

'No idea.'

'Are you an artist?'

'Sort of.'

'Did you exhibit at the opening of Max's gallery?'

'Yep.' Before he could say something I didn't want to hear, I turned to the others. 'I'll see you all at Mad's opening next Wednesday evening.'

'You bet,' said Jeff. 'We'll be there.'

'Naturally. But,' added Brian seriously, 'you must feel free to drop in, any time at all.'

I raised an eyebrow.

'No! I mean that. We've enjoyed your company. If you're feeling a bit low after the funeral, at a loose end... we'd like you to call in. Right, Mad?'

She smiled and nodded.

I wanted to say it had been the best day I'd had for four years, and they were the nicest people I'd met in that time, but if I'd opened my mouth I'd have flooded the room with tears.

Chapter Four

The Fierneys had retired to ten acres of dry eucalypt forest in hilly country about fifty minutes from the coast. Designed by Max, the house had been built by both of us, under the supervision of a retired builder, during weekends and holidays when we were at Uni. Jobs for students were as scarce as hen's teeth; my parents had no desire to waste hard-earned cash on my frivolous aspirations, so the wages paid for my degree. I spent more happy hours at the Fierney's during and after construction than I can remember. A shattered dream, thanks to Frances.

A scrub-covered mound sheltered the property from south-easterly winds and the prying eyes of passing traffic. The driveway wound down through trees to the garage and back door. From the front verandah the land sloped away to the west, affording a view over pastures, coppices, and distant ranges. A State Forest abutted the southern boundary. The neighbours to the north were invisible among their trees.

Nervous excitement as I coasted down the drive turned to dismay when I pulled up in front of the garage. Two other vehicles were already in the parking area. If they belonged to Max's brother and sister, I'd leave! They'd been delighted when Frances arrived on the scene. As I pulled up, a malevolent caricature of the rural gentleman in tweed suit, waistcoat, gold watch-chain draped across paunch appeared in the garage doorway. Patrick. I got slowly out of the wagon, face in neutral, feeling underdressed in tracksuit and anorak. Trainers were no match for polished brogues; my long hair seemed decadent beside the neat trim of this country lawyer.

'What the hell are you doing here?' The mouth a hard, thin line; eyes, slits encased in fat.

‘Your parents invited me.’

‘They were only being polite. You should have refused.’

‘I wanted to come. Max was my best friend.’

‘Friend! Patrick snorted, ‘My brother had the good sense to get shot of you four years ago. Why can’t you leave his family in peace? And driving his car! I’ve a good mind to charge you with theft!’

He had worked himself into a lather, spraying the threat at the top of his lungs.

Unable to think of anything that might improve matters, I said nothing. This goaded him into action. He turned back to the garage, grabbed a length of dog-chain from a hook by the door, swung it round his head and let it fly. I jumped back, tripped over a coil of garden hose and fell, cracking my head on the edge of the pavers. I rolled over and felt the back of my head - warm and sticky. Patrick’s eyes were blank discs of hate.

‘That’s the most athletic I’ve ever seen you, Patrick,’ I said as evenly as I could manage. ‘Now I’m down why not come over and finish me off? Work some fat off your gut.’ I struggled to my feet in case he took up the offer, but when I looked up again he was gone.

‘Patrick? Is that you shouting? What’s the matter?’ Hank’s voice from the back door. ‘What the...? My god, it’s Peter! Are you all right, son? Here, let me help.’

‘I’m fine thanks, Hank. bumble-footed as ever. I tripped over the hose.’ I dabbed at the cut with my handkerchief.

‘There’s a lot of blood. Come in and put a dressing on it.’

Inside, I was fussed over by Celia, stared at with distaste by Maureen, and glowered at by Patrick, who had just entered.

‘Patrick, Peter’s hurt himself. Get him a drink would you, dear?’ Celia asked.

My erstwhile attacker’s discomfort was balm to my wounds as he offered a stinky scotch and water, holding the tumbler just out of reach with finger and thumb. I sat back, forcing him to lean closer. Maureen took over dinner preparation and Celia bathed my cut. It was superficial, but needed a bandage to stop blood dripping everywhere. I looked quite the wounded soldier at dinner, where conversation was stilted but the food was excellent.

Afterwards, as we arranged ourselves uncomfortably in the lounge, Hank plonked himself beside me on the sofa and held out a letter.

‘Here’s a bit of good news, Peter. Frances’s solicitor contacted us to convey the details of Max’s will. As you probably know, the estate was held by Max and Frances as joint tenants, so Frances inherits everything. However, the Mercedes and the contents of his bedroom above the gallery; stereo, television, clothes and so on, are in his name only. The will was made last year and his instructions are perfectly clear; everything not in joint names is to go to you.’

My heart lurched, triggering a thumping headache. I searched Hank’s face, but his look of honest pleasure was unambiguous. Celia’s reaction was equally generous. I glanced across and caught Patrick and Maureen staring tight-lipped at each other. No wonder Patrick had let fly at me. It made a bit more sense.

‘I’m... I had no idea that... Max still...’ I couldn’t continue. My eyes filled, an enormous lump in my throat threatened to choke me and I sure as hell didn’t want Patrick or Maureen to see the state I was getting into. ‘Are you absolutely sure?’ I whispered. ‘Did...did he really..?’

‘It’s a bloody disgrace! Leaving that magnificent vehicle to a slimy pervert! I’ll contest it. His brother and sister should come before this...this sodomite!’

Hank and Celia were mortified. They had obviously not expected such an outburst.

‘But Patrick, Maureen, you are both wealthy. You have everything you need! Peter is a struggling artist and was Max’s best friend. And is a very dear friend of ours too. I think it is wonderful that he should inherit. It’s little enough.’

‘I’m sorry, Mother,’ broke in Maureen icily, ‘But I have to agree with Patrick. What on earth do we tell our friends? Our brother left his personal belongings to a queer? No, don’t protest, that’s the

truth of the matter. I have no idea what sort of hold this person had over Max, but it was unhealthy and you should be able to see that.'

Any idea I had entertained that I might refuse the bequest had evaporated. To hell with them.

Hank looked slowly from one to the other. 'You are living in a fool's world, both of you. Your brother was gay. He never slept with Frances. Their marriage was a business arrangement. He told us that himself. We kept it from you to spare your feelings, knowing how narrow your views are, but your insulting and defamatory statements this evening leave me no option but to tell you. As far as your mother and I are concerned, Peter is as much a part of this family as are your spouses. We love him and are sorry that Max's impatience to get rich led to their splitting up. That you have denied Max's sexuality all these years is your problem, but if you contest his Will, your friends will discover that your brother was the much loved homosexual son of Celia and me, and we consider Peter the rightful inheritor of his personal effects.'

Patrick stood, turned to his sister and hissed, 'I'm going home. I don't know, yet, whether I will return tomorrow. Are you coming?'

'Of course.' Maureen turned to her parents. 'I'm staying at Patrick's, if he returns tomorrow then so will I. Otherwise, I'll see you at Margery's engagement party, if you can spare the time for your grand daughter?'

'Darling, I'm sorry you feel this way...'

'You aren't to blame, Mother He has you under his spell too.' She pecked her unresisting parents on the cheek and they followed her to the door like lost sheep.

I don't think I have ever felt so embarrassed. No one said anything until both cars had driven away, then Hank sat down and looked at me with a wry smile.

'We sometimes wonder whether those two were swapped at birth. Quite frankly, I've had enough of them for a while and hope neither return tomorrow. Celia's badly stressed and we can do without their unpleasantness.' He wrapped a comforting arm around his wife.

She smiled sadly. 'Peter, I'm thrilled Max willed those things to you, I'm very glad you're here, and I'm not going bonkers. But I am tired, so if you'll excuse me, dear, I'll toddle off to bed.' She planted an affectionate kiss on my cheek, touched Hank tenderly and left us.

After two hours of reminiscence, four whiskies and a pleasurable browse through photo albums, Hank and I also called it a night.

I own a Mercedes was the first thought that entered my head as sunlight splashed across the room, dragging me from sleep. My second, less dishonourable realisation, was that today we would farewell Max, and I cried. Not for him, but for myself and for Hank and Celia who were hurting as much as I, and for the whole, stupid, unfairness of it all. Mixed up in all the wetness were tears of frustration that fat Patrick and his ilk should still be alive, destroying gladness with their bigotry, dogma and hatred, while Max, beautiful Max, was nothing but a cupful of ashes. I indulged the self pity for three minutes, took a cold shower, put on a pair of shorts and sweater, and joined Hank and Celia on the sun-splashed end of the verandah for breakfast.

What a morning. Light, clear, warm and breathless. A hint of mimosa on the air, rising mists turning hills into receding cut-outs, a callistemon splashing its scarlet among the green, lorikeets screeching in the grevilleas, and a million cicadas chirruping in unison. The man-made world of noise, fumes, concrete and stress didn't exist. It was a day in which nothing bad could happen.

The program was simple. After breakfast, Hank and I would collect Max's ashes. The local crematorium was small and could only fire one body at a time, so at least we knew whose ashes we were getting. At ten-thirty, four friends would arrive and the ceremony, such as it was, would begin.

Frances had decided not to attend, much to everyone's relief. She was going to have her own private ceremony she had informed Celia during a brief telephone conversation the previous day. We wouldn't wait for Patrick and Maureen. They'd complained bitterly to their parents that there was to be no Christian service, but on that score Max had been explicit. 'No funeral service of any

type, especially no religious crap,' were the exact words in his Will, according to Hank. He and Celia shared Max's contempt for witch-doctoring, and were only too happy to oblige.

Brother and sister were on time, minus their families thank goodness. Probably frightened I'd infect them with homosexuality. Nine of us and the dog set out on a zigzag stroll down through the trees to the bottom boundary. We stopped whenever one of us felt like saying a few words in memory of Max, and a pinch of his ashes were sprinkled over the ground. It was simple, moving, and memorable. Maureen and Patrick didn't disgrace themselves.

After tea and sandwiches on the verandah, the guests left, to be followed soon after by Patrick and Maureen. Neither had spoken a word to me all day. I was waiting to close the gate behind them when Patrick stopped the car, wound down his window and snarled, 'You are going to regret this for the rest of your miserable, disgusting, perverted life, you filthy pederast.' He gunned the motor, spraying me with dust and stones and sped away.

'I'm not, never have been and never will be a pederast,' I whispered as I closed the gate and retraced my steps down the drive, slipping unconsciously into the adolescent mantra I used to chant endlessly to keep myself sane. 'I am a normal human being. I have no power to change the way I was born. I am as worthy as the next person. I do no harm to anyone. I am not evil. I am not perverted. I will not burn forever on the fires of hell. These are the lies of bigots who seek to control others through fear. My worth does not reside in my sexual orientation, but in my thoughts and actions. I will not permit anyone to destroy my self-esteem.'

The rest of the day was like old times. A burden had been lifted, guilt was gone, and we relaxed in our friendship. Hank was interested in my plans for the gallery and they were both thrilled that Max's vision was to be continued, at least for a time. I shared their excitement about a proposed summer cruise around the Pacific Islands. We laughed at memories of house building, of the arguments and disagreements that had to be sorted before any decision could be taken, and marvelled at how excellently the house had turned out. They were still very happy with it.

'Don't you miss your legal practice?' I asked.

'One would have to be pretty desperate to miss conveyancing, drawing up the occasional will, advising on a boundary dispute, or witnessing someone's Power of Attorney.' He laughed in self-deprecation. 'My old clients are much happier now Patrick's taken over. He's a great deal more in tune with their narrow, right wing attitudes. They were never sure they could trust me.'

'But, don't either of you get bored, just pottering around here most of the time? Surely, without day to day problems lives cease to have meaning?'

Celia looked up sharply. 'Life has no meaning, Peter. None at all. It simply is. We can either accept it as a precious gift, enjoying it as much as possible, or squander it on greed, lust and trivial disputes. To look for meaning and purpose in nature is a form of insanity to which I am glad I have never succumbed.'

'Having few personal problems doesn't mean we are free of concerns,' added Hank. 'A glance through a newspaper or five minutes of television news provides anyone with a conscience with enough anxiety to keep them from complacency or boredom. The beauty of those worries is there's nothing one can do about them, whereas the day to day problems of one's workplace can destroy happiness. You feel they have to be solved, yet failure to do so is demoralising. Without shame, I confess I am happy to have few demands placed on me.'

'As Sartre said, Hell is other people. Hank is a much more contented man now he no longer has to deal with the public.'

Her husband grimaced. 'Every morning as I drove to work I used to recite that advice of Marcus Aurelius. "Begin the morning by saying to thyself, I shall meet with the busybody, the ungrateful, arrogant, deceitful, envious, unsocial...." But, it's not only that, something happens to your body from around sixty onwards. The same activities you have always done without thinking leave you tired. You can't build up muscles any more, they seem to disappear between each job. Other people cease to be so interesting.'

Conversation becomes reminiscence, and that's only fun for a while. Most people's heads are full of incredible junk. Everyone wants to talk and interruptions abound. Serious thinking only occurs when reading, writing, or walking alone. I love writing letters, but at seventy-two I've few people left to write to. None of them like writing anyway. Letter-writers have time to consider what they want to say, and the reader has time to think about it before replying. That's why I avoid telephones. I resent being expected to respond intelligently without sufficient time to think.'

'Do you watch TV?'

'The trouble with television is they have to appeal to such a wide variety of tastes, intellects and ages. Either I have heard or thought it all before, or it is so superficial that I simply get annoyed and fall asleep.'

'What we have discovered,' said Celia thoughtfully, 'is that we see more, think more clearly, and achieve greater understanding by doing little, than by being constantly active. Until one stands still, much of the world is invisible. If I sit quietly, wild birds come near to scratch around for food. When I stand silently under trees, butterflies and a myriad other insects appear. The sounds and scents of the countryside are not available when talking, driving in a car, sitting on a ride-on mower, or listening to the radio. When surrounded by others, rational thought is impossible.' She laughed self-consciously, 'It's a paradox. Life is richer the less one does. We go out occasionally, visit our few friends, walk in the forest... Of course, we're lucky we get on so well.'

Hank raised an eyebrow. 'It's not luck. It's determination. Our marriage could have gone off the rails like any other, but we were too pig-headed to let it.' He took his wife's hand in a gesture of ease and trust.

'It's all to do with false desires.' Celia smiled. 'I feel sorry for our acquaintances who are unwilling to grow old. They act like unruly teenagers. Many are out every day and as many nights as they can manage. They try all the cheap restaurants, spend hours at the RSL, play the pokies, bowls, bingo, darts, bridge, watch daytime TV, anything to distract them from experiencing their lives. They go on all the Seniors' Club outings, try hang-gliding, ballooning – everything that's going. I would be pleased for them if it left them contented, but it doesn't. They are tired much of the time, get irritated with their spouses, have dreadful rows and are constantly declaring, "If only such and such would happen, then I'd be happy." It's depressing.'

'I hope I'll end up like you two one day.'

'You will. You want the right things. It wasn't your fault you split with Max,' Hank said with deliberate firmness. 'He was prepared to cut corners and take risks to get rich quickly. You're not like that. If you'd tried to stay together during the last four years, your disagreements would have blown you apart. You are unable to compromise on what you think is right - that's one of the things we love about you. However, it could make you a difficult person to live with. Although we loved Max's daredevil approach to life, during his time with you he was the most stable and thoughtful he had ever been, and we are eternally grateful to you for those years.'

I smiled my thanks and took off for a swim in the dam. It was freezing but exactly what I needed to flush away mushy thoughts scrabbling at the edge of consciousness. Hank was right, of course. But what would have happened if we had got together again now? After Max had made his money? Would we have continued as before? What if...? What if...? If only... I had to accept that I would never know and get on with my life. It was time to purge the brain and delete dreary, unanswerable questions. That night I slept well for the first time since Max's fall, and by eight thirty the next morning was waving goodbye.

Forty kilometres south in a wet part of the ranges, my thirty-five acres were as lush as the Fierney's were dry. It was nearly two weeks since I'd seen my house and studio so I wanted to check on them before heading back to the gallery. A new resolve to take charge of life was bubbling through my veins, bringing with it a new feeling - excited anticipation. For the first time in years I was looking forward to whatever lay ahead.

The twelve kilometres of rough, unsealed winding road heading west through the hills to my eyrie, had always seemed a gruelling marathon of bumps, crunches and gear-changes, but that day I glided over it. The council must have upgraded it, I thought, until I realised what vehicle I was driving. How like life! No two people's experiences of the same thing are comparable. One person takes on the world with the backing of money and supportive parents; another, penniless and alone. Some are emotionally equipped to negotiate red tape; others are intimidated. Only one thing is certain, the playing field isn't level.

I saw the smoke as soon as I crested the final rise, a thin grey column rising straight up into the still air. Rory was probably burning his rubbish. I was lucky to have an almost kindred spirit on the neighbouring block, but he would insist on burning all his waste, including plastic bags. It wasn't until I got to the gate that I realised the smoke was at my place! The house and studio, hidden from the road by a melaleuca-timbered rise, nestle into a north-facing amphitheatre fringed by steep rain-forested hills. Enough land had been cleared for two buildings and a deep dam. I shot over the rise and, as the wagon burst into the clearing, I saw Rory and Lida running from the dam to the house with buckets. I skidded to a halt. They turned, palms outstretched in resignation.

'Sorry, Peter. We came over as soon as we realised it was bad news. When we first saw the smoke, we imagined you had come home last night and were cooking breakfast. So by the time we got here it was too late. The door was locked, but a couple of windows were already broken so we smashed the rest and threw buckets of water through.'

I raced over to what had been my cottage. Black smoke-stains oozed up from every broken window, staining the white stucco. The roof appeared intact, but smoke was still seeping between the tiles. I unlocked and threw open the door, gagging on poisonous fumes from all the plastic we forget we own. The fire appeared to be out but we threw a few more buckets of water up over the rafters just to make sure. The interior was a total write-off. Nothing was salvageable.

Wall lining, bed, kitchen bench and cupboards, armchair... everything was either a sodden black smouldering mass, or a charred wreck. Exposed beams and rafters had been singed in several places but still looked solid. I felt numb. It hadn't happened. I'd come to the wrong place. It couldn't be true! This one-roomed cottage was me! I had designed, built, furnished and decorated it. It looked like I felt - gutted. I turned to my neighbours.

'How could this have happened? I'm always so careful. I haven't been here for two weeks. There was no fire left in the stove, there's no fuel anywhere near...'

They shook their heads, wordless, helpless. I raced across the courtyard to the studio, a twin of the cottage. It looked intact until I reached the door, which had been smashed open with my axe, now lying on the grass. Inside was chaos. Every sketch, canvas, drawing - everything I had worked on or could use for a painting had been thrown onto the floor and trampled. Paint, turps, varnish, linseed oil poured on top. Every tube of paint had been stomped on, smeared over the walls, floor, easels and workbench. Total wreckage. Maniacal. Rory and Lida stood speechless at the door. I sank onto a stool. I didn't want to know who had done this, or why. I couldn't see the purpose of living if someone hated me that much. It wasn't worth the fight.

'At least they didn't set light to the studio,' Lida consoled.

No, I thought, they wanted me to experience this mess. To see the extent of their hatred.

'They must have broken a window in the house and thrown a match through. Probably with some petrol-soaked rags to get it going,' suggested Rory. 'What're you going to do?'

'You can stay with us, Peter,' offered Lida hesitantly.

That was real friendship. They were living in a caravan while they slowly built their own house. Money was obviously a bit tight as there hadn't been much progress over the last couple of years. I'd have had to curl up under the sink to sleep. I prised myself off the stool and we went outside.

'That's very generous, Lida, but I have to get back to the coast. I've got a job now. I sold the paintings but that wasn't enough to keep body and soul together. I sleep in a flat at work.'

They nodded hopelessly while I took a few deep breaths and adjusted my thoughts. It was pointless being upset or trying to understand. Such wanton vandalism is beyond understanding. However, I was getting bloody angry and that felt better. Much better!

I looked across at two frightened faces and guessed their fears. If this could happen to me, then how safe were they? Foreign accents had already made them the butt of racism and anti-immigrant hatred from local rednecks. It was worrying. 'I'd better let the cops know,' I said quietly, 'otherwise I'll get no insurance. It won't cover everything, but at least I'll get something back from this mess.'

'Do you want to use our telephone?'

'Perhaps mine still works?' Miraculously it did, despite the soot, ash and water, and I was promised a visit from a patrol car within the hour. I turned back to my neighbours. 'Thanks, both of you. You've been wonderful! Without you the rafters would have gone and there'd be nothing left. As it is, it's just a filthy mess to clean up and replace. I can handle that, no worries. So I owe you one. A big one! I'll hang around till the cops come then pop over before heading off.'

They looked unconvinced, but happier as they trudged back along the track to their place. They had enough problems of their own without having to worry about mine. I made a start on the studio while waiting for the police. Forty minutes later they pulled up, scratched their heads and looked willing but pessimistic as they trotted out the inevitable questions. Had I left a fire going? Did I usually leave the slow-burner dampened down for when I returned? Who had done the electrical wiring? What sort of hot water system? Had I any enemies? Got into a fight recently? Jealous workmates? Problems with neighbours? Ex-wives?

I wasn't much help and was careful not to mention Rory and Lida's contribution. They preferred to remain unnoticed by authority, particularly since their permit to live in the caravan had long since expired. I let the officers think it was I who had thrown all the water around. One name kept hammering in my head, Patrick Fierney, but I wasn't going to drag Hank and Celia into this. All I needed was police confirmation of the vandalism and damage so I could make an insurance claim.

After half an hour of note taking, poking around in the soot and spilled paint, and looking for tyre marks on the bone-dry track, they completed their report and left, promising to ask everyone else on the road if they had noticed anything unusual, and to contact me if they had any news. I thanked them profusely.

As soon as they had gone I telephoned Patrick's office. His secretary informed me that he had slipped out for a while. Could she take a message?

'Yes please. My name is Peter Corringe. I may have some business for Mr Fierney,' I said sweetly. 'I am a painter of pictures. Arsonists have razed my house, and my studio has been trashed. The police are on the ball and have a good lead. A local resident noticed a strange car drive up my road. I will probably be needing advice from Mr Fierney about what my options are. Could you get him to give me a call?'

She said she would, murmured suitable condolences, and disconnected.

I replaced the receiver, fully intending to get stuck in to cleaning-up, but suddenly couldn't be bothered. It was all too much. One day perhaps I would feel like doing it, but that day I sure as hell didn't.

The weather was too perfect to spoil. A numbing depression dragged at my heart as I nailed up the studio door with spare timber and locked the cottage - a useless precaution considering every window was broken. After calling in to say cheerio to Rory and Lida, I lodged my claim with the Insurance agent in Yandina, and set off for the coast.

The wagon's luxury no longer buoyed me; neither did the fatty takeaway I bought for lunch. I couldn't face the gallery, so drove aimlessly, ending up outside the Alcona's. I needed company, friendly company. Not solitary work or Frances's smug certainties. Mad opened the door cautiously, then threw it wide in welcome. She was wearing a blue housecoat.

'My neighbours think I wear nothing but these things,' she laughed. 'They'd be shocked if they knew the truth.'

I left the simplest of my cares in the wardrobe and joined Mad for a cup of tea, telling her my place was in a bit of a mess and, as I didn't feel like cleaning up, had called in on the way back to town. She led me downstairs to her studio where she was engaged on another series of drawings. After her success with the portrait of Max, she wanted to get into figure drawing. A preliminary study of Jeff looked promising. Her studio occupied one end of a large activities room directly below the living area. Sliding doors opened onto the patio and pool; sunlight splashed into the work area spreading warmth, peace and harmony.

'You're looking haggard, Peter. Go for a swim. It's cold, but it'll do you good.'

It was even colder than the dam, but at least I didn't come out covered in flotsam. I collapsed onto a towel in the sun.

'You're a bit older than Max, aren't you?'

That hurt! 'A year younger actually.'

'Oh, sorry. It's probably just the light and the stress you've been under lately.'

'I feel old. Old and past it. What's the solution?'

'No idea, but I've discovered that when I don't know how to fix up what's wrong inside, it helps to tidy up the outside. Then, when I look in the mirror I feel so perked up that my insides want to catch up.'

'Isn't that vanity?'

'Only if you do it to impress others. When you do it for yourself, it's sensible.'

'Not much I can do with my exterior.'

'Would you trust me with a bit of panel-beating, polishing and minor detailing?'

'Can you make me beautiful?'

'Handsome, I can manage. Beauty comes from inside. You're already beautiful.'

'Flattery will get you everywhere.'

'There's nowhere I want to go.'

'Bored?'

'Contented.'

'The phrase, a contented woman, is a contradiction.'

'Like, a perfect man?'

'Perhaps we are both unique and atypical of our gender.'

'That's the only possibility.'

'Well, Contented Woman, rejuvenate this Perfect Man.'

And she did.

'Youths,' she informed me, setting to work with electric hair clippers, 'have short body-hair. As men get older, body hair ceases to fall out, grows longer and covers a greater area, concealing muscular structure and keeping the skin moist, favouring fungal rashes. Eventually, hair starts sprouting in the oddest of places.'

This was not a comforting lesson for a man rapidly approaching the end of his youth.

'Apart from his obvious fitness,' she continued, enjoying my disquiet, 'Brian's relatively youthful appearance is in part due to these clippers.'

She lapsed into the stillness of concentration - I into contemplating the dread prospect of old age. Starting at my ankles and working up to the crown of my head, all hair was cropped to half a centimetre. My almost shoulder-length tresses took some convincing, but they eventually joined the impressive brown pile on the studio floor. The spacer was then removed and armpit hair was cut as short as the clippers could manage, to eliminate the need for deodorants. Hairs hold body odours, I was informed, before being advised never to shave off body hair with a blade razor, or use wax, because that caused ingrown hairs and rashes. I nodded towards her baby-smooth crotch and raised an eyebrow.

‘Great isn’t it?’ she laughed, lightly brushing the area with her fingertips. ‘Brian shouted me a laser treatment. I was going grey down there and couldn’t handle it. I don’t mind tinting the hair on my head, but not there. Dra wants it done too, but Der prefers her fuzzy.’

I blinked, but decided it was nothing to do with me.

‘You can do your own nether region,’ she grinned, passing me the clippers. ‘A hairless anus means no dags left behind on seats and,’ she added slyly, ‘a smooth scrotum will make your manhood appear larger.’

I blushed, squatted over a mirror for the operation, stood up and checked - and it did.

While my beautician vacuumed up my locks, I took a shower on the lawn under the garden hose, then was treated to a head and shoulder massage of such vigour I was in danger of being scalped. Afterwards, a young bloke of twenty-five looked back from the full-length mirror. It was astounding. The muscular definition of my torso was revealed, my legs seemed to have more shape, and I looked young! I felt young! The haggard warlock had disappeared along with the hair. Cheekbones stood out, nose seemed shorter, neck longer, eyes clearer, and lips fuller. I leaped around like a mad thing, swam another three lengths of the pool and when I got out was quickly dry - no hair to hold the water.

Mad looked at me critically. ‘Hang on a tick.’ She ran upstairs and returned with a bottle. ‘Der and Dra won’t miss this little bit,’ she laughed, massaging something stinging and smelly into my hair. ‘Now go and sit in the sun.’

Thirty minutes later I gazed at the mirror in disbelief – my head was crowned with a cap of golden spikes. ‘I’m eighteen.’

‘At the most.’

‘Would you trust the director of an art gallery who looked like this?’

‘Utterly.’

‘With your seventeen year old son?’

‘He’s old enough to make up his own mind.’

‘I never know whether he’s kidding or not. Is he really gay?’

‘Are you?’

My heart leaped. I blushed, looked her straight in the eye and said firmly, ‘Yes.’

‘Personal questions, Peter, should always be asked of the person. Ask Jeff yourself.’

‘Would you mind if he is?’

‘Brian and I never discuss our children with anyone unless they are there to defend themselves.’

‘Not only a contented woman, but a perfect parent and faultless friend.’

‘Thank you.’

A clattering of feet on stairs announced the children’s return from school. A few minutes later they burst upon us and greeted my new look with a flattering mixture of disbelief and delight. A transformation for the better was the consensus, and Mad was heaped with due praise. Dra and Jeff went up to start homework, Mad began the evening meal, to which I’d been invited, and Der and I did push-ups over a measuring cylinder full of water.

Beneath his mantle of superior calm, Der was an ordinary kid of fifteen, fooling around and cracking stale jokes that made me like him even more, and my sense of inferiority evaporated. The experiment was hilarious and, investigations completed, Der too went up to start on homework, while I browsed the bookshelves in the living room until Brian came in, looking bushed.

‘Five bitches spayed, four castrations, two cases of mange, six tooth extractions, and a broken leg. I need a shower. Pour us a beer, Peter, I’ll join you in ten minutes.’

Over cold beers he gazed at me speculatively. ‘Mad’s been grooming.’

‘A bit of spit and polish.’

‘And I thought you were my age.’

‘Almost.’

‘Almost half my age.’

‘I’m twenty-eight.’

‘I’m forty-four.’

‘Looking thirty-four!’

‘My wife’s a wonder.’

‘Skilful and smart.’

‘Tower of talent.’

‘Consummate concubine.’

‘You’d better bloody well be queer.’

‘As bent as a crank-shaft.’

‘That’s OK then. You can stay.’

We laughed, at ease with each other. By the time Mad joined us I had gained a fair insight into the delights of veterinary surgery. It sounded as much fun as being a butcher.

‘The animals are great and I love working with them. They never complain and are always grateful. It’s their nutty owners who drive me to drink. Another?’

We shared another beer and more opinions until the children joined us for the evening meal. Everyone helped with the dishes before moving to the lounge area. I remained standing. I didn’t want to go - I wanted to curl up in the womb of Alcona friendship and never budge again. However, I also wanted the friendship to endure, so was determined not to outstay my welcome.

‘You don’t want to go home to an empty flat. Stay the night,’ Brian said evenly.

‘Are you sure?’

‘Unequivocally.’

I looked around. Mad and the children were looking at me, faces uncharacteristically expressionless, not wanting to influence my response. I couldn’t stop my lips from spreading into a grin. ‘Thanks, I’d love to stay.’

Jeff patted the seat beside him. ‘You’ll probably regret it, Peter, we’re less interesting than television.’

‘Not possible.’

We chewed over the events of the day. Jeff had had a run in with his chemistry teacher, Dra an argument with her best friend. Der had been nominated as debating team leader. I’d been determined not to off-load my own woes, but suddenly couldn’t help myself. If I couldn’t tell these people what had happened, then who could I tell?

The reaction was embarrassing, overwhelming and, I realise now, predictable. Offers to come up at the weekends and help me re-build, to store anything personal, to use Mad’s studio... I thought I was over the shock of the vandalism and had pictured myself laughing it off with a manly shrug, but without warning and before I could thank them, I was wracked by a fit of the shakes.

Brian put his arm round my shoulders, it passed, and the conversation moved on until Der, with enviable gravity and several cautious disclaimers, announced the results of our experiment.

‘The volume of Peter’s penis increased from 114cc to 228cc, a ratio of 1:2, a one hundred percent increase. Mine went from 210cc to 240cc, a ratio of 1:1.2, a fourteen percent increase. I leave you to draw your own conclusions.’

These Archimedean results were placed on the floor for scrutiny. I wasn’t sure whether to be pleased or not. After the laughter, Jeff bashfully told us his main news. A new recruit to the school basketball team, an exchange student from Chile, had chatted with him after practice. Jeff thought he was in love. We all hoped the Chilean was too.

After a luxurious shower I made up the bed on the convertible sofa in the study off the lounge and crawled in, exhausted. A few minutes later a timid knock at the door - Jeff. My heart sank.

Gangling youths, no matter how charming, do not turn me on. I needn’t have worried, he was simply seeking advice. I wasn’t sure I was the person to ask - I’ve spent more time thinking about it than doing it.

We ended up agreeing on three basic principles: One: humans, like all animals, are sexual creatures, and sex has as much to do with social adhesion as it has with procreation. There's nothing one can do about one's sexual orientation, but when lust is satisfied, most people want to love and be loved – with all that implies. Two: there are as many ways of enjoying sex as there are people, and each partner's desires are equally important. Three: socially, physically, mentally and spiritually, gays are as diverse as heterosexuals; they're neither better nor worse, and there's no such thing as a homosexual type. The idea's as stupid as thinking all heterosexuals are the same.

Jeff's sigh was heartfelt. 'That's a weight off my mind. I was worried I'd have to go around with a limp wrist, dress up in drag, take it up the arse and start feeling-up little boys.'

'Am I like that?'

'Of course not! But everyone talks such a load of crap about gays that somehow it's hard to relate other people to yourself. I imagined there was going to be some sort of initiation test to see if I was queer enough. I'm so ignorant!'

'Not as ignorant as the bigoted shits who promulgate such lies. Any more questions?' I taught him my mantra and we discussed safe sex and a host of other things until, during one of my obviously less than inspiring anecdotes, he fell asleep.

Mad threw back the curtains letting in a grey morning, plonked cups of tea beside the bed, and herself on it. I opened an eye to an impish grin.

'You look as though Jeff kept you awake all night.'

I blushed. What must she be thinking?

'No I didn't, but you and Dad were right, Mum, Peter was the best person to ask.'

'So, you trust me?'

'I trust all my family.' She turned at the doorway, dispatched an enigmatic smile and breezed away to make breakfast.

Chapter Five

Mad's inclusion of me as one of the family lay warm in my head and heart all the way back to the coast. I've never had a real family. Mother's too busy with 'good works' and Dad's sole claim to fame is an endless supply of home-brew in the basement where he spends every free minute watching TV sport. I don't recall having a conversation with either of them, nor spending more than half a dozen evenings together. We almost never ate as a family, either Mum was out, or Dad had an important game to watch. As a kid I loved tennis, athletics and swimming, read a lot, drew pictures, fantasised about the family I should have been born into, and yearned for love.

I'd been driving without concentrating and the sudden view of the gallery dumped me back in the present. Frances, surrounded by shopping, waved as I pulled up.

'Peter! What a bit of luck. Give us a hand with these.'

I trailed her up the stairs to the kitchen, lugging a couple of supermarket bags and two boxes. She slumped into a chair.

'Sorry I left you alone so long.' Her voice was loud and gestures skittish. 'I've been with this amazing man - and one thing led to another - and suddenly it was Tuesday morning!' She giggled inanely. 'He has this wacky house made of plastic and canvas and bits of tubing perched up in the hills. Great view, great.... everything!' She chuckled lewdly. 'By the way, we saw the advertisements in the paper and I noticed the signs in the window when I drove up. They're excellent! You've been working your little butt off.' She paused for a breath that permitted no interruption. 'I'm glad you took Max's wagon. Your old bomb's no advertisement for a successful business. The lawyer must have contacted you. I told him you'd be here, beavering away.'

I opened my mouth but she held up her hand and gave vent to a wolf-whistle. 'You look great! I didn't notice it at first. Been to the body shop?' She grabbed my shoulder and turned me around. 'So that's where you were this morning. It's stunning. You look ten years younger. All the old biddies will fall in love, and in Max's clothes you'll be the perfect gallery director. It's good he left all his things to you. I didn't know until Simpson rang. And when I phoned, you weren't here. Now I know why.' The over loud monologue stopped abruptly and she looked around as though lost before adding vaguely, 'Let me know if there's anything I can do to help.'

Before I could answer she ruffled her hand through my bristles, pecked me on the cheek and shut herself in her room.

I dumped the shopping on the floor and took several deep breaths. When the urge to throttle her had subsided I poked my head around the bedroom door, congratulated her on a successful long weekend and asked if she would arrange the wine and snacks for Wednesday's function. She would, but first wanted to spruce up.

Back in my/Max's bedroom I took out Mad's drawing, stood it on the table beside the window and stared. It was as perfect as before. Sadness still gripped my chest but I was no longer in danger of leaking tears. Instead, I felt peaceful, free to take a new tack, try new things - even a new relationship if one came along. Hope and anticipation hovered timidly at the edge of thought.

Downstairs, nothing had changed. Mad's drawings still nestled in their drawers waiting for mounts and frames. Before starting on them I checked for correspondence. There was only one message on the answer phone, a request from what sounded like a twelve year old girl to telephone Simpson, Simpson and Grey as soon as convenient.

After an interminable muzak-filled wait I was connected to a brusque voice informing me I would be required to sign a couple of forms in connection with my inheritance within the next few days, but meanwhile it would be permissible to use the goods in question. I thanked him and promised to call in soon.

It was already ten-thirty, Bill Smith hadn't turned up and I was starting to panic. Myself I can trust, but if my organisation is dependent on others, I'm always certain I'll be let down. At least Frances was arranging supper. But was she? I trudged back upstairs to check. She had forgotten, flared into a rage, shouted I was harassing her, and told me to do it myself. A woman of rapid mood swings.

The file labelled Refreshments told me everything I needed to know, so I telephoned the caterers and ordered a repeat performance. I'd just replaced the receiver when Bill Smith backed into the gallery dragging a shopping trolley piled with parcels. He straightened, massaged his spine, nodded and looked around as if searching for someone. As I walked towards him he peered from under thatched grey eyebrows, frowned and grunted, 'Ah. Didn't recognise you. Can you fetch the rest of the stuff from the car?'

I made six trips while Bill unwrapped and carefully folded all his packing paper before placing it neatly in a suitcase ready to be used again.

'Waste not want not?' I asked.

'If I act as though I'm expecting to take everything home again, the gods will make sure everything is sold,' he grunted. There was obviously a fey side to this gruff Aussie male.

'But now you've told me, they'll know it's just a bluff.'

'Huh! They think they know everything, so never listen to mere mortals.'

It was one o'clock before we had agreed on the sequence, position, and height of each painting. I checked them off against his list, noted the details, wrote receipts, and promised they would all be hanging before nightfall. He would return the following morning to see if there'd been any problems and to check the catalogue's accuracy.

I had just decided there wasn't time for lunch when Frances arrived with meat-patties nestling among slices of fresh bread and papaya on two of her best plates. She brewed coffee in the workroom and we shared a companionable snack. A difficult woman to pigeonhole.

'Still happy with the gallery, Peter?'

'It's brilliant, but I can't help thinking it's too beautiful a building to waste on a side street two blocks back from the beach. It should be on a promontory overlooking the sea.'

'I was referring to the job, not the building,' she laughed. 'But you're not half-witted; Max designed the gallery for exactly that sort of spot.' She smiled at my look of disbelief. 'No, it's true. While we were looking for a site we had an affair with an egghead from the Department of Marine Resources. Like a lot of skinny intellectuals he took his pleasures seriously and enjoyed a bit of give and take. Max was happy to give, and I took.' She looked up for my reaction but I wasn't giving any.

'Anyway, Tony had been surveying this bit of coast; the rivers, drainage, land-forms, tidal bars, frequency and levels of storm surges - that sort of thing. Talking about work was his idea of scintillating après sex conversation. I usually fell asleep but Max was riveted. After analysing all the relevant data, Tony predicted that if we ever had a king tide accompanied by unusually high rainfall in the coastal ranges, coinciding with cyclonic winds from the sea, or something like that, then the canals would burst and join the river systems, drained land would revert to swamp, and silt would create a sandbar parallel to the coast, causing the river to sweep south and scour out the beach in front of us here. However, this block of land and several on each side would remain, because we're on a granite outcrop, not sand dunes like most of the coast.'

I nodded doubtfully. 'That's three things that have to synchronise. What are the chances?'

'That's what Max asked.' She yawned 'I forget the answer, but he had all worked it out. He was a real brain-box.'

'Well I won't hold my breath waiting for the gallery to become a monument on the coast.'

'Nor me. He couldn't convince the Council either. But you did ask why we built here. The land was relatively cheap and when the builder dug the foundations, he reached granite only a metre below the sand. So Tony was right about one thing at least.' She laughed, collected the plates and drifted back upstairs, leaving me to get on with my work.

Max had resurrected peg-board. It had good acoustic properties and added to the intriguing textural quality of the walls, but the main benefit was ease of hanging. It only took a couple of hours to slip in the pre-formed security hooks and hang the paintings at the precise locations required by their creator.

Mad's frames were in a pile on the workroom floor and I had just spread out her drawings when someone knocked loudly on the glass doors at the front. Irritated, I switched off the alarm, slid back the security locks and opened the main door. A cautious pair of grey eyes stared from under a wide, anorak-shrouded forehead. His square jaw and strong nose should have been a recipe for good looks, but deep frown-lines and hunched shoulders inspired pity rather than homage. Jeans, anorak and scuffed trainers suggested the legions of unemployed drifting up and down the coast. He dropped his eyes and stared at his feet, hugging his chest.

'Can I see Max?'

The unexpected question unnerved me.

'Max had an accident and died a couple of weeks ago.' I sounded brusque, unfriendly even, but didn't want to risk over-reacting.

Lifting haggard eyes in disbelief, the young man's frame crumpled even further in on itself and he turned away with a mumbled, 'Sorry. Sorry to bother you.'

He looked so pathetic I felt rotten and called, 'Hang on, don't rush away. Can I do anything?'

He shook his head without looking back and scuffed off around the corner. I was about to go back inside when curiosity overtook me. Pulling the door so it looked closed, I followed him. He was

moving faster than I'd expected and by the time I'd rounded the corner was already a block away, crossing the Esplanade. I jogged towards the beach and watched as he clambered over the low concrete wall and dropped out of sight onto the beach.

It was cold and windy. Towering thunderheads were building out to sea and an oppressive, brassy radiance saturated air, clouds and swelling breakers. It was not going to be a good night to spend on the beach. I jogged to the wall and peered over in time to see the bloke's backside disappear into one of the large storm-water drains that empty the city's dog-shit, litter and roadside debris on to the sand every time it rains. Rather him than me.

I stood for a minute gazing at the looming sky. Who was he? He'd been upset about Max's death. A friend? I should've invited him in; shown him Mad's drawing of Max. Mad's drawings! They were spread over the floor of the unlocked gallery! A stark vision of my desecrated studio and cottage sent me into a panic. Maybe the bloke had been sent to lure me away so his mates could smash the place up! Heart thumping in neck and ears I cursed, ground out a prayer to Bill Smith's gods and, gagging at the thought of those exquisite masterpieces ending up like my studio, raced back like a bat out of hell, threw open the door and raced across to Mad's drawings.

Everything was fine. After re-locking the doors I brewed one of Mad's pick-me-ups to quell the shakes. Peace and warm whisky stilled the tremors and by seven o'clock all drawings were securely framed and hanging on the walls, alarms had been set and checked, and I was preparing a lonely meal. Frances had gone out again.

My bedroom window faced east, towards the sea, but the view was of the backs of holiday apartments and Fast Food outlets on the Esplanade. Lightning flickering through ochreous clouds, sent me onto the roof. I've always been fascinated by electrical storms. The sea, greyly sullen beneath a yellow strip of sky, seemed crushed beneath the accumulating blackness. Sheet lightning set cloud interiors pinkly aglow. The air was utterly still, only a low grumbling from the heavens warned.

Suddenly, a searing line of fire gashed across the blackness. The shock set my hair on end – literally. Instinctively, I pressed my back against the stairhead as sheets of blinding light followed by gigantic, garish networks of discharge hurled themselves across the sky. Grumbling thunder swelled to a deafening clamour and darkness was banished by continuous billion-volt energy blasts arcing across the firmament, tearing the ether to shreds. Transfixed by the awesome power, I couldn't tear my eyes from the ever changing onslaught, nor close my ears to the unrelenting roar that swelled, crackled, crashed, sank into a rumbling roll only to burst forth again and again in chest-crushing thunder. Compared to this, fireworks, no matter how many millions of dollars are spent, are mere pretty diversions.

After about an hour, a bank of clouds rolling in from the ocean reduced the display to reflected sheets of brilliance. As I turned towards the stairs, a bolt of lightning struck earth about fifty metres away and the instantaneous thunderclap knocked me to my knees. Stunned, deaf and blind, I reeled downstairs to the illusion of safety.

That last, staggering crescendo heralded the rain. But what rain! I had no idea so much water could fall from the sky. Within minutes the car park was flooded, drains failed to cope and, at the edge of the road, a street-lamp illuminated a fountain of storm-water gushing metres into the air as overloaded drains from higher up forced their burden out the first available exit. The beach would be scoured.

The beach! The bloke who had called in earlier! Surely he wasn't still in the drain? He'd be swept out to sea! None of my business. But of course it was. My spying had violated his privacy so I was obliged to act. I threw off everything except my shorts, zipped my keys into the pocket, grabbed a waterproof torch, made sure the outside door to upstairs was locked and, wishing I'd worn a raincoat, forced my way to the beach against howling needles of rain, branches, leaves and all the detritus Aeolus the demon wind-god could snatch up.

Too late. The tide was coming in. Breakers were already swirling up to the mouth of the drain and anyone fool enough to go down there was going to get trapped. I wasn't a fool, but neither could I leave the poor bastard to his fate. It was a three metre vertical drop from the footpath to the drain, so I followed where he had gone a few hours earlier, clambered over the wall twenty metres to the north and slid down the rocks.

The water swirled round my knees and sucked at my feet, but became shallower as I approached the drain. In my hurry I slipped and skinned an ankle on a submerged rock. A wave caught me from behind and rolled me over. Drenched and cold I struggled to my knees and threw myself into the drain. It was larger than I'd realised; high enough to stand. The wind didn't penetrate much past the entrance and the roar of the sea was muffled. I splashed torchlight around the interior. It was empty and there was only a trickle of water. That didn't make sense, unless other drains were taking the flow. The bloke obviously wasn't as half-witted as he'd looked and had cleared out. Relieved, I was about to turn back when I realised that if I'd planned on sleeping there myself I'd have gone about ten metres further, around the bend.

Swallowing rising panic I ran forward and looked. A sand-spattered shape. I flashed the light on him but he curled into a ball and growled. I grabbed his shoulder and shook it hard. 'You've got to get out!' I was shouting, although there was no need to yell in the uncanny calm. He shrugged me off and curled up tighter. I grabbed a handful of hair and pulled him to his knees. He swung a weak punch in the direction of my stomach and snarled, 'Leave me a-fucking-lone. I'm not hurting anyone. Why can't you cunts leave a guy in peace. Fucking rules and regulations.'

'There's a storm raging outside! You're going to get washed out!' I was screaming, imagining the wall of water that was surely going to burst upon us at any moment.

'Fuck off!' He started to throw another punch so I slammed him in the guts, grabbed him in a fireman's lift and staggered to the exit, banging his head on the curving walls. Served him right. The mouth of the drain glowed fitfully and I'd only just crossed the threshold when I slipped, dumping him face down in surging water up to my waist. He copped a mouthful, spluttered, panicked and grabbed at me, pulling me off balance again. I held him firmly against my chest until he stopped struggling, then dragged him by the hand in the direction of the rocks. It was impossible. The further we got from the drain, the deeper the water. A metre gained when waves receded was lost when they returned and thrust us back. I jettisoned the torch but it made no difference. Cold was dissolving strength and will. We clung together, buffeted, numb, frightened.

Suddenly, above the noise of wind and waves, a thunderous roar and the mouth of the drain exploded. A blockage in the pipe further up must have been swept away, releasing the full torrent. I swung round in horror as tons of water, branches, cans, bottles - you name it, smashed into us. The other bloke's fingers slipped from mine and I was alone, battered, choking on muck, swept like flotsam. I held my breath and swam desperately in what I hoped was the right direction, touched bottom briefly, then was seized again by the current.

Where was he? I lunged around feeling with numbed fingers, but I'd lost him. Energy drained with body warmth. Blindly, coughing up half the ocean, I trod water in the dark, letting the flow take me. Luckily, the opposing forces of storm-water and waves pushed me towards the shore. When I could stand I floundered to the rocks, hauled myself from the water and stared out through the howling darkness, willing my eyes to penetrate, to see him. Rain bucketed blackly. Occasional flashes of lightning threw everything into stark relief. A body swirled past. I flung myself at it. A log.

A cry. A whimper a couple of metres to my left. Waist deep in surf, the backwash sucking sand from under my feet, I bumped into legs. I still don't know how, but dredging up reserves from somewhere I managed to tow him to the rocks, manhandle him out of reach of the waves, grab his ankles and heave his feet higher than his head. I held my hand under his mouth and felt water trickle. Almost insane with anger and cold, I thumped on his back, twisted his head and blew into his mouth, forcing him to breathe. Above the howling wind I could hear his hacking cough, so

continued pummelling, screaming and slapping him around until he'd dragged himself up the boulders to the wall. I bundled him over and followed.

In the relative calm I relaxed, so exhausted I forgot I was freezing. All I wanted to do was lie down and sleep. A violent fit of shivers rattled sense into my head and it seemed pretty stupid to give up after all the effort. Leaving my semi-conscious but breathing companion in the slight protection of the wall, I let myself be blown to the gallery.

It was dangerous driving back to the beach against the wind and its flailing cargo of debris, but at least there were no other idiots on the road. I gathered up the shivering, wet heap of clothes and dumped him in the back of the wagon. At the Gallery I was so cold I couldn't make myself get out of the car, so turned the heater up full blast and kept the engine running. After about ten minutes the worst of my shakes had stopped, and coughing and sounds of movement were coming from the back. I slithered over the seats and curled beside him.

'Can you move?'

A grunt, followed by a slight nod.

'If you think you can manage it, we'll go inside.'

No response.

'I'll make coffee and rustle up a bite to eat.'

He looked at me warily and coughed. 'You a cop?'

'No, mate, just a bloody idiot who likes to go swanning around waist deep in the ocean during a storm. Well, I'm going up. You can stay here as long as you like, but I'm turning the engine off and you'll soon get fucking cold.'

I climbed out, locked the front doors, opened the rear gate and helped him out. Even in the lee of the building we were buffeted, and it was such a relief to slam the outside door that I sank onto the stairs, shaking with exhaustion. He slumped beside me.

'Just up these stairs and we're home,' I muttered, more for my own encouragement than his. We supported each other up the remaining few metres and sagged onto the kitchen floor. I turned on the heater, stripped off my shorts and towelled circulation back into blue limbs. While he was doing the same, I brought both doonas from the bed. After coffee and eggs on toast we felt better. Battered, but recognisably human.

'You saved my life.'

'Probably.'

'Why?'

'Something to do.'

'Shouldn't have bothered.'

'I'm regretting it already. More coffee?'

He grunted acceptance.

A long silence as we both relived the previous half hour.

'Shower and bed?'

His answer was lost in a fit of coughing.

After hot showers and splashings of antiseptic on copious grazes, we were asleep within minutes. My guest's coughing, occasional whimpers and frequent twitching barely registering on my own fitful dreams.

The alarm woke me. I leaped from bed and threw open sun-bright curtains to be greeted by the uninspiring back views of apartment blocks and takeaway outlets. We were still a street away from the beach. It was obviously going to take more than last night's tempest to provide the gallery with a prime sea-front position.

My visitor, at seven in the morning, looked pinched and suffering. Ignoring his grumbles I wrapped him in a bathrobe and forced him to eat breakfast with me in the kitchen. Bed's no place for eating - encourages mice.

After a coffee and one slice of toast and marmalade, he looked warily across. 'I'm full.'

‘I’m Peter Corringe.’

Suspicious slits avoided my eyes. ‘Jonathan... Jon... Jon Moore.’

‘More to eat?’

He pulled a face, neither amused nor ready to talk.

‘Did you lose much?’

‘Always keep my wallet in a plastic bag zipped in my pocket.’

‘Lucky – no, sensible.’ I gathered up the dishes and dumped them in the sink. ‘I’ve a busy day ahead setting up the gallery for an opening tonight. D’you want to help?’

A grunt.

‘Fine, get the dishes done, shove your clothes in the washer, help yourself to something to wear from the bedroom and join me downstairs.’ I took my wallet, no point in leaving temptation. Frances always locked her door when away, so that was safe.

The wind had dropped and a pale yellow sun struggled wetly. An extraordinary roaring was coming from the direction of the beach, so before getting down to work I jogged down to check it out. Gone was the wall over which we had clambered, gone were the trees, flowers, shrubs and grass of the twenty-metre-wide nature strip. Present were hundreds of gawking sightseers.

I peered from the edge of cracked and crumbling road-seal, ignoring warning shouts from police and council workers. The tide was out, and about thirty metres of Jon’s drain were now visible, lying on top of the tidal flats. The mouth was the source of all the noise. A pile of detritus and sand had built up in front and was diverting the still raging storm water upward in a gigantic, thundering fan.

Fifty metres beyond that, trees, rocks, sand, smashed barbecue shelters, the crumpled remains of the new toilet block, park benches, several cars, and just about everything else you could think of had been dumped in a long ridge, like a sea wall, and what looked suspiciously like a river was flowing swiftly southwards on the landward side of this new ‘island’, parallel to the coast. Impossible, because the river mouth was a kilometre to the north!

Wherever it came from, if the water continued to rip past like that until the next high tide, the Esplanade wasn’t going to last long. The roadway was already undermined. Police and emergency workers in red overalls were standing around while one spoke into a mobile phone. Their immediate problem was sightseers. Temporary barriers had been erected and people were being herded away from dangerous edges. I wondered if the versatile Tony’s predictions were being realised.

Shortly after I’d let myself back into the gallery, Jon came down the internal stairs, shaved and presentable in blue tracksuit and trainers, still feeble-looking, but not so hunched. His body was obviously hurting, but like me he was doing his best not to let it show. We adjusted the lighting, checked the position of the paintings, ran the polisher over the floor, cleaned the windows and made the place fit for a glamour public opening.

Bill Smith and his wife, a craggy, large-boned woman wearing beige hair coiled in plaited discs over her ears and a stone-splitting glint in her eye, arrived to check the display and the entries in the catalogue. They wandered around in silence.

‘This is a very busy street,’ she eventually muttered to Jon.

‘All the Esplanade traffic has been diverted past the gallery,’ I explained.

She continued to face Jon. ‘Will that be bad for the exhibition?’

‘Probably good,’ I said to the back of her head. ‘More people in the area, more people to see the signs, more customers,’

My golden bristles must have unnerved her because she nodded sagely, shook Jon’s hand, took a firm grip on her silent spouse’s upper arm and led him away, grudgingly satisfied.

The forward planning necessary before the advent of computers and printers makes my mind boggle. Within three hours we had produced a professional-looking coloured catalogue complete

with biographical notes and rave reviews from a “well-known Art critic” - me. The mere thought that in the past we’d have had to get all that stuff to the printers weeks in advance, was a nightmare too awful to contemplate.

I had thrown a few casual questions at Jon during the morning, which he fielded automatically. He looked honest enough, but I couldn’t afford to have a felon living in the gallery, so was persistent. He wasn’t, as it turned out, particularly secretive, merely cautious and unwilling to burden others with his problems. Bit by bit I learned that his life had been in turns dull, eventful, and sad.

Devoutly Old Testament parents and three brothers lived on a sheep-station somewhere out the back of Longreach. Jon was the second son. Life had consisted of Distance Schooling by radio, never-ending farm work, family church services and an occasional outing with the family. At twenty-one he had been persuaded to become engaged to a young woman he’d met at a Bible studies camp; the daughter of a roofing contractor in town. They were to marry and live on his parents’ farm.

A week before his wedding he had suffered a vision of his life to come, and that night took all the cash in the house and a change of clothes and rode away on his farm-bike. Three days later he arrived at the coast and had his first, never-to-be-forgotten view of the ocean. Money ran out and someone stole his bike, so he joined a gaggle of street-kids, begged for meals and tried for jobs.

Nearly starving, too frightened to ask for help in case there was a warrant out for his arrest, he traipsed round building sites asking for work. There had been a number of thefts from a new block of flats designed and partly owned by Max, who, luckily for Jon, was on site and persuaded the foreman to take him on as night watchman.

During the day he did odd jobs, catching up on sleep in the corner of the mobile canteen, until Max had a small caravan delivered to the site. He had no money, no driver’s licence, no bank account, no tax-file number – no document to prove he existed. With Max’s help these omissions were rectified, a letter with no return address was sent to reassure his parents, and eventually he saved money, bought another bike and, proving himself useful in a variety of ways, moved from site to site with his caravan.

Over the next three years Max took an interest in his young protégé and sometimes called in of an evening for a game of chess and a chat, sharing his dream of one day designing and building the best Art Gallery in the State.

On one of her rare visits to a building site, Frances’s eye fell on Jon, and the same evening she presented herself at his caravan door. His protests had been silenced by threats of the sack and she had her way with him, several times. Afterwards, sick with shame at having cuckolded his best and only friend, he fled to Brisbane, where life was difficult and cruel. Having first been sheltered by parents, then protected by Max, he was still an innocent.

Money and bike disappeared along with self-respect. The dole, when he was forced to claim it, reinforced his sense of worthlessness and he slithered into a reasonably deep depression. No proper or regular job, no prospects, no home, no money, no friends and perhaps worst of all, apart from his rape by Frances, still a virgin.

After a year in this wilderness of the soul he decided to face his problems and seek Max’s pardon. Two weeks too late. He told his story simply, accepting full responsibility for his life.

To offer sympathy would have been an insult. Instead, I told him I liked the way he had knuckled down to work and showed initiative. He blushed and grunted something that sounded like thanks. After lunch, he too checked out the damage to the foreshore, returning deeply thoughtful, sweating, and coughing. I sent him to bed. It would be surprising if he hadn’t caught a chill after the previous night.

Chapter Six

Frances crawled in around mid-afternoon and went straight to her room. At six o'clock Jon poked his head into the office and announced he was recovered and ready for the opening. The caterers were setting up downstairs, so we celebrated with cold chicken, bread rolls and a beer on the roof. My new-look body brought out the exhibitionist and I tried for a bit of Max's sartorial panache in an embroidered waistcoat over naked chest, a gold chain round my throat, black trousers and shiny black shoes.

'What do you reckon?' I asked.

Jon frowned and mumbled something about Sinbad the Sailor and catching chills. He chose an inconspicuous dark suit with white shirt and conservative tie.

'Am I OK?' he asked diffidently. It was the first time I'd looked at him properly. I try not to stare at people's faces, they reveal too much and I feel like a voyeur, although such deference has its disadvantages. Seconds after being introduced to someone I've usually forgotten both name and face. Of course I'd glanced at him during the day, but had avoided scrutinising. Now he'd asked my opinion, however, he'd have to put up with it.

He was unconventionally handsome. Dark blond hair flopped across a high forehead and brushed the tops of prominent ears. The large nose had a small bump in the middle and slightly flared nostrils. Grey-green eyes that gazed seriously from deep sockets, accentuated prominent cheekbones and hollow cheeks. A square jaw was softened by full, sculpted lips. He was as tall as Max, but thinner, so looked poetically gaunt in his suit.

'Perfect.'

His eyes flicked away in disbelief. 'Yeah, yeah. When Frances sees me she'll kick me out.'

'Bet you ten dollars she has no idea who you are – especially in a suit. You were just a convenient cock. Probably didn't even look at your face. Certainly never thought of you again.'

'Surely Max told her I'd done a bunk?'

'Doubt it. They didn't share much.' I paused, wondering whether to go on, then decided he was old enough. 'They never slept together.'

'But... You mean...? I didn't.... He wouldn't have...?'

I shook my head.

To his credit there was no ranting and raving and gnashing of teeth, he simply stared at his toes for a full minute before letting out a strained laugh.

'All that suffering in Brisbane. All the worrying that he would find out! There must be a lesson there somewhere. Something character-enhancing and ennobling. I've been through the valley of the shadow of death!' He frowned, looked straight into my eyes and demanded, 'Why is my life such a mess? Why am I such a fuckwit?'

'Did you like Max?'

'He was the best, cleverest and nicest man I've ever known.'

'And he liked you.'

'So?'

'So, on the basis of that, do you want a job?'

'Here?'

'Yep. I need an assistant.'

He suddenly looked haggard. 'I'm not worth it, Peter. Everything I do goes wrong. I'm useless.'

'That's why I want you - you won't show me up. Now cut the wallowing in self-pity and prepare to receive the cultured hordes. Tomorrow you can accept my offer of a job - courteously.'

He grunted, forced an enigmatic smile, and unlocked the main doors.

Frances drifted serenely amongst the patrons, graciously accepting praise and congratulations for this, her second successful Exhibition. Guests peered at the paintings and drawings, plagued me with questions about the storm, consumed litres of wine and kilograms of snacks, and oohed and

aahed over the opening of the dome, scarcely able to conceal their disappointment at the lack of another body.

The big news was the storm surge, the damage, potential danger to their properties, the ruined canals – everything except the art. Only one of Mad's drawings sold, three of Bills paintings - the ones with the most salacious titles.

'Who's that bag of bones?' Frances had snapped as soon as she entered, staring at Jon who was at the door welcoming guests.

'Jon. I've employed him as a general dogsbody.'

She opened her mouth and I held up my hand. 'Hang on, Frances. I can't work every hour of every day, and you shouldn't have to work here, you're the owner, not an employee. We'll save on cleaners' wages, ground maintenance, a hundred things. We'll make money on him.'

'If we don't, you'll be paying his wages. Haven't I seen him before?'

'I expect so. He's been living down the road. It would be strange if you hadn't seen him around.'

She grunted and rubbed a hand over my chest. 'Nice bod. Pity you're queer.'

'By the way,' I said, removing the intrusive fingers, 'the place he was staying in was washed out, so he's bunking in with me for a while.'

Her leer made me want to puke. 'Oh yeah? I've heard that one before. You've taken on Max's persona along with his clothes. Hope this one's more of a success than what's his name – Maurice.'

I didn't waste time protesting the innocence of our relationship. She wouldn't have believed me and she'd already drifted off to drape herself over the arm of a well-built, prosperous-looking chap in permed silvery curls, white trousers, designer boat-shoes and dark blue reefer jacket with shiny buttons. They wandered across to a nervous looking Jon, said a few words, then headed for the refreshments.

The Alconas had been to see the damage to the shoreline and were philosophic about the lack of sales.

'Many of the people who would normally buy are going to lose a great deal of money in devalued real-estate,' observed Brian calmly. 'We can hardly expect them to splurge on unnecessary expenses until they're sure where they stand. And as far as I can gather, the worst is far from over. It appears, from what an engineer acquaintance was telling us, that we are about to observe Catastrophe Theory in action.'

'Catastrophe Theory?'

'The Maths are a bit esoteric, but it goes something like this...'

'I'll explain,' interrupted Der. 'You'll leave out the important bits.'

Brian winked and deferred gracefully to his son.

'About 20 years ago,' the young man began gravely, 'a mathematical system called Catastrophe Theory was conceived, which proved to be applicable to many situations. The basic idea formulated by this particular model was that, under increasing stresses, eventually a point of no return is reached, and beyond this, irreversible change occurs.'

Der looked so handsome, sincere and serious, I wanted to kiss him. I wasn't alone in my admiration. Three women and a man were also gazing with bemused half-grins of ill-concealed appreciation.

'Indications are that a point of no return has been reached as far as development of the Eastern Coastline of Australia is concerned,' he continued earnestly, unaware of the effect he was having on his audience. 'All the natural systems for water management and land stabilisation have been bypassed, and irreversible change is occurring. This part of the coastline is now like Humpty Dumpty - it can't be put back together again - ever.'

I suddenly realised how much I was missing the Alcona sanity - Jeff's bubbling zest for life, Mad's wise assent to it, Brian's strength and quietude, the twins' serious good humour. I missed their acceptance of me – especially that – their unquestioning acceptance of me for what and who I am.

Bill Smith and his wife overheard the last bit. ‘You told us the storm damage would do no harm to the exhibition,’ she accused, directing her displeasure at my hair.

‘Bill’s sold three paintings.’

She harrumphed and turned her back.

It was midnight before we crawled into bed. Frances had departed early with her paramour, leaving us to clean up. It’s pleasing to be trusted, but... We showered and collapsed into bed, exhausted but too wound up to sleep. I put on a Haydn piano concerto and we both started talking at once.

‘No, you first.’

‘What did Frances say to you at the door?’

‘It’s unbelievable! She had no idea who I was. Simply said I’d better be honest and earn my wages, or I’d be out on my ear. Then stalked off.’

‘That’s ten dollars you owe me.’

‘Take it out of my first week’s wages. I want the job! I had a great time.’

We laughed with the ease of old friends.

‘It won’t often be like that. But the job’s yours. What were you going to say?’

‘Ask, actually. Why didn’t Max sleep with Frances? She’s good looking enough, in a tarty way.’

‘He was gay.’

Dead silence. Then quietly, ‘I don’t believe you.’

‘He and I were lovers for four years, until Frances got her claws into him. So you and I have something in common, she fucked up both our lives.’

Jon slithered out of bed and backed against the wall. He was as lean as a flayed carcass. Every tense muscle visible, eyes dark shadows, the soft light accentuating brow, cheekbones and flaring nostrils. Suddenly aware of his nakedness, he grabbed a pillow and clutched it to his loins. ‘I have nothing in common with queers!’ he snarled.

‘Is that so? You liked Max, you like this music, you don’t want to sleep with Frances, you eat, drink, breathe, piss, shit, sleep, dream, hope, fear, worry, cry and bleed. You’ll get older, suffer loneliness, frustration and boredom. You might, if you’re lucky, experience pleasure, happiness, contentment, joy and anticipation – even love. One day you’ll die.... How’s that for commonality?’

‘You know what I mean! Christ,’ he shuddered with horror, ‘I’ve probably got AIDS already.’

‘How’d you get it?’

‘From sleeping in your bed last night.’

‘I have no diseases.’

‘All queers have AIDS. Their disgusting, perverted way of life ensures it. How the hell could you choose to live like that?’

‘Like what?’

‘You know.’

‘I do not.’

‘Dressing up like a woman. Going round fucking young kids. Shoving your cock up the arse of every man you meet. Having sex in public toilets... I feel sick!’

‘So do I. Did I touch you last night? Have I put the hard word on you? Did Max?’

‘Leave Max out of this, he was different!’

‘Yes he was. And so am I. And so are most gays.’

‘Gays. Huh! Sicks, you mean!’

‘OK, same-sex-oriented men.’ I sighed sadly. ‘Jon, you have just insulted both Max and me, and millions of other innocent men who have done you no harm. I ought to thrash you and turf you onto the street, but I suppose it’s not fair to blame you for ideas drummed into you by your parents. The stereotypical slander that just sullied your lips is malicious propaganda. Lies told to kids by people who imagine, wrongly, that one chooses one’s sexuality. They are frightened their son might decide

to be gay and try to dissuade him. But no one chooses! Everyone's born with their sexual orientation intact.'

'I don't believe you!' he was shouting.

I shrugged, refusing to argue.

'But even if you are born like it, which I doubt, there's no need to actually do it. You could join the church. Become a monk. At least be celibate!'

'Why? I'm glad I'm gay. It feels right. It feels normal. I'd hate to be het. I can't imagine any other way of feeling about people and I'm none of those things you said. I'm just a normal man, twenty-eight years old, who has not had sex with any one for nearly four years, and if he ever falls in love it will be with another man.'

'Four years?'

'Yes.'

'But...How...? Do you...?'

'Masturbate? Of course. Like I said, I'm normal. I wank myself silly some nights. Days too when I get depressed.'

'Me too. But... why?'

'Why no lover? I'm choosy. I can only get aroused with someone I find both physically and mentally attractive; who likes me as much as, and in the same way, as I like him. There aren't too many people like that around. If I like talking to them, they're usually physically unattractive. If they're good lookers, they're either stupid, aren't interested in me, or both.'

Jon was staring at me, obviously worried. 'You're having me on. You're not really queer. Queers are soft and effeminate. You're tough and strong. You saved my life in the surf. You're all muscles.' The pleading in his voice was pitiable.

I couldn't speak – it was too sad, too pathetic, too bloody tragic. He dropped his eyes, then looked up again. 'Are you really like that? So choosy? How do you know?' An edge of cunning. 'You've obviously tried!'

'Half a dozen times, but nothing happened. Believe me I was getting pretty desperate before I understood my problem.'

'Is that why you didn't do anything to me?'

'Feeling rejected?'

He blushed. 'No, of course not. I...I just can't understand. I thought all queers...gays... whatever, were... But... even if you aren't, now that I know, I can't possibly sleep in the same bed as you.'

'Fine, if you're in to masochism. What'll it be? The hard, cold floor? Drag a couple of chairs together in the lounge? Careful though, I might creep in and rape you during the night.'

He looked up. 'Am I being stupid?'

'Yes.'

'Have you really not got AIDS?'

'I am perfectly healthy.'

'You really won't ...do things to me?'

'Not unless you ask nicely.'

He smiled. Wanly, but it was a start. He coughed a bit, started to speak, blushed and looked helpless. I was in no mood to help.

'I...I don't know what to think.'

'Well, that's an excellent beginning. Most people are too bloody certain of the rectitude of their opinions. How about reviewing everything you're certain of about the only two gays you know well, Max and me?'

He stood still, staring into my eyes. 'I still can't believe you're gay. Are you? Honestly?'

I stifled the urge to kill him. 'Yes.'

'But not all gays are like you.'

'And not all heterosexuals are like your parents.'

‘I see.’

‘People are people. Good, bad and indifferent. Their sexuality has absolutely nothing to do with it. Lots of gays are a bit strange because they’ve suffered persecution, some of it horrifying, all their lives. You can’t tell a kid he’s a foul sinful bag of worthless shit, bash him up and disown him and then expect him to behave normally.’

‘Does that happen?’

‘All the time.’

‘How did you survive?’

‘My parents aren’t interested in me enough to care. I was one of the lucky ones. Better neglected than abused I reckon. Then I met Max, and life was bliss. Remember how he was able to make the sun shine? No problems existed when he was around?’

‘Yeah. I really loved that guy.’ He stopped abruptly, realised what he’d said and blushed furiously.

‘Did he ever abuse your trust?’

He shook his head.

‘Would you have liked him to?’

‘What the hell do you mean?’

‘Nothing. I’m tired. Either come to bed, or go somewhere else.’ The CD had finished and I rolled over and turned off my light. About two minutes later Jon crawled into bed and switched off his. I don’t think either of us got much sleep.

Dawn was breaking but it was too early to get up. Jon was restless too.

‘You awake?’

‘Yes.’

‘I’m sorry about last night.’

‘Don’t be. I’m used to it. All queers get abused.’

‘You’re not queer, you’re gay.’

‘Don’t you believe it. I’m definitely queer! Any self-respecting gay would have had his way with you by now.’

‘Why didn’t you? Aren’t I attractive to you?’

‘Shut up, Jon. What the hell are you? A crappy little cock-teaser?’

‘No. I’m serious. Do you... fancy me?’

‘You’re good looking. You’re intelligent. But, as I told you last night, I’m not interested in anyone unless it’s mutual.’

‘Peter, I’ve been thinking all night about this. I’m grateful to you for saving my life. I like you and... and I really want to work with you – here at the gallery. So, if...if you want to, you can...you know...do it with me...’ His voice faded into a worried silence.

For the second time that month something snapped inside my head and chest. I’d been patient, forbearing, trying to do what was best for everyone, to maintain my sanity after the revelations about Max and Frances; to make the gallery worthy of his memory; to keep Frances happy; to get Mad the recognition she deserved; to comfort Hank and Celia; to hoist Jon out of his gloom and doom, and to come to terms with the fact that someone hated me enough to destroy everything I’d worked for over the last four years.

I didn’t just snap - I ruptured, split, fractured, spat the dummy.

Hoisting myself on to my knees, I slammed my fist into the side of his head, knocking him out of bed. He scrambled to his feet, back to the wall, fists balling in defence. Too late. Anger fuelled speed and I lay into him, slapping and punching his head, chest, shoulders; any part he failed to protect. He sank to the floor, hands over his face. I grabbed his hair, shoved my mouth against his ear and hissed, ‘Don’t ever play the whore with me,’ then slunk back to my side of the bed; already ashamed of my outburst.

He remained huddled in the corner. I didn't care – couldn't care. Fuck him and his pathetic little problems. Who was looking out for me? Whose shoulder did I have to cry on? I guess we both wallowed in self-pity. Eventually, Jon's whimpering stopped, to be replaced by shudders and the occasional sob. I sat on the edge of the bed facing him, angry with myself for caring, with Jon for being so stupid, with Max for leaving me, with the world, my loneliness, exhaustion. I think half the world's woes are caused by tiredness. People argue, bicker, fight, start wars and generally behave like arseholes when they're tired, and I'm no exception.

'Jon,' I said as evenly as I could manage, 'the last thing I want in my bed is a prostitute. I made myself absolutely clear about that last night, and again this morning. There's no way you could have misunderstood me, and yet here you are offering yourself like a whore.'

I want someone who wants me for myself, not for something I can do for them. I am trying not to despise you for attempting to buy the job with your body. I've probably got unrealistic expectations as you're the second person in as many weeks who's tried that. I like you – at least I did until this nonsense. You've still got the job, but one more stupid, insulting crack about my sexual orientation and you're fired. Understood?'

He stared at me, opened his swollen mouth a couple of times, thought better of it, nodded and looked away. So did I. Blood noses and black eyes are not my favourite pre-breakfast viewing, especially if I've caused them, so I went to the kitchen and made breakfast. When Jon emerged, sullenly flaunting his bruised and battered countenance, he obviously had no idea how, or even if our association could possibly continue.

'What did you put on your battle scars?'

'Nothing.'

'Don't be a fuckwit, look after yourself.'

He returned looking slightly better, ate a silent, healthy breakfast and, still without speaking, helped wash up. I looked across to where he was slowly drying and re-drying a plate, tears streaming down his face. What could I do? What words could I offer? I couldn't even help myself. We each have to work out our own salvation. He was nearly twenty-five. Whatever he did from here on had to be because he wanted it, thought about it, and worked for it. In his present state he'd have jumped at the first friendly overture like an addict to a fix, so I pretended not to notice.

'Can you give the apartment a bit of a once-over? I'll check the mail and get started on tracking down some work for our permanent collection.'

He sniffed assent and I left him to it. Two hours later he brought me down a cup of coffee, a newspaper open at the review of the previous night's Opening, and a precarious smile.

'Thanks.'

'Sorry about my insensitive suggestion this morning.'

'Sorry for laying in to you.'

'I deserved it. Um... I'm pretty sure I know what you're talking about, but I have to think about it for a while. All my certainties have come unstuck since I met you.'

I smiled, not because I felt like it, but he looked such a mess - swollen lips and nose, bruises.

'Jon, stop worrying. I know you meant nothing bad. We were both tired. I'm glad you're working with me, and I've had no second thoughts. Take all the time you need to sort yourself out and I promise there'll be no repeats of my lousy lapse. OK?'

'I'm not worried about that, it's just that... I don't know, it's difficult to know how to deal with someone who's saved your life. On one hand I feel a grudging gratitude; on the other I'm angry. It sounds soft, but... maybe it was somehow... time for me to die? Now I owe you. I feel as though I have to guard your back, look after you in return. But I don't want to owe anyone anything!'

'You're angry because you've been cheated of a quick death. I can sympathise with that. Oddly enough, your other feelings also apply to the bloke who saved you. Having prevented your release from this vale of tears I now feel obliged to look after you and make sure my interference doesn't lead to a future you'll regret.'

He frowned. 'You're joking.'

'Nope. But... if you like, we can declare the slate clean and absolve each other of all feelings of gratitude and debt. Do you want that?'

His stare had become a frown.

'No,' he said as though surprised at his own words. 'No I don't want that.'

Relief washed through me, swilling out tension, mucky bits of anger, self-pity and encroaching despair. I needed to feel responsible for someone other than myself. I needed to know that someone felt a bit of responsibility for me. I was sick of living for myself alone.

'Neither do I!' I said somewhat more vehemently than I'd intended.

Chapter Seven

When I returned from signing for the inheritance and transferring ownership of the Mercedes, Jon was out the front watering the lawn and shrubs. I'd scarcely taken off my jacket when the main gallery door slammed open to admit a short, deeply tanned, thickset, shaven headed, broad shouldered pugilist of about forty, in a silver-grey suit stretched so tightly over the muscle-stacked body I feared for the seams. Orange and purple trainers on small feet forced apart by massive thighs didn't match the suit, but were probably comfortable. I felt slim and lithe and let him look around for a bit before offering my expertise.

'Excellent drawings, don't you think?'

'Crap!' was his terse assessment. 'Where's Mrs Fierney?'

'She's unavailable at present.'

'She should be here! We sent a fax. Who the hell are you?'

My face flushed - with embarrassment. I'd meant to tell Frances about that fax but it had dropped out of my mind. What the hell was the name? Some bullshit. Impasto? Wash? Scumble. Yes, that was it, Scumble. Bloody silly name. From... ArtWorks. How so many thoughts could whip through my head in less time than it took to clear my throat I can't imagine, but they did. I held out a hand, which he ignored.

'Peter Corringe. I'm managing the gallery for Frances. You must be Mr Scumble from ArtWorks. We've been so busy I haven't had time to inform Frances of your visit. I hadn't realised...'

'Shut the fuck up, I'm running late. Where do I dump the display?'

'We obviously have our wires crossed. Maximillian's has a full stable of artists and...'

With unexpected speed and deftness Mr Scumble cupped a calloused hand round my neck and dragged my eyes down to his level. 'I'll cross more than your fucking wires' He hissed into my nose. 'You've got two minutes!'

I scurried into the office, found the fax and was docilely waiting when he re-entered wheeling a 'V' unit, the sort of thing found in discount stores for displaying posters of hot-rods, air-brush-enhanced scantily clad women holding kittens, and reproductions of popular Impressionists. He tapped tiny feet impatiently while I flicked through the contents. Snow-clad mountains with ten-point stags strutting disdainfully behind fir trees; weeping-willow-encircled lakes on which floated coy coveys of swans; herds of cattle wandering along dusty tracks past log cabins nestling among the gum-trees. He even had my all time favourite, two androgynous kids dressed in patches and rags, eyes the size of saucers in unblemished faces, sitting beside a dew-spangled flower on recently swept steps, gazing up with the spurious innocence of youth.

They had been hand-painted to the same extent that modern electrical appliances are hand made. Hundreds of prepared boards bearing outlines of a scene, move past on an assembly line. One person does all the green, the next the yellows, the next reds, blues and so on till complete and as near identical as possible. Similar kitsch crap used to be touted up and down the coast by impecunious students. They belonged in Conias Jackson's Arte Bizarre - not in my gallery!

Scumble was twitching. I let him twitch for a bit before shaking my head and telling him it wasn't our sort of product. He moved as if to thump me but I didn't flinch. After ten long seconds he wordlessly wheeled out his display, leaving me with a recklessly beating heart and shaky knees. It was very disquieting, so I went out to pick Jon's brains.

'Probably a scam they try on new outlets. Scare insecure businessmen into displaying their junk. Could be a protection racket. You'll get a really tough nut next who, for a substantial fee, will provide protection from the bastards who will bash you up unless you stock their paintings.'

I pushed the unpleasant incident to the back of my head until I could talk with Frances, went back inside and assisted two customers to select drawings. They were curious about Mad, but I feigned ignorance while applauding their taste. Previously unaware of the gallery's existence, they'd driven past because of the detour and popped in on impulse, buying two drawings – just like that.

I'd barely had time to record the sale when a battered white van pulled up bearing a defeated looking woman of about fifty, who emerged to gaze helplessly at the front windows. I went out. She smiled her gratitude at not having to decide which glass panel was the door, and invited me to her studio to view her works, with a view to including them in our permanent collection. Maybe even having a solo exhibition later in the year. I made an appointment for later that evening and she rattled away, leaving a patch of rust on the new pavers.

We were debating whether to be extravagant and buy a takeaway for lunch, when a car skidded to a halt and ejected Frances, who dashed upstairs. A couple of minutes later she burst into the gallery. 'Guess what!' she sparkled. 'Gregor wants to marry me!'

'Is he the one who entertained you royally in plastic-and-canvas-covered magnificence in the hills?'

'The same.'

'Who wears reefer jackets with silver buttons and designer boat shoes?'

'You've got your eye on him?'

'Not unless he's filthy rich.'

'He is!' she shrieked ecstatically.

'Well done. We sold two drawings today, and a chap from...'

'Not now, Peter! Gregor's waiting.'

'But...'

'No. No. No.' She giggled, almost hysterical at her good fortune. 'Such mundane matters will have to wait until I've returned to earth!' She looked at Jon, ran a finger from black eye to bruised chin, turned back to me and, obviously aroused at the idea, drooled, 'Mmm! You two do have fun in bed. Let's make it a foursome one night.' She skipped through the doorway, stopped, poked her head back in and whispered theatrically, 'Gregor's huge!'

The sporty little car revved expensively and whisked her away.

Jon released a shudder of loathing. 'Does she think we're on together?'

'Apparently.'

'Stupid bitch. I remember that lecherous leer from when she raped me. Christ, I despise her.'

'She gets the rich ones with expensive cars.'

'A Porsche,' he sighed from the door. 'He's old, though. She's only excited because he's rich. Hasn't she enough money already?'

'Apparently one can never have enough. It's an unwritten law.'

'Guess I'll never know.'

'Then you have a chance of happiness.'

'I want to be independent though.'

'Me too. Free from bureaucracy's tentacles.'

'A hermit.'

'A guru on a mountain-top.'

'But,' Jon's eyes lost their laughter, 'you have to have money to live.'

‘Less than you think, if you eliminate false desires.’

‘Yeah, well we’d better stop there. I know yours, but mine are still a mystery to me.’

‘OK, what’s it to be? A takeaway, or some of Pete’s pottage?’

‘Pottage, seeing I’m impecunious. Bye the way, who owns the old Holden out the back? I want to dig that spot over and plant some banksias.’

‘It’s yours - if you want it?’

‘You’re joking.’

‘No. Max left me his Mercedes, so I don’t need it.’

‘And you’re giving it away?’

‘Yep.’

‘Must be totally clapped out.’

‘It goes.’

He trailed me outside, inspected the exterior, then sat behind the wheel. After a cursory check of the interior he wound down the window and said gruffly, ‘Either I pay you for it, or I don’t want it.’

I started to speak but he interrupted.

‘No! I already owe you enough.’

‘Fair enough, fifty bucks?’

‘You’re joking.’

‘That’s all the dealer offered.’ I’m an excellent liar.

With a sudden grin, he shot out his hand. ‘A deal! I’ll go for a burn round the block.’

Of course it wouldn’t start.

‘How’d you get this to a dealer?’

‘It’s just a flat battery, I’ll give you a shove.’

He returned, ecstatic. ‘There’s nothing wrong with this thing that a bit of TLC from an expert won’t cure. That dealer was ripping you off.’

‘And you’re the expert?’

‘The machinery on the farm depended on me.’

‘Then how are they getting on without you?’

‘My youngest brother’s a dab hand – I taught him.’

‘Do you miss them?’

‘Of course.’

‘Want to go back?’

‘You’re joking!’

‘How long since you wrote?’

‘More than a year.’

‘Have they written to you?’

‘I’ve never been game to give them an address. Dad’s a vindictive old bastard. He’d probably find me and do an Abraham. Sacrifice me to his god for disobeying my parents.’

‘Give them a ring.’

‘What, now?’

‘Yes.’

‘But...’

‘Frances left her mobile on the desk. The call can’t be traced.’

‘You’re on! It’s lunchtime, they’ll be eating.’

The call didn’t last long. Within two minutes he was standing thoughtfully in the office doorway. ‘Mum answered. She said, “Jon! Darling, how wonderful! Father! It’s Jon...”’ She sounded really pleased. You know? All excited and dithery? Then Dad took the receiver and said, “This is no longer your home,” and hung up on me.’ Jon looked more puzzled than sad as he stared at his reflection in the office window. ‘Peter, was what I did that bad?’

‘For him, probably. By rejecting his wishes, you were rejecting him. Thus, he rejected you. It’s simple and biblical.’

‘But why didn’t Mum?’ Tears were closing in and I wasn’t going to stop them. I’m in favour of a good cry now and again. Clears the emotional ducts.

‘Your mother probably understands some of the feeling of entrapment that forced you to leave. I imagine she sympathises with you and, not being the boss, hasn’t the same feeling of rejection. Also, she loves you.’

‘A father should love his son.’

‘He has to love all his family and protect them. In his heart he may have doubts, but in front of your brothers and mother he has to be strong and unwavering in his beliefs. He imagines the family would fall apart otherwise. He’s in a bind. If he relaxes the dogma that made your life intolerable, he risks the defection of your brothers too. It’s like the Army; shoot deserters.’

‘But, it’s not a war!’

‘Don’t you believe it! Onward Christian soldiers? Fight the good fight? For most Christians it’s a war all right, against the devil and all who question their doctrine. A medieval view producing stability at the cost of happiness. Christians have spent two thousand years denouncing happiness.’

‘But have I been bad?’

Tears were streaming and I wanted to clasp him in my arms, stroke the bruises on his manly cheeks and press his head against my chest and absorb - absolve - the cancer of four years of loneliness, misery and doubt. I wanted to lift his burden of guilt so he could be whatever he should be – but I didn’t dare. What a cunning religion is Organised Christianity. Not only is everyone born sinful, but we can never liberate ourselves from that dreadful state. Even death doesn’t secure release. Unless one has abided by the church’s rules, after death there will be torture, pain, and misery for eternity. Truly, it is one of the most sadistic creeds ever invented for the psychological enslavement of mankind.

‘No! You have not been bad!’ I said, surprising us both by shouting. ‘Human sacrifice is bad. Slavery is bad. We can’t expect to live without responsibilities, but we must take on duties because we want to. Parents have the right to make young children do chores they dislike - that’s part of the learning process. But you’re an adult. Your father hasn’t the right to force you to live a life in which you’ll be miserable. That’s evil. You’re intelligent and did the brave thing by accepting responsibility for yourself.’

Jon sagged to the floor. ‘I hope so. I hope so.’

The buzzer announced a customer. Closing the door on the snuffling heap of manhood, I pretended to adjust pictures, re-arrange catalogues and do all the things one does while keeping an eye open for thieves, vandals and a sale.

‘I’ll have that one,’ the elderly man announced firmly, pointing to one of Bill Smith’s more colourful works - Crotch Itch. ‘Discount for cash?’ he proffered a fist-full of notes.

We agreed on ten percent. In return, he would leave the painting hanging until the end of the following week. I was becoming anxious about the rapidly emptying walls. Fortunately, during the afternoon four more painters from Max’s list brought in samples of their works. All were acceptable, although none were a patch on Mad and Bill. We re-arranged the exhibition so the advertised show occupied the most prestigious areas, and an elegantly labelled Permanent Collection was scattered over the remaining walls. Things were looking up.

‘When’s pay-day?’

‘Good question. I’ve been here two weeks and haven’t received a bean. Mind you, our glorious leader’s been conspicuous by her absence. The lazy cow should’ve arranged things by now. Tell you what, the gallery’s share of the painting I just sold is three hundred dollars. That’s one-fifty each. Frances can’t expect us to live on love alone,’ I joked thoughtlessly, removing six fifty-dollar notes from the safe. I flicked a glance at Jon’s face, but there was no reaction. He immediately

returned one fifty-dollar bill, a disbelieving smile on his face. 'This is for the Holden. Now we're quits. I'll change the ownership papers as soon as I get the money.'

'No worries. The Registration's not due for about eight months. Wait till it runs out.'

'You trust me that much?'

I smiled guilelessly.

We were busy for the rest of the day with disaster-freaks wanting to talk about erosion, future devastation and how the gallery would soon be dumped in the sea along with the rest of the seaboard. I agreed enthusiastically, suggesting they buy something of lasting value as a souvenir before it was lost to posterity. At closing time I rang Mad to tell her about the sales and the excellent newspaper review. She was pleased and hoped I would visit them soon. After locking up, we took the Holden's battery to be charged at a nearby garage on our way to view the mustard woman's paintings.

Her studio, a disused warehouse beside the motorway, was unlined, draughty, noisy and cold. Lank hair dragged back with a rubber band, accentuated somewhat protuberant eyes and narrow face. A long, mustard coloured, knitted cardigan and scarf swathed her emaciated body. Communication was tricky, despite her use of fingers, hands, arms and head in what she apparently assumed were expressive gestures of clarification. Like most contemporary art practitioners who have spent too long in tertiary art institutions, her head was full of mesmerising psychobabble substitutes for rational thought.

We gazed around in horror. 'She's using art as an enema,' whispered Jon, heading for the door. It was nauseatingly true. In what appeared to be a determination to purge herself of troublesome thoughts, she had daubed dozens of enormous canvases with angst-ridden outpourings of gloom. Technique, design, and content had all been sacrificed on the holy altar of self-expression, resulting in murky puddles of egocentric vomit.

I admired Jon's discernment, but pity made me listen to the sad little details of an unfulfilled life. Compassion forced appreciative noises about scribbled lines, splashed paint and inexpertly cobbled together assemblages of household junk symbolising the predicament of women.

Jon was annoyed I'd wasted so much time, dismissing my pity as the product of clever manipulation. He was probably right. To cleanse our minds we went for a long, hard jog as soon as we got home, ending up at the sea. The river continued to run parallel to the shore and, helped by another very high tide, was busily washing away chunks of roadway. In the previous twenty-four hours another five metres had gone. All the buildings along nine kilometres of sea front south of the old river mouth had been evacuated because the way things were going they'd soon be joining the rubble on the ever-enlarging island.

'Impressive, isn't it?' A spry, grey haired woman remarked with obvious pleasure. 'That'll teach them to dig those abominable canals and destroy some of the most beautiful wetlands this country has known.'

'Was that the cause?' Jon asked.

'There is never one cause, young man, but always a last straw. Draining the swamps made the soils acid, deep-rooted trees died, canal banks collapsed with the unusually large volumes of water draining from the hinterland because of deforestation. Everything's come apart at the seams.' She smiled contentedly. 'The new island will probably be very fertile and beautiful in a hundred years or so.' She gazed at it with approval and I didn't consider doubting her word. If you can't believe the only elderly woman on the coast who doesn't dye her hair, then who on earth can you believe?

She drifted away and we stationed ourselves above Jon's drain. More of it had been exposed and shifting sands were causing the segments to separate. Gaps several centimetres wide had appeared between the sections nearest the new shoreline. Water now ran out of these gaps, further eroding the drain's foundations. Jon turned to me, a strained grin playing at his mouth.

'I'm glad now... that... that I didn't die.'

What could I say? Me too sounded a bit lightweight, and I didn't want to spoil the mood with deep, meaningful phrases, so let loose with an unsentimental, masculine Aussie grunt.

We jogged home the long way, passing several ex-canals on the way. Most had sprung leaks as the edges disintegrated. Sterile little waterways were reverting to the swamps from which they came. Hundreds of families were homeless. I tried to feel sorry for them, but no convincing emotion arrived.

After a meal and TV News, in which councillors and experts tried to pretend it wasn't like Humpty Dumpty, it was put-back-togetherable, we spent the evening listening to music and chatting.

Chapter Eight

Jon was computer-friendly, checked mail, kept the accounts up to date, polished floors, cleaned windows, dusted, mowed lawns, weeded flowerbeds, and spruced up what was already a tidy ship. As a reward, I added his name to the letterhead: Maximillian's Gallery of Fine Art. Director: Peter Corringe: Manager: Jon Moore. He laughed, unimpressed by the title, merely hoping his salary would be commensurate. I kept the ship afloat with five sales.

After work on Friday we pushed a supermarket trolley together, returning to the flat to do our washing. On Saturday after the gallery closed we unwound with a long jog around the canal estates to the south. At first glance the damage didn't seem too bad. Uninviting rows of cloned brick-veneer bungalows still squatted cheek by jowl along their curving streets. Lawns, dotted with the occasional unthrifty shrub, still separated them from the neatly curbed and channelled road. It was only when we stopped to peer that we noticed the slightly drunken angles of wall and roof, cracked foundations and paths, lop-sided pergolas and, in the case of those right on the water's edge, great holes missing from back yards. The entire rear sections of some houses were overhanging muddy ponds. Three had collapsed into the ooze.

'What boring gardens. I thought this was supposed to be a sub-tropical paradise.'

'Most people reckon that in paradise you shouldn't have to work. Gardening means work, so they plant something low-maintenance and get on with boozing, feeding the pokies, eating at the RSL, going on bus trips, playing cards, bingo, bowls - anything to distract them from the stark truth leering at them the minute they're alone.'

'What truth?'

'This is the only life they're going to get, and they've wasted most of it.'

'Mmm,.. My grandparents still grow their own vegetables, keep a few chooks, that sort of thing. They enjoy working, and seem happy enough.'

'Do they live near your parents?'

'On the property. Dad built a cottage for them.'

'I expect they feel useful. Retirees here have usually left their families behind in the south. Came up here for the warmth.'

'But not everyone's retired.'

'No. Lots of unemployed are in a similar boat. As you experienced.'

Jon was thoughtful. 'It was bloody awful being out of work. Sometimes I felt so hopeless I could only squat on the ground and wish someone would hit me on the head and put me out of my misery.'

'And now?'

He grinned. 'Now I'm excited about the future. There're lots of things I want to do and...' he hesitated, blushed and blurted, 'for the first time in my life I have a friend... someone I can say anything to. Someone I can trust. I've never had one before...' he glanced sideways. 'Don't worry,

I'm not expecting you to feel the same. You've probably got lots of friends.' He blushed. 'Say something... This is embarrassing!'

What could I say? Yodelling scarcely seemed appropriate, so I clapped him manfully on the shoulder and mumbled, 'Real friends are like hen's teeth - and until this minute I was right out of them.'

As usual, we ended our jog at the eroded shoreline in front of the gallery. Heavy rains overnight meant that water continued to flow from the ever-widening gaps in Jon's drain, and the river remained a torrent. Apartment blocks and fast-food outlets were now teetering on the edge of extinction. A brood of bulldozers, front-end loaders, ditch diggers and other devices of demolition had been busy piling up heaps of masonry, bitumen and other detritus for an onslaught on the watery enemy, but man's weapons in this battle looked puny. We wished them failure and agreed it was a pity humans hadn't tried coexistence with nature.

On Sunday the gallery was closed, so we headed for the hills before sunrise, me in the Mercedes, Jon in his Holden. I arrived at the cottage relaxed - he, shaken but exhilarated.

'Wow! What a place! I'm crazy about mountains. Do you know? When I first saw the ocean I thought I was back out west - flat, boring and endless. The only difference was no flies. But here? There's something to look at, somewhere to go, something to explore. I can't believe it!'

With a cry worthy of Tarzan, he ripped off his tracksuit, raced down to the dam and dived in, leaping out even faster than he'd entered. 'It's freezing!' he yelled, racing back in long zigzags to dry off, before dragging on his clothes.

'I want to stay here,' he puffed. 'I didn't know such places existed. I've only travelled on main roads. Never thought of going up side roads. It's heaven.' He grabbed my shoulders. 'You're not having me on? This is your place? I am allowed to be here?'

'No, yes, and yes.'

We laughed and gazed across the small lake formed by the dam. Trees and bushes on the other three sides were reflected in its placid surface. Papyrus and waterlilies decorated the nearer shore. Vapour tendrils drifted lazily from the surface into the cool air, joining mists rising from surrounding tree-covered hills. As we watched, a fleck of gold touched a distant bluff, dove grey against a soft blue sky speckled with pink-edged, fish-scale clouds. No breath of air disturbed the stillness. Whip-birds called, pigeons warbled, butcherbirds chimed duets, frogs screeched, noisy minors argued, a squabble of kookaburras laughed themselves silly, and five black parrots flew overhead, crying like babies.

The view gave me as much sadness as pleasure. Although beautiful, the trees were only regeneration from clear-felling about thirty years previously, and tiny compared to the forest giants that had clothed the land when the first Europeans arrived. Compared to primeval forests my beautiful remnant gave lean pickings. Half the plant species had been lost, most of the humus had gone, and alien invaders were everywhere - lantana, thistles, foxes, rats, cats and humans.

Having made myself dutifully miserable, I left Jon to explore and crossed to the cottage. It was worse than I remembered. Broken glass, ash and soot stains contaminated the exterior. Inside it stank. Damaged roof tiles hadn't kept out recent heavy rains and the interior was a bog. I tried the phone, squatting in its puddle of grey slime. Not a buzz; it wasn't indestructible after all. I backed out of the mess and leaned against the doorway, wondering how to get myself started. With a flickering of wet hair Jon squeezed himself in front of me, leaned against the door post and peered in.

'Shit!' he whispered. 'Who did this? Did you know about it?'

'It happened last week. I've been putting off thinking about it, but I guess it's not going to go away.'

'This is your house?'

'Yes.'

'You built it?'

‘Yep. And the studio over there.’

‘They’re great. Romantic. The sort of place I’d build. Why didn’t you tell me?’

‘Hoping it hadn’t happened.’

He was staring at the rafters. I could smell wet hair, see a tiny pulse in his throat and feel warmth radiating from the loose collar of his tracksuit. Fine hairs on the nape of his neck shivered in my breath and my legs went limp.

‘The strong, silent type eh?’ he muttered as though to himself. ‘Well, today’s your lucky day. I’m the expert at extracting method from muddle. A couple of crazy heifers did more damage than this to Mum’s wash-house when they ran amok.’ He ran his eye over everything again, then declared it was structurally sound and could be put to rights in no time.

‘You reckon.’

‘I reckon. Four hands are better than two, and two heads are better than one, as Mum used to say.’

I let my hands drop onto his shoulders and pulled him against my chest. ‘Your Mum is a fountain of wisdom and I accept your absurdly generous offer.’

He went absolutely rigid. Tendons on his neck stood out like guy-ropes.

I quickly pushed him upright. ‘They had a go at the studio, too,’ I said evenly, before walking purposefully over to the other building, cursing my stupidity. It took a couple of minutes to knock away the timber barring the door. I went in. ‘They were a bit more subtle in here!’ I called through the window.

Jon was still standing where I had left him.

‘They only trashed my drawings and painting gear.’

He turned slowly and trudged sullenly across. After poking lethargically at the mess with a stick, he ended up squatting in front of a pile of torn, paint-spattered drawings. ‘These aren’t bad. What’s left of them. Who did the damage?’

‘I’m not sure.’

‘Are we mates or not?’ he snarled, willing me to define our relationship in terms he could accept.

‘Mates,’ I answered, then added flippantly, ‘comrades in arms; friends to the death.’

‘Right, then. Who was it?’

I told him about Patrick’s anger over Max’s bequest, and my suspicions.

‘Figures,’ he said nodding his head knowingly. ‘My brothers would sell me for forty pieces of silver.’

‘He’s not my brother.’

‘Was for four years – virtually.’

I laughed, imagining Patrick’s reaction to that idea. ‘

‘Well, what are we going to do about it?’

‘Nothing.’

‘You’re joking!’

‘His time will come.’

‘If it doesn’t, I’ll arrange it.’

I surprised myself by laughing. Until that morning the mere thought of the mess had me planning on warm baths and sharp razor blades. Suddenly it seemed funny.

Jon stood up. ‘Got me up here under false pretences, eh? Promise a quiet day in the country and it turns into a labour camp. Well, the exercise’ll do me good. You set the studio to rights and I’ll clear out the house. Where’s the work gear?’

We climbed into overalls and sorted out a few tools before breakfasting on slabs of bread and cheese, washed down with chlorine-free rainwater from the tank. By lunchtime I’d cleared out the studio, repaired the door and replaced the bolt. The walls and floor resisted total cleanliness but, as Jon observed, it was an elegant smudging, eminently suitable for an artist’s abode. (He said artist, not me.)

I lit a fire in the barbecue with all the useless drawings and paintings and while Jon washed off some of his soot and grime, grilled the meat and vegetables. Why is it when someone you like has dirty smudges under their nose, across their chin and around their eyes, they look great; but if you don't like them they look gross? He looked fantastic.

'I've got the easy job,' I apologised.

'Well, you're the ugly old brains of the outfit. Hard work's best done by young dumbos like me.' I glanced up, startled. Was that how he saw me? He caught my look and laughed uproariously. 'Gotcha! You're a vain bastard. I guessed it with those bleached bristles. And you shave your chest.'

'Yes, well...' I blustered.

'And your bum and pubes. What's with the hairless look?'

'Trying to look younger.'

'How old are you?'

'Twenty-eight.'

'Shit! It works, I thought we were the same age.'

'You've made my day. But - do you think I shouldn't?'

'Why the hell not? Go for it. The body's the temple of the soul - as Mum used to say.'

'It's not only that,' I continued with an unwonted urge to justify myself, 'it's cleaner. You wouldn't know, being a hairless babe, but hair traps dirt and smells.'

'And shit,' he added carelessly. 'Yeah, my older brother's hairy. He used to get sore from the dried dags round his ring when we'd been riding for a couple of days and hadn't been able to wash properly. I'll have to write and tell him to shave his arse. After all, cleanliness is next to godliness...' he paused, waiting for me to join in, 'as Mum used to say.' He laughed wildly, and it was several seconds before he could speak. 'That's why...' he burst into giggles. 'That's why your farts have such a ring of confidence!'

'Prick, I don't fart much.'

'Not compared to Steve. He used to stink the bed out. Some nights I had to sleep outside. The other two didn't seem to notice.'

'Did you share a room?'

'And a bed. Me and Steve in one bed, Paul and Mark in the other. Dad's idea of economy. There wasn't much money to spare for non-essentials.'

'How on earth did you study?'

'When I got desperate I knocked together a bed and desk in the outside washhouse. That way I could flop into bed after studying late. The others didn't bother studying, couldn't see the point.'

'But you did?'

'I hoped it'd be an avenue of escape, but in the end the motorbike proved more useful.'

'It wasn't wasted. You're the most intelligent young man I've spoken to in years. And the best looking.'

'You're not exactly Quasimodo yourself. You looked cool the other night at the opening. Everyone had the hots for you, even a few blokes. You should've heard the comments from some of those well-dressed dames - make your hair curl!'

'Such as?'

'Sorry mate, I'm too pure to repeat it.'

'Prick!' I threw myself at him and we wrestled lazily until he put a headlock on me and demanded submission.

After lunch I gave him a hand and by four o'clock all the irreparable contents of the cottage and studio were stacked in a heap beside the drive. We called it a day, stripped for a quick cold swim, soaped off the worst of the sooty smudges, and went visiting. As we forced our way through the overgrown track we heard loud voices.

‘You’ve ruined my day! You’re always criticising everything I do! I don’t go around telling you how things should be done!’

Rory’s voice was deeper and in another language. Placating, but equally loud.

‘Hang on a bit,’ I said, motioning Jon to sit. ‘It won’t last long. Give them a minute and there’ll be kisses and smiles.’

‘You know them pretty well?’

‘As much as they’ll let me. They value privacy as much as I do. That’s why we keep the track hidden. They don’t want visitors to my place wandering through to them, and vice versa. They’re madly in love, keep to themselves and spend their days fighting, making up and pottering around. Not much work gets done. Perfect neighbours - there when you want them, not when you don’t. It’s thanks to them the fire was put out on time.

The forest was suddenly quiet. After a respectable interval and talking loudly, we wandered across to the brightly curtained caravan in its clearing. Under an awning, a few comfortable chairs rotted silently beside pot plants jammed into every available spot. A dozen jobs waited for someone’s attention, and piles of possibly useful materials rescued from the dump, littered the open spaces.

Rory is barrel-chested with the shoulders of an ox, biceps as large as my thighs and thighs as thick as my waist. In a torn pair of old shorts, skin tanned a glossy brown, hair a tangled mess of black curls hanging over dark brown eyes, full lips just visible through a beard and moustache streaked with grey, he looked thuggish.

Lida, as lean as Rory is broad, was standing beside her husband. Hair scraped back and caught with a rubber band, eyes peering through thick-lensed glasses, bare feet poking from a dirty pair of men’s overalls, she looked tired. They welcomed me like the prodigal son, ran hands through my bleached bristles, laughed and reckoned it was a change for the better.

I introduced Jon. Rory shook hands but Lida merely nodded, averted her eyes, blushed and mumbled, ‘I’ll go and put on the kettle.’ She returned looking ten years younger, having dashed on lipstick, hoop earrings and a flowered shift. She wouldn’t have bothered for me. After we had solved the world’s problems over tea and sticky sweet homemade biscuits, Jon announced he’d be staying on in my cottage for a couple of days.

‘I’m going to repair Peter’s roof in case it rains again, and then I’ll hire a small truck to take all the rubbish away. He won’t let me dump it in the trees.’

‘Burn it,’ was Rory’s predictable response, his smile daring me to argue. I bit my lip, tried not to laugh, and wondered if Jon was serious. We hadn’t discussed getting rid of the rubbish, nor his staying up here. I turned to see if he was joking.

He raised an eyebrow. ‘There’s nothing urgent on at the gallery and I’ll be back on Tuesday night, Wednesday at the latest. You can manage without me till then can’t you, boss?’

No doubt I could. But I didn’t want to. Then again, neither did I want him at the gallery unless he was there willingly. With what I hoped was an air of indifference, I nodded perfunctorily. ‘Good idea, if you’re sure you can manage on your own.’

‘It’ll be easier without you fussing around.’ Jon grinned into his tea, and I laughed to hide my annoyance.

‘Where will you sleep? What’ll you eat?’ asked Lida.

‘There’s a sleeping bag and tent in the boot of the Holden, and enough food left over from lunch till I get something tomorrow morning when I buy the tiles and dump the rubbish. Can I use your phone?’ he asked cheekily, turning to Rory.

‘Of course, Jon,’ Lida simpered. ‘And you must eat with us tonight. Mustn’t he, Rory?’

Rory’s wary grunt turned to smiles and an offer to lend Jon his tools and half-ton utility truck, when I mumbled that Jon was my ‘friend’. We’d been good neighbours for four years but this was the first time he had offered to lend anything material. He was profligate with time and energy, but his precious tools and ute? I hid my jealousy but after an hour of feeling increasingly unimportant

and increasingly irritated for feeling like that, I stood up and said I had to go, expecting to be pressed to stay. But no one tried to stop me. Jon walked back with me for a last check on things.

‘No more work now, Jon,’ called Lida sweetly. ‘You’ve worked hard enough for that slave driver. Rory’s opening another bottle of home-brew, so hurry back.’ Jon sent her a ravishing smile and a wave. I bit my tongue. We loaded some stuff into the Mercedes, I mentioned a few things Jon might find useful, got in the car and wound down the window. His face was wreathed in a smug grin.

‘You’re in with a chance over there, Lida has the hots for you,’ I said seriously.

That wiped the grin off his face. ‘But, she’s old!’ was his shocked rejoinder. ‘At least thirty-five.’

‘So? Do you think desire stops at thirty?’

‘Shit. I was just being nice. What’ll I do?’

‘That’ll teach you to try and wind me up.’

‘Were you? Wound up? I just wanted to see how far... how much you...’ He looked trapped then finished in a rush. ‘Whether we were equal or... or if in your heart you really felt more like a boss than a friend.’

‘And what did you discover?’

‘I’m not sure. I think we’re equal. I think you trust me... but you don’t seem to care what I do.’

‘Isn’t that what you want?’

‘I...I don’t know... I don’t know what I want. I think I want you to care, but not so much you stop me doing what I want.’

‘I care, OK?’

‘And...?’

‘And I’m not looking for a faithful dog.’

‘And it’s a wise man who knows what he wants.’

‘As your Mum used to say.’ Neither of us laughed. It was all getting a bit serious. Suddenly Jon let fly with a wild whoop. ‘Yaheee! Alone in this magic place! I want to get to know every part of it.’ He turned back, serious again. ‘Are you sure you don’t mind, Peter?’

‘You’re joking. I’m grateful you want to clean the mess up. But accidents happen! Promise to ring me in the morning as soon as you get to civilisation, no later than nine o’clock. Here’s some money for the tiles and things, also a new phone. And pay Rory two dollars a kilometre for his ute, as well as filling it with petrol.’

‘Yes, boss. But – what’ll I do about Lida?’

‘Be subtle. Let her know we share a bed.’

He looked nonplussed, then grinned in relief. ‘Brilliant. Why didn’t I think of that?’

‘Too pure of heart.’

‘It’s true,’ he responded almost sadly. ‘Anything else?’

‘Yes. Do not go on the roof unless either Rory or Lida is there.’

Jon looked aghast. ‘I’m not a stupid kid!’

‘And I’m not insured against strangers having accidents.’

‘Mercenary bugger. OK, I promise.’

‘And so I know you’re safe, you must ring me on the dot of seven each morning, except tomorrow when you’ll phone at nine, and on the dot of five every evening, starting tomorrow evening. Promise?’

Jon promised, repeated the instructions, crossed his heart, pointed to heaven, waved goodbye, and was already heading back to the exotic Rory and Lida before I had crested the rise.

It was only five o’clock and I was regretting being in such a hurry to leave. Lida had certainly expected me to feel included in the dinner invitation, I’d eaten with them often enough in the past. I was biting off my nose to spite my face, as my mother used to say. Served me right.

It was too early to go back to an empty gallery so I let the Mercedes decide and forty minutes later was parked in front of the Alconas. Their welcome was even warmer than the previous time, and when I was dismantled I discovered why. Brian had been kicked in the back by a sick show-pony.

He'd been brought home on a stretcher and placed on a plank on the spare bed in the downstairs guestroom. After two days of his complaints, everyone's tempers were fraying and I was deputed as entertainer in chief. Rigid on his back, supported by pillows on each side, he looked like a handsome cadaver in a padded sarcophagus.

'Are you ready for the last rites my son?' I inquired solemnly from the doorway.

'Peter! Thank heavens. A man! If you knew how tired I am of women and children.' He was in considerable pain. The analgesics were helping, but he hadn't been able to sleep, refusing sleeping pills. 'They addle your brain, old man. I'm not going to shut down any of my precious grey-matter. Talk to me, there's a good chap. Take my mind off my miseries.'

That was easy. As an only child I'd conducted endless conversations with the world around me. My mother soon gave up worrying when she came upon me talking to the lawn-mower, a plant, my Teddy, the bed, the contents of my wardrobe. I've always been more than half convinced that all things, both animate and inanimate, will be better disposed towards me if I talk to them as equals, but antagonistic if I take them for granted. On cold mornings when I didn't commiserate with my bicycle, I'd get a puncture, a nut would drop off or it'd fall off its stand.

Brian lay back, closed his eyes and grunted occasionally as I chattered about what I'd been doing; Jon; how we met, floods, erosion, today... After an hour or so the others joined us, and Mad put plates on our knees. I continued to prattle between mouthfuls; someone would ask a question, there'd be discussion, we'd go off on a tangent, opinions proffered, conclusions debated and off we'd head on another tack. Eventually we fell silent. Mad put a finger to her lips. Brian was asleep. She turned out the light and we tiptoed into the gloom of the lounge.

'Thank you, darling. That's his first sleep since the accident. I think he was worried about not being able to protect us in case of invasion or some nonsense. But you being here has allowed him to relax.'

'Glad to help,' I yawned. 'What's the time?'

Mad was standing between the twins, an arm draped protectively around each; Jeff towered close behind – a sentinel.

'Eleven-thirty. Too late to go home. Stay the night.' It was a nervous instruction, not a question and the three children seemed equally nervous about my reaction.

'I'd love to, but Brian's got the spare bed.'

'You shared your bed with me last time, you can share mine tonight,' offered Jeff.

'You're on.' I answered, relieved at not having to return to an empty flat.

Der and Dra were tugging at Mad's arms. 'Tell him, Mum. Go on! You have to tell him first!' I didn't try to hide my curiosity.

Looking a little lost, Mad cleared her throat and spoke softly. 'Brian and I lived for a few years in Samoa. In the villages they live in fales, large, circular, family spaces open to the world. At night the blinds roll down and everyone sleeps in the same room, parents and kids. The children grow up wholesome, with few of the sleazy, salacious attitudes towards their bodies, natural functions and sexuality that Australian kids and adults have, so we decided to build a house like that. We all sleep in the same, huge room upstairs. Does that shock you?'

'I think it's brilliant!'

'See, I told you Peter would understand.' Jeff's hands were protective on his mother's shoulders.

'I read the other day, Der added diffidently, 'that more than seventy percent of the world's children sleep in the same room as their parents. So we're not the strange ones.'

'Indeed you're not!' I stated firmly

Dra solemnly took my hand and, followed by Der, led me upstairs to the bedroom. A magnificent space – walls, floor and ceiling of polished wood, golden grain glowing like flames in the lamplight. Exposed rafters sloped to the high ridge-beam, dormer windows looked out to the stars, colourful rugs scattered. One double bed jutted out from the street wall, another from the wall overlooking the garden, and a third from the gable end. Wardrobes, dressing tables, work areas and

comfortable chairs dotted the space, but there was no sense of clutter. Each bed occupied its own realm and it all looked cosy and sensible.

‘That’s Mum and Dad’s bed,’ Dra pointed towards the gable. ‘This one, under the window looking out to the pool, is Jeff’s and this one’s ours.’ She had wound her arm tightly around her almost identical twin’s waist, and pointed shyly to the bed under the dormer window facing the street. Der plonked a kiss on her forehead and a pat on her bum before pointing to a door at the other end. ‘That’s the bathroom. Let’s shower.’

It was the ideal family bathroom - three showers, three wash-basins, two toilets, each with an accompanying bidet, one bath, a spa pool, a sauna, copious towel rails and a large airing cupboard full of towels. Mad and Jeff were already showering, the steam wafting away through extractor fans. Jeff offered to scrub my back in his, and Der and Dra showered in the third. We all dried ourselves in the centre of the room.

‘Are you still happy with the arrangement, Peter?’ asked Mad a little nervously.

‘I wish you and Brian had been my parents!’

Mad read for a while, Jeff and I talked a bit. The atmosphere was so nurturing that it didn’t surprise me when Jeff invited me to race him to orgasm. Nor was I surprised by the sweet sounds of pleasure from Der and Dra. What did surprise and delight was that, despite torrential rain, I slept deeply and dreamlessly the entire night.

Brian’s face was alert at breakfast. His temper had improved and in the few minutes we had together he thanked me for staying.

‘Sleep well?’ he asked blandly.

‘Like a log.’

‘Do you still like us?’ Face still expressionless.

I could do the same trick. ‘Why on earth not?’

‘Well... The bedroom? Der and Dra?’

‘The bedroom’s great. They’re great.’

Brian frowned. ‘I want to explain about them.’

‘There’s no need.’

‘Yes there is. Dra has unusual chromosomes. Her ovaries produce no eggs and hardly enough hormone to generate secondary sexual characteristics. Apparently, apart from her vagina she’s almost as much boy as girl. It begins to explain their being practically identical. They’re inseparable, that’s for sure.’

‘Brilliant! The world’s over populated. And it saves on condoms.’

‘This is serious, Peter. Their happiness and security are very important to us.’

‘This whole family is enormously important to me.’

‘I love you.’

‘And so do I.’ This from Mad, carrying a tray with Brian’s breakfast. ‘Peter, you are the first person to whom we have ever shown our... arrangements. I can’t tell you what a weight’s been lifted from my heart. To go on, day in day out, knowing that the way you live is right, clean, proper and pure, but also in the knowledge that if anyone found out about it they’d probably throw us in prison for being evil parents, is horrible. Yet we can’t help ourselves! So we go on. Being able to be honest with you is like – I don’t know, being told we aren’t fiendish ogres, but normal people.’

‘Tell me something new. How do you think all we who are born same-sex-oriented feel about ourselves? Exactly the same! We know we are good, pure, proper and clean of heart, but the rest of the world tells us we are evil, sinful, foul and no better than rapists and murderers. So we keep quiet, waiting for that rare, special person to whom we can confide our dreadful secret. Then, for a time at least, the impossible burden is lifted.’

‘Oh, Peter,’ she whispered, tears streaming over her cheeks. ‘Thank you. Thank you for everything.’

After a quick breakfast, I drove the kids to school on my way back to the coast. Der intoned ponderously about the state of the universe, obviously at peace with himself, but Dra remained apprehensive, finally blurting out just as we arrived, 'Do you really not mind about Der and me?' 'I approve wholeheartedly, because you've both been wise enough to choose perfect mates.' I may have been mistaken, but I think they both floated through the school gates. 'Thanks, Peter. See you soon I hope!' grinned Jeff, and I was alone again.

Chapter Nine

It was slow travelling back to the coast. Roads were cluttered with removal vans, utes, cars and trailers stacked with household goods, sodden furniture - anything salvageable from homes made uninhabitable by the collapse of the canal system. I suppose it had all seemed like a good idea at the time, drain the swamps, channel the water, and build on the dredged silt. Who could have predicted a rising water table turning everything into a mush of quicksand?

Well, actually quite a few people did, but no one listened. Many houses were unsafe long before the floods sent them crumbling. Acid soils, created by draining melaleuca wetlands, had been attacking concrete foundations since the canals were first dug, and insurance companies had been refusing cover on some places for years. The recent deluges simply hurried things along.

So far, only about thirty kilometres of coast had been seriously affected, but canal and coastal dwellers from Coolangatta to Noosa were shitting themselves. How do you offload a million dollar mansion that's splitting at the seams as it sinks into a bog? With great difficulty. The roads, except for those patches along the coast that had fallen into the sea, were fine, they'd been built to last, well drained and not slap up against canals. The problem wasn't getting from place to place, it was finding somewhere to live.

I stopped at a shopping centre and bought lunch, electric hair clippers, and a packet of hair bleach. As long as Jon liked my spiky persona it was going to be permanent - at least while I could be bothered.

As I swung round the corner my jaw dropped - literally. I'd been dreaming away and was totally unprepared for a fairy-tale vision. The gallery's crystal dome and white buttresses were silhouetted against the blinding blue shimmer of sea and sky. A sight to inspire even the most prosaic of souls. This must have been how Max had envisaged his creation. The thought dimmed my pleasure, but not the spectacle.

From my bedroom window I now had an uninterrupted view of the ocean. Every last stone of the buildings on the Esplanade had been bulldozed away to join the piles of rubble that were still being shoved, fruitlessly, into the river's maw every time the tide went out.

About fifty metres behind the gallery the land dropped abruptly to the new shoreline three metres below. Most of the sandy soil, together with Jon's planting, had been scraped off, exposing outcrops of the granite on which our building was constructed.

Assuming the roads remained, Frances was now the owner of a very valuable bit of real estate. She wasn't there, of course. Obviously hadn't been in the place since the previous Wednesday.

As I had half an hour to spare before opening and was trying not to worry that Jon hadn't yet telephoned, I made good use of the clippers and re-gilded my spikes. Then, to celebrate the liberation of the gallery from its backstreet anonymity, I donned the same outfit I'd worn to Mad's opening. Thus arrayed, I imagined I would be ready for anything the fates might throw at me. The phone rang and I nearly gave myself a hernia racing for it.

'Maximillian's Gallery.'

'Mr Corringe?'

'Speaking.'

‘My name is Glaze, Bob Glaze. I was hoping I could have a few words with you this morning about exhibiting some works.’

‘By all means,’ I gabbled, desperate to clear the line. ‘How soon can you be here?’

‘Ten minutes?’

‘Perfect. I’ll see you then.’ I’d no sooner put the receiver down when it rang again.

‘Maximillian’s Gallery.’

‘Pete’s paradise.’

‘You rang me!’

‘You answered.’

‘Everything fine?’

‘How could it be otherwise?’

‘Rory’s ute go OK?’

‘Rory lent me his vehicle because it had a puncture and was in desperate need of a tune-up. If you remember, I bragged loud and long about my mechanical expertise yesterday, so today I had to prove it. That’s why I’m a bit late calling.’

‘And here I was wondering what you have that I don’t.’

‘That’s a list too long to regale you with at the moment. I’m in a phone booth on my way to buy tiles and fasteners, some paint and a phone. You bearing up?’

‘What else? We’ve a clear view of the sea now. Those remaining excrescences on the Esplanade have gone. That’s something for you to look forward to.’

‘I prefer your place.’

‘Me too. How’d you sleep?’

Silence. Shit! I was being gushy.

‘No complaints. The tent didn’t leak and I wasn’t washed away. You?’

‘The same.’

‘Yeah...well...’

‘Don’t forget to ring at five.’

‘Worried about me?’

‘No. Well, yes. It’s been raining and will be as slippery as hell on the roof. Remember to have Rory or Lida there when you’re up the ladder.’

Peter...! I’m not...’

‘Promise!’

‘I promise... Mum.’

‘Hey, that’s not fair. I told you yesterday, I’m not insured and you could sue me if you had an accident.’

‘And as I said then, you’re a mercenary bugger. Got to go. Someone’s tapping on the glass. Till five o’clock?’

‘Till then.’

What an inane conversation. I hate telephones. I’m always sure afterwards I’ve made a fool of myself. Further soul searching was prevented by the arrival of a tall, lean, late thirties, vegetarian-type; long hair tied back in a pony-tail, large hooked nose, sun-aged skin, several earrings, tight jeans, expensive trainers and a pure white shirt open to the navel. He gazed around in ostentatious appreciation as he made his way across, hand out like a prow cutting through calm seas. His skin was dry, grip firmer than necessary, and I detected a slight squeeze.

‘Bob Glaze. What a magnificent space!’

I extricated my hand. ‘Peter Corringe.’

He bestowed an intimate smile and nod. ‘Great external design too. A real gold mine now it’s on the sea front. An estate agent’s wet-dream – position, position, position.’

‘As long as the roads hold out.’ I quelled an urge to hit him.

‘Look, Peter,’ Mr Glaze began in warm fuzzy tones, gazing intimately into my very core. ‘Last week a representative of the company came to see you and got off on the wrong foot. Our Mr Scumble.’

So this was the next step. Soft soap. Better than Jon’s heavy brigade. I nodded vaguely as though trying to remember the incident.

‘Oh, yes... ArtWorks.’

‘Quite. Well, look, I’ve come to apologise, sincerely, on behalf of the company for any misunderstanding.’

‘There wasn’t any. I don’t want that sort of stuff in this gallery. Nor do I appreciate being physically manhandled. I have no wish to offend you, but at Maximillian’s we are trying to make a name for ourselves as serious purveyors of fine art.’

‘Point taken, point taken. However, what you are obviously unaware of is that the previous owner, Mr Fierney, had already agreed to...’

‘The hell he had! I was his adviser on stocking the gallery and there’s no way he would have agreed to that junk coming within a kilometre of the place.’

Bob Glaze didn’t miss a beat, merely smiled candidly and continued calmly. ‘I must have been misinformed. Perhaps I meant his wife, Frances.’ The self-effacing shrug and boyishly rueful grin were captivating.

‘That’s entirely possible – even probable.’

‘Look,’ (that was his third ‘look’ and I hadn’t yet seen anything worth a glance) ‘perhaps Mr Scumble didn’t explain the incentive system. The gallery will receive fifty percent of the value of every sale, and there’s a bonus for you, personally, when sales exceed a certain number.’

My lack of response must have appeared encouraging because Bob continued to persuade. ‘Naturally, in a quality establishment such as this, we do not expect our little display to be in the main viewing area. Some quiet corner or alcove would be ideal, where only those actually looking for it would find it. What do you say?’

‘I say there is something dodgy about such an offer, Mr Glaze. What’s the truth? Trying to put a gloss on a grimy little subterfuge? Attempting to con the ignorant public into thinking the trash you peddle is worthy of the label Art? I imagine even the name ArtWorks could be challenged under the Fair Trading Act.’

Mr Glaze managed to look very despondent. ‘No, no, no, no!’ he protested sadly. ‘It’s nothing like that. Look, to be perfectly frank with you, I tend to agree about the artistic merit of some of the works, but we are not put on earth to be our brother’s keepers. Some people love those sorts of paintings, so why shouldn’t intelligent people like you profit from their lack of taste?’

Patronising sod. I gazed out the window and looked noble.

‘Mr Corringe, I appeal to your sense of fair play; to your better nature.’

I raised an eyebrow, wondering why he’d dropped first-name chumminess.

‘I...I have to confess that my job is on the line. I simply must get this deal signed and sealed before Mr Motherswell returns this evening. I tried to contact you yesterday, but you were away. Please, won’t you just give the scheme a trial? You’re on a winning wicket here, Mr Corringe. What have you got to lose?’

‘My self-respect. Good day to you and please don’t bother me again. I’m certain, when Mrs Fierney is apprised of the true nature of your... works of art, she will be as adamant as I that we do not stock them.’

I walked him towards the door and he followed docilely enough, but turned at the entrance to give me a look of such intense hatred that my blood curdled. That sounds a hell of a cliché, but it’s precisely what it felt like. His eyes penetrated to my bowels as he rasped quietly, ‘I do not envy you, Mr Corringe. Mr Motherswell is not like Scumble and me. He is not a nice guy.’ Shaking his head, he turned abruptly and walked briskly to his car.

Suddenly insecure and no longer the confident curator of fifteen minutes before, I raced back upstairs and replaced the tight trousers and daring little waistcoat with something sensible and uncontroversial. I'd felt like this often enough as a younger man. Not so much lately, but every time the nervous chill clutches at your guts you realise you've lived with it all your life. A sensation unknown to ninety percent of Australians, most of whom refuse to acknowledge its existence in their fair and just society. It's fear. A cold and nameless dread of one's fellow citizens. My sole, inadequate defence has been to attempt concealment under a shroud of conformity.

By the time I returned to the gallery it sounded as though war had broken out. The newly scraped sand and rock of our back car-park was sprouting great piles of rubble. I'd imagined that with the Esplanade buildings gone we would be left to enjoy our solitary splendour. Not so. As I watched, an enormous truck dumped a load of rocks the size of cows. Noise, dust and waste of energy - a testament to humanity's unwarranted faith in their ability to avoid the consequences of their actions.

My tribulations were increased by an absence of patrons. Only one human crossed the threshold before lunch, a woman seeking directions. I was just biting into a slab of the cardboard pizza I'd bought in a moment of insanity that morning, when the Porsche skidded to a halt long enough to eject Frances before rocketing off again. She burst through the doors with far too much energy, a preternatural gleam in her eye and a fit of the giggles in her throat as she stumbled a little before steadying herself against a pillar.

I was nervous, tired from the constant noise of bulldozers, the lack of patrons, and having to run the place single-handed. I was also jealous that she had been, and still was apparently, having such a great time, so I merely glanced up busily from an imaginary workload. Her greeting was loud.

'Doesn't it look fantastic? We're on the coast! The property value has quadrupled! I'm richer than I was yesterday!'

All I could manage was a frigid, 'Hello, Mrs Fierney.' Unfortunately, it was exactly the cue she wanted.

'It's Mrs MacFife,' she twittered inanely. 'We got married last Thursday and have been on honeymoon. That's why I haven't been in touch. We went to Kathmandu!'

'Congratulations.'

'Oh, Peter. You're angry with me.'

'Not at all. I admire your restraint. You remained a widow for nearly three weeks.'

'Poor wee Peterkins. Is he feeling neglected then? Has his boyfriend run off with someone else? You're all mopey dopey. There now, what is it?' She attempted to tickle me under the chin while dribbling revolting baby noises through lipstick-smudged lips. Quite clearly, whatever she had imbibed since breakfast had set her on an unstable path.

'Oh for god's sake shut up, Frances. I just think you could take a little more interest in your investment, that's all.'

'No one could take more interest. We are on the seafront! Tony was right! And it's all mine!' She slid gracelessly to the floor, skirt riding up obscenely. A droplet of liquid trembled on the end of her slightly reddened nose.

'You should lie down. Come on, I'll help you upstairs.'

'Would you, Petey?' I nearly slapped her. 'Perhaps just for a teensy weensy minute then.'

I was concerned about the effect this display could have on clients, not about the frightful Frances. If it were up to me she would spend the next decade locked under the stairs. Without creating too much fuss, she was soon lying, apparently comatose, on her bed. However as I left the room she sat up and spoke clearly.

'Sorry about that. I'm not used to it. I guess I could use a nap. Gregor's expecting me at two-thirty. He dropped me off to pick up my car. Give us a call at two? There's a dear.'

'Fine. However we must discuss something first. What do you know about ArtWorks?'

She looked blank, then laughed hoarsely. 'You mean Mr-ah-Motherswell's little business?' There was something odd about the way she said Motherswell, but I put it down to inebriation.

I nodded.

‘Such a clever, clever, darling man. He wants to make me rich.’ Her mind was starting to fall apart again.

‘Have you seen the trash he wants us to carry?’

‘Who cares? He pays well.’

‘But Max’s ideals! My ideals! This was to be an art gallery to be proud of!’ I couldn’t keep the pleading from my voice and despised myself. She heard it well enough; Frances was an expert at ferreting out weaknesses.

‘Peter, Peter, Peter. Don’t be such an old fusspot. It can go out the back somewhere. All they want is to work from somewhere respectable.’

‘But.’

‘Not now, darling. I really must sleep. You just find a little corner and pop their paintings, or whatever they are, in it.’ She yawned. ‘Where’s Jon?’

‘Up at my place.’

‘Good for you. Now, wake me at... whenever I said. We can talk then.’

At two o’clock I was entangled in what the police might call a domestic. I’d read that art used to stimulate passionate debate, but this was the first time I’d seen two people come to blows over it. A youngish man, good looking in a heavy, rugby-forward sort of way, had removed a painting from the wall and was holding it above his head.

‘I will not have that thing in my house!’ shrieked his tiny, but perfectly formed assailant through collagen implanted lips painted the same pearly-orange as her earrings. Grabbing hold of her mate’s curly hair, she dragged herself halfway up his back, swinging about precariously as she tried to grab the painting.

‘Let go you stupid bitch. Christ I’ll fucking do ya! If I want this painting I’m bloody well going to have it. It’s my money, earned with my sweat. Let go ya cow! Ahhhhh!’ The howl of agony was justified - his woman had sunk her fangs into his meaty neck. At least her teeth weren’t false.

Concerned for the safety of Bill’s work, I prised it from the bloke’s enormous fingers and carried it to safety on the other side of the room. They continued with their noisy fight until he managed to shake her loose and swing her round to face him. Locking enormous hands loosely round her neck, he held her suspended, her toes just touching the floor. Amazingly, she continued to hurl abuse, albeit in a strangulated gurgle.

Having no bucket of cold water to throw over them, I sat on my desk and examined the painting for damage. It was fine, but I couldn’t imagine what she was objecting to, unless it was the title. Clitoris. It reminded me of a flowering vine we had growing over the back porch that Dad used to snigger over. If you didn’t read the label, the painting was simply a swirl of complicated shapes, textures and colours.

Silence. I looked up to see them sitting side by side on the floor, hugging, petting, kissing and murmuring sweet nothings.

‘You’re right, I won’t get it.’

‘No. I was stupid, darling. It is beautiful, I don’t know what came over me.’

‘We’ll look for something else.’ ‘

No, no. I want that one, I really do. Especially if it really does remind you of my...’ And so they made up, discovering through battle the strength of their devotion, the vigour of their love, and the limit of their power. Those who seek a calm and peaceful union would do well to consider that without deep valleys there can be no great peaks. They helped each other to their feet and peeped across at me, proudly defiant.

I sat on the edge of the desk and smiled complicity. ‘I’m glad there’s someone out there who still takes art and love seriously. What’s it going to be? This one? Another? Or none?’

They gazed at each other like sappy spaniels. ‘That one.’

I wrapped it and swapped it for cash. Bill had done his bit for romance that afternoon, and my cash-flow problems. Suddenly I remembered Frances – two-twenty! I dashed upstairs but the bird had flown. I felt empty. Jealous. Of what? Of a couple of sparring spouses? Of Frances's love affair with someone twenty years older? I don't know. I decided to ring Hank and Celia.

Apart from Jon, I had no close friends my own age. It wasn't for lack of trying. Max and I used to go to discos, and bars in the hope of meeting couples like us, but the likelihood of meeting them was infinitesimal. The noise is usually horrendous and smokers make life intolerable. When we got home we used to take off our smoke-stinking clothes in the porch and throw them in a bucket of water. After Max left, I'd tried the usual meeting places, but the atmosphere's aggressive. They're meat markets not meet markets. Only the physically and emotionally wretched want to talk and I wasn't that desperate. Maybe if I lived in Brisbane things might be different, but I wanted nature around me. You can't have everything, I've discovered.

Celia answered on a crackly line. 'Peter? I can hardly hear you.... The line's very bad. You must get a mobile telephone, dear. How nice of you to ring. Did Hank tell you about my ankle?'

'I haven't seen Hank.'

'Isn't he with you?'

'No. What's the matter with your ankle?'

'Just a strain. Where are you calling from?'

'The gallery.'

'Oh. Hank's up at your place.'

'Why?'

'He's been worrying about your cottage, as you're so busy with the gallery, so drove over today to make sure everything was OK.'

The static became so bad that all we could do was shout farewells and give up. I called faults and a computer voice informed me that water had penetrated underground lines on the coast and it would be several days before communications could return to normal. I hoped Jon would be able to get through at five o'clock.

Although it was still early, an eerie haze had dimmed the afternoon sunlight to a yellowish glow and I had to turn on the lights. I went outside. Heavy black clouds were building on the horizon, underlined by a brassy streak of sky. The sea was leaden. Westwards, an excruciatingly beautiful patch of turquoise sky hovered above the hills.

A minibus of elderly sightseers drove past, stopped, and backed up. They dismounted and stood on the strip of lawn at the front for a minute or two, before shyly entering as though uncertain of a welcome in such a place. I greeted them warmly and they relaxed, chatting about the beautiful building, the floods, the erosion. No one mourned the passing of fast-food outlets, the busy road that had usurped the once peaceful Esplanade, the high-rise apartments, or the canals.

'Stan and I used to fish in the wetlands right behind here. It wasn't a swamp at all! That's just what the developers called it when they wanted to drain it. There were dozens of crystal-clear waterways shaded by huge stands of melaleuca, lots of small lakes and pools and more fish than you could throw a hook at.'

Many similar memories were aired by some very old, very tired, very disillusioned people. The despoliation I had witnessed in my own twenty-eight years had been bad enough; how exhaustingly sad must it have been for these people? And how many times worse again for the original inhabitants of the land?

I've no idea if my guests liked the drawings and paintings, but they did love the building. I demonstrated the opening of the dome and, as there were only fifteen of them, it wasn't too much trouble to make tea and offer something stronger from the well stocked bar in the office.

It was still a few minutes to closing when they left, so I mopped out, straightened the paintings, checked no one had been left behind in the toilets, and closed everything up for the night. At five past five the telephone rang.

‘Maximillian’s.’

‘Giddy.’

‘You beaut. I was worried. Lots of lines are waterlogged and I thought you might not be able to get through.’

‘Rely on me.’

‘I do. Look, (that word was catching) there’s been a follow up from ArtWorks.’

‘Tell me! Was I right? Protection racket?’

Having no idea what Glaze’s fury and warning could mean, I gave Jon as detailed an account as possible. He took it more seriously than I.

‘You know, for all your great age you’re a bit of a babe when it comes to the real world, Peter. I came across several Scumbles and Glazes in Brisbane. You can’t avoid it if you’re mixing with the bottom end of town. I even did a stint as a heavy for a bit, until the boss realised I wasn’t getting results.’

What he thought sounded serious, so I promised to be on my guard.

‘By the way,’ he continued, ‘I had a visitor. A mate of yours, Hank. Wanted to see if everything was still standing. Got a bit of a shock when he saw the state of the place. Asked who did it. He seemed a genuine enough chap, so I told him your suspicions. Hope that was all right? He sure went a funny colour.’

My blood drained. ‘Do you know who he is?’

‘Hank?’

‘He’s Max’s father. Patrick is his son and I’m only suspicious. I’ve got no proof.’

Silence, then, ‘Shit! Sorry, Peter.’

‘You couldn’t know. Don’t worry about it.’

‘Yeah. Well, I do open my gob a bit wide sometimes.’

‘Join the club. Maybe I’m glad Hank knows.’

‘Yeah. Anyway, the roof’s watertight. Let it rain.’

‘That’s lucky. From the look of the sky it’s going to piss!’

‘Make sure you keep out of drains.’

‘I intend to – and you.’

‘Once burned... Yeah... well... see you - I guess. I’ll ring again at seven in the morning.’

‘Excellent. Cheers.’

He hung up and I was left staring blankly at the handset, wondering what the hell I was doing stuck on a rock at the edge of the land, trying to sell esoteric little drawings and paintings to people who only wanted a bit of decoration, something to brag about, or another trinket to relieve the unending sameness of their pointless little lives. I had swapped creativity for salesmanship; my hermitage for a stage. I enjoyed being on show, playing the glamorous purveyor of objets d’art, the specialist in all things aesthetic.

I loved my new look and the chance to wear outrageous clothes. But... how satisfying was it really? Too easy, if the truth were told. No challenge. The only positive thing had been meeting the Alconas. And Jon. That made everything worthwhile. But I wasn’t with them – I was alone and, in a rare flash of awareness, understood that time spent away from people I love, is time wasted.

I also realised that sometime during the afternoon I’d lost the urge to fight for Max’s dream. If people are to appreciate the intrinsic value of things, they must detect it for themselves. Human nature seldom lets us cherish what others have pointed out. By playing the evangelist and striving to convert Joe Public to an appreciation of a ‘higher aesthetic’ I was diminishing its value. A Zen saying fell into my head. When the pupil is ready, the teacher will appear.

For lack of anything better to do, I wandered up to the roof to stare at the ominous accumulation of clouds. Frances’s car drove in and parked beside the door to the flat, followed by the Porsche. She unlocked the door, waited on the step till McFife joined her, kissed him sweetly, took his hand and led him inside.

I moved across to the edge of the dome where Max had stood on the night of his fall, and gazed down at the marble floor. He was dead and wasn't going to suffer - whatever happened. Everything important to me about Max was in my head. I had no reason to stay and no reason to care what junk ArtWorks wanted to fill the place with. Stuff them! It was time to go! Time to get on with my life.

Reinvigorated, head filling with ideas for a new series of paintings, I returned to the gallery and closed the dome.

Chapter Ten

As I was closing the roof, Frances fluttered vaguely down the stairs in something brief, pink and diaphanous. She yawned delicately. 'Where's ArtWorks going?'

'Nowhere.'

'Why not?'

'Their stuff's crap and they're dodgy. An honest company wouldn't pay bonuses for access, and then let their display be placed out of sight. Jon reckons it's a front for something illegal and, judging by the reactions from the improbably named Scumble and Glaze, it's a scam.'

'Scam?'

'Money-laundering, drugs, who knows?'

'Peter, don't be tiresome. This is a business and you're not paid to turn away clients.'

'I haven't been paid at all.'

She shrugged impatiently. 'You're starting to annoy me.'

She was starting to annoy me, and I was born stubborn. I'd just decided to resign, so why couldn't I have said, It's your gallery, and packed my bags?

'I may be annoying, Frances, but at least I'm honest. Crime only pays because people do nothing to stop it.'

'Forget it,' she snapped, 'and get on with your job!'

'My job's selling art, not trash. And I intend to get to the bottom of ArtWorks.'

'In that case,' she sighed, 'we'd better discuss it with Gregor. He knows about this sort of thing. He's upstairs.'

'That's a damned good idea. I'm concerned for you too.'

'And I appreciate it.'

A new article of furniture had appeared in Frances' bedroom - one of those frames with pulleys and weights for building muscles and eliminating ugly flab. Gregor MacFife was in the process of doing the former, having none of the latter. He was one of those rare men who look as good naked as clothed. Tanned, sleek and well muscled, he looked in his late forties, but Frances had exaggerated; he was only slightly larger than normal.

Finishing a lift, he lowered the weights and offered a firm, sweaty hand.

'Welcome, Peter.' His voice was mellifluous, rich and deep - capable of massaging the cares from one's soul. Equally intoxicating was the even-toothed smile. 'Just a dozen more and I've finished. You don't mind?' He motioned me to a chair jammed between the wall and the machine.

I was so close I had to swing my knees sideways to avoid brushing his thighs each time he squatted, and with my head sixty centimetres from his groin I didn't know where to look. I glanced across at Frances. She was also naked, draped over the bed staring blankly at the wall. Not a pretty sight, so I settled for a crick in the neck and looked up at Gregor's face. He rewarded me with a wink. Embarrassed, I looked back at Frances whose vacant stare now rested on Gregor.

The room was silent, except for a grunt each time Gregor squatted, followed by a susurration of pulleys when he stood. He was becoming aroused and I could smell his maleness. Aggressive nudity like this was the opposite of the Alconas' naturalism. I feel sexy with Mad's family, but it is

sexuality without demands, without awkwardness or doubt; the natural, healthy sexiness of life. Gregor's display was sexuality soiled.

Frances prised herself upright, staring at her husband's erection, the fingers of one hand caressing her nipples while the other played at her groin. She licked her lips. With one last, well-bred grunt, Gregor lowered the weights, leaned back against the frame and smiled complacently. I stood up, feeling over dressed and glad I was. This was definitely not my scene. Before I could escape, Gregor threw an arm around my shoulder and squeezed me to him; his body hot through my shirt.

'It's an honour to know the man who inspired this magnificent building.'

'I didn't inspire...'

'According to Frances you did. Congratulations!' He pulled my head across and kissed me on the mouth.

I pulled back, repelled, and wiped his sweat from my lips.

Frances maintained her dippy smile. 'Peter's more worried than proud.'

I nodded wildly, desperate to escape the clammy embrace.

'He thinks someone's trying to use the gallery as a base for an illegal scam.'

'No!' Gregor's eyebrows shot up in surprise and his hug grew tighter.

'And he intends to get to the bottom of it. Don't you Peter?'

'Yes.'

'I told him you'd know what to do.'

'Quite right, Frances.' Gregor ran a hand through my bristles and smiled, but fortunately didn't attempt another kiss. I felt annoyed at my intolerance. Obviously, he was a man in harmony with himself. I was the one with problems.

'You must tell me everything, Peter. But first, a glass of wine?'

Frances poured and Gregor draped himself over the bed, hands behind his head, legs spread, eyes on his erect manhood as though seeking insight from such a powerful life-symbol. I sat on a chair beside the bed and studied my fingers. Frances brought our drinks, then snuggled up beside Gregor as if to reclaim possession. We drank each other's health while I told him everything, including Jon's suspicions.

'Where's Jon?'

'At my place.'

'Where's that?'

I told him.

Gregor took our empty glasses to a table, put them down carefully, then turned, face serious.

'You've been very perspicacious, Peter. Few people would've understood the implications of ArtWorks' offer. Have you told anyone else your suspicions?'

I shook my head, waiting for the wise words that would make everything clear. Frances' gaze swivelled from husband to me like a mesmerised chook, a peculiar half-grin playing over her features.

'Frances,' Gregor whispered softly, moving towards the bed, 'you told me Peter was just some dumb fuck of Max's. That he'd do as he was told. What happened?' The voice was as caressing as ever, but I didn't much like the words.

'Well, that's what I thought. That's the sort of boy Max usually chose. How was I to know this one was different?'

I don't think Gregor liked her tone, because he leaned forward and slapped her, leaving a reddening mark on her cheek.

'There's no need to pick on me!' she whined. 'At least I was on the ball and brought him to you before anyone else got wind of it. Better than your two gorilla fuckwits who put the suspicions into his head in the first place.'

'Shut your mouth!' the voice not so mellifluous. 'I should have guessed if I left things to you nothing would get done!' He threw himself petulantly onto the bed.

‘That’s not fair!’

‘Fair? Fair? This is costing me money! You promised that if I got Max out of the way, ArtWorks would be able to move in. I kept my side of the bargain; you’ve stuffed up.’

Blood does run cold, I assure you. My heart felt as though it was trying to pump chunks of ice. Cold sweat ran from my armpits.

Frances fumed. Gregor was pensive. Neither was taking an interest in me so I stood quietly, walked softly to the door and escaped. A hefty rabbit punch brought me to my knees and I was dragged by an ankle back into the room. The tableau remained the same. He looked up.

‘Thanks, boys. What’ll we do with your fairy, Frances?’

‘Get Max’s clothes off him for a start,’ she snapped, clambering off the bed to look contemptuously down. ‘You don’t deserve Max’s things, you creepy little queer. He was six times the man you’ll ever be.’

‘Is that why you had him murdered?’ I don’t know why I can’t keep my mouth shut.

She jammed her foot on my neck. I thought my head would burst.

‘Get those things off him!’ she screamed.

Within a minute I was naked on my knees with both arms too far up my back for comfort.

‘What’ll we do with him, boss? Bury him?’

‘Later. It’s too light now. And why deprive ourselves of a little entertainment? Tie him to that thing.’

Frances crept back beside Gregor and they watched as Scumble tied my wrists to the handles of the weight lifting machine. Glaze hung on the weights, then suddenly let go, jerking my arms above my head, nearly ripping them from their sockets. Scumble kicked my legs apart and lashed them to the base. Stretched out like a flayed skin, swallowing was difficult but that didn’t stop my mouth.

‘Why?’ I asked.

‘Why what?’

‘Max.’

‘Money.’

‘Haven’t you enough?’

‘One can never have enough.’

‘But - after a while there’s nothing to spend it on.’

‘Who wants to spend it? Money is power and power’s the ultimate turn-on.’ Gregor’s voice had thickened and as if to underline his statement, he grabbed Frances’s hair, pulled her head down and forced his erection into her mouth. ‘You like that, don’t you dear?’

Spittle dribbling from stretched lips, she nodded.

‘Real power is forcing people to do what they don’t want. When you have enough money, Peter, everyone wants to lick your arse, but you’d know all about that.’

‘Not my scene.’

‘It’s Bob’s scene though, isn’t it Bob?’

Bob looked unconvinced.

‘Isn’t it, Bob?’

‘If you say so, boss.’

‘I do say so. You let me down today, Bob. You were supposed to calm Mr Corringe’s fears and get everything running smoothly. But you didn’t, did you?’ The voice continued mellifluous, the smile still intimate, but I felt sick. Sick, stupid, cheated and scared.

Bob hung his head and mumbled, ‘No, boss.’

‘You have a choice, Bob Glaze - out into the wide, wicked world - or lick my arse. What’s it to be?’

Bob mumbled something.

‘Speak up! What do you want to do?’

‘I want to lick your arse!’ Bob said dutifully, if a trifle unconvincingly.

Gregor smiled indulgently at me. ‘What a pity you didn’t have the sense to do as you were told, Peter. You could’ve joined our little band and shared the profits.’ He sighed deeply as though with regret. ‘Instead, you had to play the hero.’ He turned to his wife. ‘Frances, how can you add to Bob’s little punishment?’

Frances slithered hot-eyed from the bed, reached into a cupboard and produced a small whip, its thong capped with a shiny metal tip. Meanwhile, Bob had stripped revealing a body devoid of fat. Muscles and bones showed clearly through unhealthy pale skin flecked with tiny dark patches. Some looked red and sore as though he’d caught himself on a barbed wire fence. His half-smile as Scumble tossed him to his knees relieved me of the obligation of pity. Frances landed an expert flick with her whip on his cheek, raising a tiny red welt.

‘Belly up, boy,’ she snarled.

Bob rolled on to his back and was subjected to an elegant whipping on sensitive parts. His body twitched and flinched at every stinging cut, but the only sounds were sharp intakes of breath and heavy grunts of pain - or pleasure, it wasn’t clear which.

‘Walkies!’ snapped Frances. The penitent crawled across the room to the foot of the bed. Gregor raised his legs and smiled across at me as Bob slithered up and buried his head.

Frances maintained the tension with the whip until, having drained all possible pleasure from his employee’s humiliation, Gregor’s attention turned back to me. Bob dragged his twitching body to a corner.

‘What do we do with the shaved, bleached little gay-boy, Frances? Want to fuck him?’

She turned her evil grin on Scumble. ‘Ian, if I remember correctly, the other day you said you’d like to fuck him good and proper.’

Scumble looked aghast. ‘I didn’t mean it literally. He might have A.I.D.S.’

‘Have you?’ Frances asked.

I tried the butch, contemptuous look, but I was jelly. If I was going to die I wanted it to be as painless as possible. I did not want to end up a screaming mess on the floor of Frances’s bedroom, so I lied.

‘Yes. So watch out for my bodily fluids!’

‘Boss?’ The pleading in Scumble’s voice was pitiful.

‘Use this.’ Frances passed the unhappy Scumble a realistic, if improbably large plastic dildo attached to a harness. The whip she handed to a miraculously resurrected Bob. Scumble stripped, strapped on the phallus and pranced around the room like a lewd satyr. I was untied from the frame, bent over the foot of the bed and refastened. Gregor pulled his legs up to make room. Bob lashed with the whip. The MacFifes watched with tight smiles. Scumble dragged back my head and thrust. I screamed, certain my bowels had ruptured, emptying litres of poisonous slime into internal cavities.

After an aeon of pain greater than I had imagined possible, Scumble stopped pumping, I stopped shrieking, and Bob jerked himself off into my ear. Blood from the whipping was running into my mouth. My back and ring felt as if it they’d been torn open. I’d been reduced to a whimpering accumulation of agony, and vomited over the bed, unfortunately missing the loving couple.

Frances rolled onto the floor, landing on all fours. Her husband followed and mounted her like a dog, barking and woofing in ecstasy. When he’d shot his load, Scumble, minus the dildo, emulated his master. Gregor watched them from the bed, smiling his tight smile at his wife’s barbarous love-making. Desire quenched, Frances snuggled back into her husband’s arms; Scumble and Glaze sprawled over a couple of chairs.

‘That was wonderful,’ Frances moaned. ‘Let’s do it again.’

‘How’s your mother?’ murmured Scumble.

‘Mother’s well,’ was Gregor’s contented response.

A minute later he sat up. 'Right, you two clean up in the other bedroom, then get shot of the faggot. An accident - or bury him somewhere he'll never be found. First thing tomorrow go up to his place in the hills and waste his bum-chum.'

'Sure thing, Boss. No fuck-ups this time.'

Mr Motherswell-MacFife merely grunted.

I spent a long fifteen minutes tied to the bed, face buried in drying vomit, trying to fix my mind on higher things. Could I escape? Not likely. How would they do it? Permanently. I agonised over Jon. I'd got him into this mess. I was alone in the room. If I could get to the telephone I could warn him, but the knots were secure. Sadness overwhelmed me. Was this my final act, face down in vomit on a bed of lustreless lust? How tragic that sex, that delicious gift of the gods, could be reduced to pain and torture. How dire that people like these should profit from their inhumanity. How pitiable that I had no more tears to cry.

The MacFifes were still showering noisily.

Scumble and Glaze eventually reappeared, untied me, fastened my hands behind my back, hobbled my ankles, shoved a dirty sock in my mouth, secured it with tape and half carried, half dragged me down to the gallery and out the back door. After checking the way was clear, I was forced to shuffle the fifty metres to the edge of the cliff. It was about seven o'clock and utterly still. Lurid light from a rising yellow moon trickled under heavy black clouds, already beginning to spit their load.

'Hurry up, it's gunna piss,' Glaze muttered. Enormous piles of rocks loomed like demented pyramids, dwarfing the two bulldozers whose job it was to shovel them into the path of the ever-hungry river in the hope of diverting it away from the suburbs built on sand dunes further south. Scumble hoisted himself into the cab of a dozer, fiddled for a few seconds under the dash, started it up and began pushing a pile to the edge.

'It's going to be like it was with your mate,' Glaze laughed. 'But tonight I'll use a shovel instead of a broom.'

I looked down. We were directly above Jon's drain. If I wasn't knocked out in the fall I might be able to get away before the bulldozer shoved its load. Fat chance, bound hand and foot! The shovel slapped me in the back.

Three metres doesn't sound far but believe me, when you're trussed it's a bloody long way. I fell on my side in the moist sand, winded, while the dozer, headlights reflecting palely off the rocks, revved erratically and the sky came tumbling down. A frenzied roll got my head under the overhang as a boulder the size of a small car crunched on to the drain and bounced near my legs. There was just enough light for me to make out a vertical slit of deeper darkness. The direct hit had forced an existing gap between two pipes to open wider. It took less than three seconds to roll across and shove head and shoulders into the gloom.

A bolt of agony vaporised all illusions of safety. Something had crashed onto my left foot. Whatever it was must have protected me from further onslaught, because although I could hear the roar of tons of rubble sealing me into my tomb, nothing further landed on the bits of me outside. Gagged on pain, I pulled my hands further up my back and rubbed the ropes against edges of concrete.

Try it sometime. The amount of possible movement is slight, the effect negligible. I fell back on an old trick learned during years as an artists' model. With a bit of practice you can switch off awareness of time passing, retreating somewhere inside your head where cramp and pins and needles can't penetrate. It wasn't quite as easy jammed into a wet and dark crack in a drainpipe, but it worked. After a long time my hands separated. Wriggling to a better position, and with a trickle of hope, I tore off the tape, extracted my gag and tried to drag numbed legs in to join the rest of me.

I think I passed out. My left foot was jammed and the agony so excruciating the brain refused to cooperate. Eventually, wet cold fear clawed its way from entrails to consciousness. My head and shoulders were damming the flow of storm water, which was by now running over my neck and

trickling into my mouth. Choking, I sat up too quickly and convulsed in a spasm. My foot! Another wrench brought forth a scream of obscenities.

I recalled the trapper who'd sawn off his right arm with a pocket-knife when he was trapped in a crevasse. That wasn't an option - I hadn't a knife. With the toes of my right foot, which Scumble had only hobbled, I scratched away at the sand underneath. Little by little the pressure eased, and with it the worst of the pain. After an interminable time my left foot sank far enough for me to drag it out from under. Terrified I was going to start an avalanche, I dragged cold, twisted, cramped, aching extremities in to join my torso. A momentous reunion.

Tender explorations revealed a cut from ankle to toe, oozing warm sticky fluid. If I hadn't already chundered I would have. Darkness lets the imagination run free - not a good idea. Fiddling in the blackness, I gave homage to the inventor of nylon cord that doesn't knot tight, and after separating my feet, used it and the gag to bind the cut foot. Pretty useless, but I imagined it gave protection.

Sitting waist deep in water and having solved the pressing problem of keeping all my bits together, the full horror of the situation clunked into focus. What next? Crawl to the sea? Fighting claustrophobia (I could never make myself slither under the tarpaulin in obstacle races at school in case they sealed all exits and I'd expire) I limped past openings and cracks in the sides too small to squeeze through, not daring to hope.

After the intense dark, the night at the end of the tunnel positively glowed. Crunch. Tonnes of sand and rocks had built up outside, reducing the opening to a wide slit about fifteen centimetres deep. I tore at it with my fingers but it was set like concrete. I was already waist deep in water, the tide was coming in and it had been raining for goodness knows how long so things were not looking good. Stumbling back through the impenetrable blackness I wondered if this was Karma. Was I doomed to return again and again to the same fucking flooded drain? But there was nothing else to do.

I tripped, bashed my bruised and grazed body on the sides, scratched legs and feet on bits of junk, and understood despair. Brain on standby, I groped on and on and on. The drain divided and became smaller. I was crawling. The current swifter. Swallowing filthy water. Which way? The side away from the gallery. I slithered on. A pale glow! I dragged myself into a rectangular shaft about a metre deep faintly lit by a street light. The entrance was one of those concrete spillways in gutters that happily swallow your car-keys but are not much wider than your arm. I suppose I was disappointed, but suspect I was beyond that meagre state.

After another age, reduced to slithering on torn hands and knees, water sloshing around shoulders, barely making progress against the ever-increasing current, another light glimmered. Another shaft, this time circular and about one and a half metres high. I stretched up, exhausted, not caring if I was trapped as long as I wasn't crawling, cramped, aching, bruised and scraped in that hellhole. Filthy stormwater gushed over me. I shoved my hands against the circular grill, pushed, heaved - nothing. Sliding torn fingers between the bars, I shook them in despair. A movement? Again. Yes! Rotation? After an eternity of heaving, grunting and twisting, the faint feel of flanges lining up with gaps. A final spurt of energy and the grill was up. I slid it sideways, but it was another age before I could summon the energy to haul myself up and over the edge to lie in the streaming gutter; wet, cold, naked, hurting and indescribably happy.

Chapter Eleven

The euphoria lasted ten seconds, to be followed by muscle cramps, uncontrollable shivering, whimpering and disembowelling fear. Scumble and Glaze are going to kill Jon! The thought hammered incessantly and was probably the only thing stopping me from lying there to expire of cold and exhaustion. Limping from the cut, blind from rain, shaking from cold, I staggered away from the coast. A telephone booth! Punch in 000. Nothing. I tried again. Dead.

I had no idea how long I'd been in the drain, but it was late. No lights in houses, no flicker of TV, no cars, no one. Panic. Smashed the handset against the wall. Swore and cursed and felt slightly warmer. There was only one thing for it – walk.

But where? I had no friends nearby. It never occurred to me to knock on someone's door. Invading other people's space requires the confidence of knowing you belong, that you're not a barely tolerated hanger-on. That's the preserve of heterosexual Anglo-Saxons in Australian society. Someone, who from their earliest memories has known they are different, is not going to take risks with strangers. I stretched my brain. Mad and Brian!

It was about fifteen kilometres to the Alcona's up some steep and very exposed roads. If anyone objected they could call the cops. And surely I'd pass a working phone booth? Rain pelted. Chilled core sent spasms of shivering so severe I thought my bones would shake apart. Aching foot dragging. So cold it hurt. I tried slapping myself but that only aggravated cuts and grazes.

I couldn't go fast enough to build up heat and was heading for hypothermia. No clothes on washing lines in this weather. No parked cars covered against the rain. A building site. A dark, flat, nothing. Sheets of black polythene dotted with plastic cones and reinforcing rods ready for concreting. I tugged out a section, tore at it with fingers, teeth and the edges of concrete blocks to make it smaller, chewed and ripped a hole in the centre and trudged on in plastic poncho and head cloth.

Body heat was trapped and life returned. I could go on. I had to go on. Delirious. Hills, torn feet, speeding cars, tripping, falling, bleeding again, hungry, hurting, body screaming for rest.

It was too late for the police. I have every confidence in their goodwill, but I also imagined I knew bureaucracy. By the time my story had been checked, the MacFifes investigated and someone sent to warn Jon; it would be too late. The closer I got to the Alconas the more certain I became. No cop in their right mind would believe a naked, bristle-bleached poof after they'd listened to the suave certainties of Gregor MacFife. I'd probably spend a couple of nights in the watch-house while Scumble and Glaze did away with Jon, and then be accused of murdering him myself in revenge for being jilted or some crap. With my luck I'd get a cop who hated gays. And I could imagine the stories Frances would concoct with wide-eyed-innocence.

Paranoia.

It was still dark when I staggered against Mad's gate and collapsed. The first luck of the evening arrived when my head fell against the bell and kept it ringing. They'd have ignored one ring. I came to my senses shouting angrily. Mad was applying disinfectant. It stung! According to Jeff, I started shouting, 'No! No! Don't! Stop! Stop! I can't! It's too dark!' And then just blubbered. I still get embarrassed thinking about it. Until then I'd always imagined I'd be able to out-sang-froid James Bond if it came to the crunch. It was humiliating to discover I'm ordinary.

Eventually it sank in that I was dry, warm and safe. Dra poured sweet tea down my throat, Der massaged warmth and movement into the bits of me not cut and grazed, Mad continued to bathe, disinfect and apply dressings, while Jeff oversaw everything and kept his father informed. It was an hour since he'd dragged me inside, but I still wasn't making any sense. I became hysterical about Jon, demanding to be taken to him immediately, babbling about being buried alive and trapped in tunnels.

'It's only half-past five, Peter. What's so important?'

'They're going to kill Jon this morning!'

'Where is he?'

'At my place!'

'Call the police.'

Apparently I became hysterical. They imagined we were in trouble with the law, but that didn't stop them helping. Brian was still flat on his back and I wouldn't countenance Mad or the twins getting involved, but Jeff offered to drive me. I warned him it wasn't an adventure and insisted he return immediately after dropping me off. He promised.

‘Why don’t we ring Jon and warn him? Asked a puzzled Der. Of course! Probably it was only the Coast phones on the blink. I limped to the phone, punched in my number and it rang. And rang, and rang and rang. I grabbed the directory and searched for Rory’s number, cursing myself for not memorising it. Not there. Punched in Directory services. A computer generated voice... “The number cannot be provided as no matching details or listing was found. Please hang up and check the details.” ‘Jon’s not there! Rory’s number’s unlisted! Something’s happened! Quick, Jeff! We have to get up there!’

It took him four minutes to change, get the car keys and reappear with a dark tracksuit, anorak and sneakers for me. Mad had packed a loaf of bread, some cheese, a thermos of hot coffee and a packet of biscuits into a backpack. Dra appeared with a small first-aid kit and Der with his pride and joy – a Swiss Army knife. He pressed it into my hand.

‘Go for it, Peter. You’re not too late. It’ll be fine. Jon’s probably a deep sleeper, sleeping outside or something.’

‘Use the salve in the kit on your anus,’ murmured Mad. She kissed me on the cheek, Dra clung to Der and Jeff dragged me out to the garage. I was afraid to leave their haven. A hero, I am not! Jeff drove well, using the car as a means of moving from place to place, not a source of macho thrills. I gave him directions and we drove silently until the highway.

‘Is Jon your lover?’

‘Friend.’

‘That’s more important really, isn’t it?’

‘I guess so. But both would be ideal.’

‘Yeah. Isn’t he...?’

‘He either is but doesn’t know - or is and knows, but won’t acknowledge it – or isn’t.’

‘Problem.’

‘Indeed. How’s the South American?’

‘Off.’

‘Oh?’

‘We went to his place after school. I was all Byronic passion, dripping with romantic notions; soft kisses, gentle caresses. It was going to be....’

‘And it wasn’t.’

‘We had a coffee, which was nice, sitting on the lounge. Then he put my hand on his crotch, but I wasn’t ready for that, so I draped my arm around him and tried to kiss him. He pushed me away and got angry. “Don’t be stupid!” he said, “I’m not a woman. Men don’t do those things. I only want a fuck.” Suddenly it all seemed pointless and... I don’t know... unwholesome. So I said I’d forgotten an appointment, and left. I felt stupid.’

‘Have you seen him again?’

‘Every day. He ignores me.’

‘There are lots like that. Ashamed to be gay so refuse to get pleasure from it. Especially in Catholic countries and places where it’s either illegal or strongly disapproved of. Lots of men seek the respectability of marriage and kids, and pursue other men for anonymous sex-relief. But that’s a recipe for disease and matrimonial disaster. By refusing to share the gentle, loving aspects of sex with men, they pretend they’re not queer. Don’t blame yourself or him; blame social pressure. You’re a romantic like me. Hang in there, though. These experiences are what make us adults. You won’t become a very interesting person if you drift through life without setbacks.’

He glanced across. ‘You don’t think I was stupid?’

‘The opposite.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Thanks.’

The intersection was just ahead and neither of us spoke for the rest of the journey. The Volvo gave an even smoother ride than the Mercedes and the dashboard clock was showing six thirty-two when I whispered, 'Stop.'

My gate was four hundred metres ahead on the right, Rory and Lida's another five hundred metres further on. In case Scumble and Glaze had already arrived, I didn't want to warn them. Neither was I going to put Jeff in any danger. He turned and drove quietly back the way we'd come. The sun wasn't up but it was light enough to race as quickly as my legs would hobble the remaining distance. The car had been too comfortable. I'd just closed the gate and had only the last hundred metres of drive to go, when the sound of an approaching vehicle threw me into the lantanas to the left of the drive. More scratches. The car stopped, the gate was opened and my Mercedes purred past and over the rise to disappear into the house clearing.

Heart thumping, I raced like a madman. Perhaps Jon wasn't there. Had gone for a walk. Was with Rory. Please! Please! Please! I stopped at the top of the rise and peered down. The cottage was twenty metres in front of me to the left of the drive, on the high side of a grassy, shrub-dotted semicircle. The grass sloped fairly steeply down to the dam - placid, undisturbed and heartbreakingly beautiful. To the left, a tree-filled gully, the catchment for stream and dam, rose steeply to a ridge and the boundary with Rory and Lida. Eastwards, eucalypt-covered hills folded together, barely permitting the stream to pass on its way to join larger creeks, rivers and the sea. A sudden shout.

'What the fuck are you doing? Leave me alone...Aaah!' followed by more shouts, grunts and curses. Still nothing visible except the corner of the cottage, the empty Mercedes and the roof of the studio beyond. Under cover of a hedge of grevilleas and banksias I'd planted along the back wall of the cottage, I skirted westwards.

Against the wall furthest from the drive, Jon, head twisted at an alarming angle, was being forced to his knees by a grunting Scumble while Glaze tied his legs together, lashed his hands behind his back, looped the rope around his neck and fixed it to the binding around his ankles. Lethal. You struggle - you strangle.

Jon wasn't cowed. 'Why are you driving Peter's car? Where is he?'

They ignored him. After testing the knots, Glaze stood in front of his prisoner with a satisfied smirk, then kicked him viciously in the ribs. 'Shut the fuck up! Your precious mate's karked it. Fallen off a cliff, Buried his troubles. Sunk to new depths. Up shit-creek ...' he sniggered unattractively. 'And you're going to join him.'

'Yeah, yeah,' Scumble interrupted impatiently. 'Cut the Hollywood, Bob. Let's ...'

A spine-tingling wail reverberated through the hills, echoed and returned softly. The hair on my arms stood on end and my flesh crept.

Scumble slapped his prisoner viciously. 'Shut the fuck up, fag.'

Jon sobbed silently

'What's the plan?' asked Glaze.

'There's a ladder over there. He's been repairing the roof, see? I'll take off a couple of tiles, put his builder's apron on him, carry him up and throw him down. Poor bugger slipped while repairing the roof.' He shook his head in mock sorrow.

'Might not kill him.'

'I'll snap his neck first. Always a good party trick. Ever seen it done? Makes an interesting noise.'

'Won't the cops know?'

'Not unless you go on kicking him around and giving him the wrong sort of bruises.'

'Well get going before he strangles himself. I'll guard while you set it up.'

Glaze picked up a rifle from the grass, eyes flicking everywhere. My hedge felt transparent so I forced myself to look down. Eyes and faces catch attention. I was lucky the sun wasn't up and Jeff had given me a dark tracksuit. When I dared to look, Glaze was squatting on the ground with his back to me. Scumble appeared in the clearing and trotted across to the studio, returning with a

hammer, pinch bar, nails, and an apron that he dumped beside Glaze. The other gear he carried to the front, out of sight. A thump announced the ladder's falling against the guttering and I watched hopelessly as his head appeared over the ridge of the roof before disappearing again as he bent to prise off tiles.

I reckoned my best hope would be to overpower Glaze while he was putting the apron on Jon, but he was waiting for Scumble. Fear made me desperate for a piss, but at least I forgot my pains. Der's knife was open and ready, but it would probably fold up and amputate my fingers if I tried to stab. Powerlessness paralyses. I was five metres from my best friend who was trussed up ready to have his neck snapped by two blokes who had already attempted to murder me, and I was doing nothing! Why hadn't I listened to the Alconas? Why hadn't I told them to call the cops? Why bloody why?

Jon groaned. Glaze raised a foot as if to lay in the boot, thought better of it, and turned away in contempt. I dithered and wondered what to do. I didn't dare move and there wasn't a weapon in reach. The gun complicated everything. A clatter disturbed the peace as Scumble threw the tools down in front of the house. Half a dozen tiles followed before he climbed down and strutted back, feet apart, hands on self-satisfied hips, smiling cheerfully down at his victim.

'Ready for the high jump, faggot?'

No response.

'Right, Bob, pass the apron.'

'Shouldn't you break his neck first?'

'Good idea.'

I had taken a huge breath and was on the point of hurling a blood-curdling war cry and myself in a Kamikaze all-or-nothing rescue bid, when the sound of a car skidding to a halt on the other side of the house, made the two thugs freeze. The car door slammed and a voice shouted, 'Come out you thieving pervert! I know you're in there! Max's car – stolen property! Come out you load of rat shit!' A gunshot echoed around the valley. 'Come out, blast you or I'll bloody well come in and get you!'

'Sort it quick!' ordered Scumble, stuffing his handkerchief into Jon's mouth and shoving him into the bushes a couple of metres in front of me. I held my breath. Jon's eyes, already popping from near strangulation, opened even wider when he saw me. Sitting on the ground in front of us facing the studio, Scumble's bulk would conceal his prisoner's trussed body from the view of anyone who might come round the corner.

We could hear Glaze striving to pacify Patrick – because it could only be him – and Patrick's increasingly hysterical responses. Using the distraction as a cover I eased forward and was just starting to cut the ropes when another gunshot shattered the peace, followed by a yell of fury from Glaze. Scumble leaped to his feet, grabbed the rifle and took off.

It took twenty endless seconds to sever the ropes, rip out the gag and drag Jon through the hedge before running like hares up through the trees towards the ridge and Rory's. Jon never faltered, didn't ask how I had risen from the dead, just saw his chance and took it. Time for questions if we survived - unlike adventure films when I was a kid. A bloke and a girl would be escaping ravaging wolves, erupting volcanoes or pursuing crooks, and she'd stop and start arguing, asking questions, complaining she wasn't being treated with respect. The bloke would keep his temper, pander to her idiocies, take on the burden of worry and effort and even manage a good tempered joke that never failed to infuriate. It was always despite the woman they survived. The odd thing was that none of my friends thought the woman's behaviour was odd.

At the top of the ridge, instead of dropping down to Rory's I turned north along the boundary. An act of utter stupidity. Jon followed unquestioningly. Later, when he asked why we'd gone that way, I told him I hadn't wanted to involve Rory and Lida in any danger, police questioning, or court-cases. In reality I was a hen without a head, pursued by nameless fear, rushing headlong into inhospitable forests rather than using common sense.

The boundary was an overgrown surveyor's sight-line through lantana, vines and scrubby regrowth. When I first took possession of the block I couldn't believe I owned such a vast area. I kept expecting someone to knock at the door and say there'd been a mistake. How could one person own twelve hectares all for himself? I soon realised I didn't 'own' it at all. I was the temporary custodian; neither welcome nor unwelcome, simply another factor in the equation of nature.

If you sit still, even for a few minutes and quietly view how the natural inhabitants of Australian forests go about maintaining their lives, it doesn't take long to realise that nature's not there for the benefit of humans – it's there for itself. William Lines' observation in his book, *An all Consuming Passion* is correct. The true habitat for humans is culture, not nature. What natural being would knowingly disrupt and displace life wherever they went, clear forests, alter habitats to favour some species over others, poison soil, air and water and precipitate the greatest extinction of life since the world began?

After fifteen minutes of dragging ourselves up hills and down gullies, we turned east along another ridge into the rising sun. Five minutes later we dropped onto the grass on the crest of a small hill, a couple of hundred metres behind the dam. I used to swim across with a towel and a book in a plastic bag, climb the rise and gaze back in ecstatic disbelief at my cottage while I was building it. Although trees and bushes had grown over the years, the cottage in its clearing was still just visible. We flopped onto our bellies and peered across the water.

'There they are,' Jon whispered.

Two figures were combing the trees and shrubs around the cottage, meeting up and talking together after each ever-widening circuit. Muffled calls and indistinct curses floated across the stillness. After about ten minutes they waved their hands around, seemed to be arguing, and Scumble pointed at a lump on the ground. Suddenly in a hurry, they dragged the lump, which I guessed must be Patrick, to the rear of his own car and heaved it into the boot. After a last look around, Scumble climbed into Patrick's car and Glaze picked up a handful of something wriggly before following Scumble up the drive in my Mercedes.

Disintegration. Shudders wrenched my shoulders as though someone was physically shaking me, and I had to hug myself to stop my arms from flailing. I'm having an epileptic fit! I thought, conscious of what was going on, but unable to do anything about it. I know I was sobbing and I'm pretty sure I was dribbling. But I wasn't hurting. I turned away but Jon held me until the convulsions subsided, leaving me exhausted and aching. At least I hadn't pissed myself. Ashamed, I averted my face. Jon was still holding me.

'No worries. Everything's fine. We're safe...' he muttered again and again, hypnotising, calming.

Suddenly I felt angry. I thought, What the fuck's he doing? I'm not a baby. This is ridiculous! And then the dams burst again. The brain has few ways of exorcising bad experiences - mainly dreams and lots of sobbing, ranting and shuddering, so Jon suffered several more mucky moments until this second, blessedly brief episode was over. I was still tired, hurting, angry and frightened, but the panic had passed.

He disentangled himself, pulled out a handkerchief and set about cleaning up my face.

'Those guys had me worried for a bit,' he said casually, 'I thought you'd karked it and I wouldn't get rescued.'

Manic laughter burst from somewhere inside me. I couldn't speak.

'What's so funny?'

'Mr Cool.'

'Can't afford to emulate your performance - we haven't enough handkerchiefs.' He looked me over. 'You've been in the wars. Bark knocked off here and there. You're limping and either you've shat yourself or there's something dicky up the crapper. Wanna talk about it?'

'No.'

'Too fucking bad, mate. You're going to unless you want me to add to your woes.'

I told him enough to bring back the shudders.

‘You couldn’t get me on the phone because I wasn’t there. I couldn’t sleep, so at five o’clock I went for a jog out to the main road and back, took a dip in the dam and was making breakfast when I heard your car. I walked straight into their arms.’ He shook his head. ‘That’s the second time you’ve saved my life, the debt burden’s growing.’

‘We’ve been through that! No debts, remember? Anyway, you’ve got it arse about face. You saved me. It was my pig-headedness that got us into this shit. And the only reason I was able to drag myself out of that fucking drain and haul my arse up the hill to the Alcona’s, was the thought that you were in danger. That’s what saved me! So we’re square. Understood?’

Jon’s stare was expressionless.

‘I know this is going to sound gooey,’ I continued grimly, ‘and you’ll probably feel threatened, but... I love you!’

No audible reaction, and I was too shy to look. After such an embarrassing confession, future options were limited. The embarrassing silence indicated that if we ever got out of the present mess he’d return to the relative sanity and safety of Brisbane and I’d... what? What could I do? Max’s murderers wanted me dead - thought I was dead - and wouldn’t hesitate to try again if they discovered I wasn’t. And who cared anyway? I gazed across to the cottage, brain empty.

‘Yeah, well... they reckon people say strange things when they’re hysterical, so we’ll ignore that. But next time someone needs saving, it’s my turn, OK?’

‘You’re staying?’

‘Can’t see why not.’ He plonked a quick kiss on my brow and grunted a laugh. ‘That surprised you.’

It certainly shut me up.

‘More to the point, you’re in need of a few running repairs.’ He checked the weeping wounds, rubbing antiseptic cream where required, replaced damaged plasters and bandages, then - ‘Lift your hips.’ He peeled down my tracksuit trousers, lifted my legs and let out a low whistle. ‘I don’t envy you crapping through that for a while. He applied some of Mad’s ointment and put me back together again. ‘You’ll do. Battered but lovable. In a week you’ll be as good as new.’

I lay back, contented. That sort of attention was worth any pain.

‘So,’ he murmured, ‘now we know how Max died. Glaze shoved him. I knew he’d never fall.’

‘Mad said the same thing.’

‘But how could they know he’d go up to the dome?’

‘It was Max’s baby. No one was allowed to touch the thing. Frances’d know that if it failed to open he’d be up there in a flash, so made sure it didn’t. Anyone who knew Max would also realise he’d never miss a chance to grand-stand.’

We sat in silence. I wondered why I didn’t feel worse, then looked across at Jon. A trouble shared is a trouble halved, my grandmother always warned before launching into a barrage of complaints. How right she was. But there was one question I needed to ask. ‘What were you thinking when Scumble was about to break your neck?’

Jon grunted. ‘That’s funny. I was going to ask you the same thing.’ He shook his head in disbelief. ‘I didn’t think anything. All I remember is that when they said you were dead, I wanted to die too. After that, it’s a blank. What about you on the edge of the cliff with a dozer ready to dump rubble onto the body-beautiful?’

‘I didn’t believe it. I think I felt cheated, but I was too busy planning what to do when I fell over the edge to consider death a possibility. You read about people having their lives flash before them; it didn’t happen. Now it just feels like a bad dream. I still can’t believe people will do such terrible things - have such callous disregard for others simply for money! There’s no place in my brain for understanding such obscenity.’

‘Do you have these speeches pre-recorded in your head, or are they off the cuff?’

‘Gift of the gab.’

‘Gift of the blab.’

‘That’s the last time I offer you the benefit of my brain.’

‘Promise?’

‘Bastard.’

We turned our minds to our predicament. I was dead. Jon had escaped. The wriggling things were the ropes I’d cut, so they knew he had an accomplice. Patrick was either a prisoner or dead. I suddenly felt sorry for him. We owed our lives to his bad tempered bigotry.

‘What would you do if you were them?’ Jon asked.

‘You’re the bloke who’s roughed it in Brisbane. Tell me.’

‘I’d check out the neighbours. Who else could’ve snuck up and cut my ropes? I’d put a watch on the cottage and on the road, and bring in reinforcements to comb through this place.’

‘So we don’t go back to the cottage?’

‘Can you see over the hill to the gate? How do we know someone isn’t lying low, watching?’

‘How long have we got?’

‘No time. Your telephone works perfectly. Frances has a mobile. They must know at least half a dozen thugs ready to do anything for cash.’

‘So we don’t go back along the road. We don’t visit Rory and Lida. Have you had breakfast?’

‘A couple of mouthfuls.’

We downed Mad’s bread, cheese and coffee, slithered down to the dam under cover of shrubs, filled the flask, and packed the biscuits for later. Rested, slightly refreshed, absurdly cheerful, we took one last look across the water. Jon grabbed my arm.

‘See that?’

‘Where?’

‘Beyond the cottage.’

Sunlight slanting through the trees sent golden shafts across the grevilleas, rebounded off pale clusters of eucalypt flowers, spot-lit a flock of quarrelling lorikeets and silhouetted two shapes stalking the edge of the clearing. They conferred, split up, and set out on a circuit of the dam. We took off north, into the forest.

Chapter Twelve

Ten minutes tramping through tree filled gullies, lantana clad ridges and scratchy re-growth, brought us to my boundary with the State Forest. The rusty barbed wire fence was unnecessary, but had come with the block. We’d seen no one and heard nothing. The going was now easier because thick undergrowth had been cleared and replaced by struggling grass. The widely spaced trees looked impressive, being thirty to forty years old and ready for milling, but there were only two or three different species and no visible animal life.

After about half an hour we stopped for a breather. The air was cool and still, no birds, frogs or crickets - just the occasional rustle of a lizard. I eased myself to the ground, leaned back against a tree and counted my aches. Jon dropped onto his stomach, head propped on hands.

‘It’s a damned sight more peaceful here than your place. Where are the birds?’

‘In the last hundred and fifty years this block’s been cut-over at least three times and each time more tree species lose out to the vigorous growers. Only a few dominant species are left and they don’t provide continuous food for financially unrewarding things like birds and honey gliders. It’s either a famine or a glut. When they flower, the air shimmers with screeching flocks of lorikeets and other nectar-eaters; in between it’s a zoological dessert. It’s called sustainable logging.’

A stifled giggle stopped me. Jon was gazing up innocently.

‘What’s so funny?’

‘Nothing.’

'You're laughing at me.'

'Never.'

'I feel silly.'

'I feel randy.'

'It's lying on your belly.'

'It's listening to you.'

'Am I raving?'

'Probably. I get a hard-on when you shift into lecturing mode.'

'Since when?'

'Since the first day.'

'But... you always denied...'

'Of course I did! I knew I wasn't queer. I was simply over-sexed from eating so well for a change.'

'Clever thinking. So... I've got a sexy voice?'

'Mmm. Not really - more a sexy intensity.'

'Not what you'd call a marketable talent.'

'There are... other things.'

'Go on.'

'Are you sure you can handle it?'

'I've been insulted by experts.'

'Well... I'm no expert, but even my inexperienced eyes can see you've got a sexy butt, chest, legs, head, belly, balls, cock, feet, hands, and nose.'

'Nothing else?'

'I'll probably discover more when I get to know you better.'

'I bloody well hope so. And when did you first realise the extent of my attractions?'

'The first night, after your shower. Instant hard on. Why do you think I was so sullen?'

'No idea.'

'You made me nervous.'

'About what?'

'I was worried you might think I was queer! That I was one of those horrible degenerates everyone's always warned me about. I knew I wasn't! I knew perfectly well it was simply the unusual combination of a near-death experience and being rescued, playing silly-buggers with my libido.'

'A student of psychobabble no less. This is fascinating. How could you be so sure you weren't a faggot?'

'That's easy. I'm not effeminate. I hate Kylie Minogue. I'm not even slightly interested in drag shows. Mardigras embarrasses me – except for the muscle-boys. I like playing football and other sports, heavy farm work, repairing engines, keeping fit... I like women.'

'Sexually?'

'Not yet. But I've always assumed that one magical day I'd meet the woman who would turn me on. I reckoned I was being selective – a connoisseur. Not that there's much selection in the bush. I've only met about fifty women socially in my entire life. I usually like talking to them though, buttering them up – you know - I've watched you.'

'That's called salesmanship.'

'It's called greasing.'

'Cheeky bugger. Find me a man who enjoys chatting with women, and I'll show you a poof. Heterosexual men only like yarning with other men.'

'So, I'm queer.'

'Perfectly.'

'Perfectly stupid.'

‘Perfect same-sex-oriented male.’

‘Wow!’

‘Also beau, fort, intelligent et grand.’

‘Handsome, strong, intelligent and tall?’

‘Perfectly.’

‘Yeah... well of course I knew that, but...’

‘Arrogant prick.’

‘But perfectly arrogant.’

‘True. However, we still have a problem.’

‘And that is?’

‘Your dead rooster. It might interfere with our escape.’

‘But, Sir... I’m a virgin.’

‘Your agony is about to end. Disrobe.’

The tracksuit and trainers were off in seconds and I gave my full attention to his relief, to be rewarded very quickly with all the usual shudders, gasps and sighs.

‘Aahh! That’s the best orgasm I have ever endured. Teach me the trick.’

‘Cost you.’

‘No price is too high.’

‘You’ve already paid something, your ribs are black and blue and I think at least one is cracked.’

‘Yeah, feels like it.’

‘Why didn’t you mention it?’

‘Waiting for an opportune moment.’

‘Perfectly tough as well.’

There was a roll of elasticised bandage in the first-aid kit, so I strapped the empurpling chest as tightly as I dared. We were heading, I hoped, for Hank and Celia’s. I figured that after talking to Jon, Hank had confronted his son with my suspicions and, after mulling it over all night, Patrick had driven over to pay me back for blabbing. Poetic justice. He’d be furious if he knew he had blown his chance to get rid of me forever.

‘What’re you smiling at?’

I told him, and outlined my plan.

‘I like Hank.’

‘You’ll like Celia too. I know Patrick’s an arsehole of the first order, but I guess someone has to tell his parents. Christ I was stupid not to contact the cops. Why didn’t I get Mad to ring them after I left? Why didn’t we go straight to Rory and Lida and telephone from there instead of cutting out here? I’m insane! If we ever make it to the police they’re going to think it’s bloody suspicious, so before I do anything else I want to get Hank’s advice. He’s a lawyer.’

‘I’m glad we didn’t run to Rory and Lida.’

‘You’re having me on.’

‘No way! This is beaut. Thrills, problems to solve, doing it rough.’ He glanced at my look of disbelief. ‘Yeah, I know things got a bit hairy back there – worse for you – but think of the stories you’ll be able to tell your nephews.’

‘I’m an only child.’

‘You can borrow mine. Now, which way and how far?’

‘About twenty k’s as the crow flies, forty the way we’re going. You up to it?’

‘You’re the weak link. But never fear, I’ll carry you through the desert.’

‘Promises, promises. Weak link indeed.’

‘Which way’s north?’

‘Got a watch?’

We had neither watch nor compass so took a wild stab and set off.

It wasn't critical. As far as I could remember from the map I used to have hanging above my bed, if we headed roughly north we should hit an east-west logging track that we could follow west before hitting a north-south, secondary state-road. I'd always intended to tramp the forests, but not totally unprepared. It's just as well adventures are sometimes thrust upon us, we'd never choose them in the ordinary course of events and our lives would be the poorer.

A short time after I bought the property I trekked to my back boundary at night-fall and became so confused in the darkness I couldn't find my way back, even though it was no more than seven hundred metres. I blundered around, gave up and spent an itchy night with spiders, bush-rats, ants, wallabies, monitors and innumerable rustles. It got pretty cold, but I wouldn't have missed it for anything. Mind you, I've never done it again.

We meandered. The featurelessness of regrowth forest paralyses the senses and without some means of correcting one's direction there's little likelihood of travelling in a straight line. We tried to keep the sun at the same angle, but even a slight variation soon adds up to a large deviation and it was well after midday before we hit the forestry road – a rough, gravelled track. Unfortunately, what the map on my wall hadn't shown were the side tracks that kept branching off. If they'd been used recently they looked as important as the main track.

We took it in turns to decide which looked like the proper one and the sun was setting before we admitted to a prodigious fuck-up. We hadn't found water, hadn't seen any loggers, and had no idea where we were. After sharing half the packet of biscuits, finishing the water, scrabbling piles of bracken and grass together for a mattress and heaping a rough tepee with leaves, grass and anything else we vainly hoped would keep off cold and dew, we huddled down, hungry and thirsty, for a long night.

It got cold very quickly. Lying in any position was painful for both of us, but Jon reckoned his circulation was the best and I needed the most mollycoddling, so we ended up curled on our sides, me in front, he encircling my back. I had a warmish back, chest and right shoulder; freezing thighs and left shoulder. Jon, a warm chest and that's about all. He never complained, even about the trillion mosquitoes that bugged us all night. Having endured forty-eight hours with virtually no sleep, I dropped straight off, waking sometime in the middle of the night dying for piss, but hanging on so I wouldn't waste body-warmth.

Despite everything, we slept in snatches till first light, when it took a fair bit of stretching, bending and arm slapping to restore circulation. Only the promise of the remaining chocolate biscuits sustained our sunken spirits. Jon extracted the packet from its safe place in the fork of a tree and hurled it down at me in fury, shouting abuse at my stupidity for letting him put it there. The contents had been spirited away by a marauding thief of the night. Being evenly matched in the verbal stakes, our first slanging match was memorable - warming the insides and leaving us relaxed.

In the pre-dawn light I checked my battered body. Everything seemed OK except for a yellowing bulge of pus on my ankle. We sliced it open and applied some antiseptic. My ring felt a hell of a lot better, and so did my spirits. I had my life, the possibility of a future with Jon, a great place to live – everything I wanted. Hank would solve any other problems. Jon wouldn't let me look at his ribs, said it was too cold. He was going to need watching.

Sunrise was about six-thirty. We jammed a stick in the ground, checked the shadow and set off west. Well, north-west, because that's where the track went, winding up and down, hither and yon as it followed ridges, dropped into valley heads where puddles let us quench our thirst, and cut swathes up to yet other ridges. After several kilometres it branched - north and west. Yielding not to temptation we continued west, making good progress for several kilometres before the track zigzagged down into a deep valley.

There was plenty of water now in culverts as the sclerophyll forest gave way to rainforest remnant. Ferns, palms and broadleaf trees hugged the wet depths of gullies. Birds sang and we joined in. We were obviously descending to the river valley, so the main road that followed it was only a short distance away. All was well.

The track ended at a pile of logs, a scattering of cans and a rusty tow-bar in the centre of a muddy turn-around. My septic foot burst into flame, my stomach wrenched and I hurled curses to the heavens. It was at least two hours since the last turn-off back up on the ridge. We couldn't go back. Jon stood in the middle, hands on hips, gazing around. It was a dispiriting spot. Weeds choked all hope of native plant regeneration, puddles of stagnant water glistened with oil slick, and the air was still, sunless and cold.

'Sit down and put your feet up. I'll scout around.'

'I'm not going back.'

'Neither am I, so shut up and do as you're told.'

I did, and would have fallen asleep if a swarm of mosquitoes hadn't arrived for a meal. Slapping and jiggling kept me warm until a faint 'coo-ee' guided me through a couple of hundred metres of rank weeds and regrowth to Jon, standing at the edge of about ten hectares of moonscape.

'We're out of the forest, but what on earth's this?'

'Looks like an old pineapple plantation. The government encourages landowners to clear trees and plant cash crops. Most go for pineapples but they're gross feeders and attractive to pests, so without massive poison-spraying regimes and fertilisers the crops fail and this is what's left. It's called developing the land. These places stay toxic for years. To stop their tractors rolling over they plough the furrows up and down the slope, so the erosion's horrendous. Just try not to drink the water down-stream. The poor bastards who buy these blocks and build houses, fall prey to all sorts of chronic ailments.'

Jon stared in disbelief. 'Every day I'm confronted by greater insanities. Back home we always assumed you guys on the coast knew a thing or two. We were the fuckwits degrading the land, causing salination, destroying the ecosystems. Boy, were we misinformed. It's worse here than the bush.'

'You won't find many who'll agree with that assessment, but where there's cultivation there's settlement, a cosy fire, food and comfort. Find the homestead.'

It was simple enough. A trail of broken fences, drunken gates, overgrown tracks and eroded earth led to what must once have been the busy hub of the farm. A rusting panel-van listed gracelessly on its patch of oily ground, spare parts for long forgotten implements and vehicles lay abandoned in rusting heaps of rejection, a sheet of iron flapped, a chicken cackled, three black crows clung to a sagging fence rail, their baleful eyes accusing as they offered up the occasional disgusted caw, and an indefinable stench lay like a rotten blanket over the land.

On the far side of the clearing a rusting corrugated iron shed leaned against a drunkenly askew verandah. Maggot infested sheepskins adorned the sagging railing. The steps had rotted out.

'The place is abandoned.'

Jon headed for the shed, then stopped and beckoned me over. On one of a pair of ancient easy chairs spewing greasy stuffing onto the filthy deck, sprawled an impressive beer gut. It was asleep. Bubbles of saliva burst over slack lips each time a wheezy breath was exhaled. Fat red legs splayed from once green shorts. Limp fat hands hung from short, red-veined arms jutting over the armrests. We stared, enthralled.

'Look at his navel,' Jon whispered reverentially. 'It's as large as a saucer.' And indeed it was. Massive breasts, capped by distended nipples, hung diagonally to each side of the belly under a shimmer of coarse reddish hair. Above, the tiny half-circle of gristle that marked an unshaven chin, dissolved in concentric rings of fat into neck and ruddy chest. Colossal flabs of fat at each side forced his arms out from his body. He snorted, dribbled, grunted and shuddered rhythmically. Neither of us dared disturb him.

'Wananotherbeer Arn?' The voice was nasal, tired and flat. Getting no reply, its owner poked her head out the door. 'About bloody time youse got here. We've been waitin' days. It's in there.' She nodded vaguely towards the evil-smelling interior.

'What is?' I asked.

‘The fuckin’ phone youse’re gunna fix.’ The words may have been aggressive, but the delivery was dead, falling from slack lips like a liturgical response. Her eyes strayed slightly, unfocussed and loose. A hand-rolled cigarette, unlit, was stuck to her lower lip.

‘Sorry, it’s not us, we...’

‘Who the hell are youse then?’ she sighed with not the slightest interest in our response, before landing a weak kick on Arn’s leg and placing a can on the stool beside him. ‘Want one?’ she inquired in the same dispirited tones, dropping into the other chair. She was almost as fat as her husband, but whereas he seemed tight, almost ready to burst, she was a soft elastic bag of fat that bounced, sagged, flowed and squeezed into all the available space. Her only garment, a flowered housecoat, was dragged across massive bosoms and fastened in place with safety pins. The lower one wasn’t low enough and, as she sank back, the full glory of her thighs was exposed like multi-headed ice creams atop the insufficient cones of lower legs. Pinkly fat knees, a bulge of bluish cream and a larger bulge of vanilla.

‘No thanks. Wouldn’t mind a slice of bread.’

‘Bread?’ she repeated as though she’d never heard of the stuff. ‘What day’s it?’

‘Wednesday.’

‘No bread till tomorrer.’

We tried to explain our predicament, but she didn’t appear to be listening.

‘Mightn’t even get anything tomorrer. Can’t phone the order, see? Jilly might do it from school, but she’s not too bright.’

‘How did Jilly get to school?’

‘Bus.’

‘Will it take passengers?’

‘Nuh. Not insured or some fuckin’ thing.’ She roused herself enough to look almost interested and asked, ‘Where’s ya car? Take us into town?’

Before we could respond she thrust a dimpled hand into her cleavage, scabbled around, flicked out a large cockroach, sagged back into her seat, yelled, ‘Arn!’ then pointed inside. ‘Get yerselves somethin’ter eat if ya like. Arn! Ya beer’s gettin’ warm!’

Arn snorted, felt around for his beer and took a sip before nodding at us and muttering, ‘Giddyay. Fuckin’ phone’s always on the blink. Gunna rain?’

We nodded, went inside, checked out the dirty planks that served for a bench, the bucket of slops, the greasy crates standing in for cupboards, the grime-streaked fridge and the shaky, plastic-covered table littered with meals past. Nothing I could bear to touch. Jon picked up an opened packet of shortbread and shook one into his hand. A cockroach scuttled out with it but the rest of the biscuits looked clean enough so we shared them, returned to the relatively clean air on the verandah, thanked our hosts, avoided a handshake, promised to give the phone-boys a buzz, and followed vague waves in the direction of a distant gate. It took several minutes of deep breathing and total expulsion of air before I could rid myself of the foul air.

The rest was easy. Two kilometres of clay road led past several farm gates and over a stream before becoming sealed. Another two kilometres and we were at the junction with the road we were looking for. We’d seen no one till then except farmers on tractors in the distance.

‘What now?’

There was no money in the pack so we had no choice. Making ourselves as presentable as possible and gluing radiant smiles to our washed but unshaven faces, we walked north. Half an hour later, an elderly bloke picked us up in his decadently comfortable new Citroen. We admired, praised and congratulated him on his taste as we drifted along at about twenty kilometres an hour. This road couldn’t be seen from Hank’s place because of the low hills in between, but by looking up to the ridge I should be able to recognise a distinguishing feature or building.

Jon kept up the chatter while I checked out the land to the east. After several kilometres another state forest appeared on our right, jumped the road and surrounded us. This was probably the one

visible from the lounge. As soon as it stopped, open grassland gave views up an incline to the lightly wooded hills above. There, standing out like dog's balls, was a two-storeyed monstrosity I recognised. It was about a kilometre from Hank's, on the same road.

Our driver floated his vehicle to a halt. We thanked him, clambered out, raced across the road, waved goodbye and set off up the hill between recently sprayed and evil-smelling groundsel, patches of swamp around a leaking dam and through an unthrifty grove of macadamias.

Half an hour later we helped each other through the last fence and staggered up the remaining few hundred metres, aches forgotten in the overwhelming relief of arriving. As we passed the pump-house by the dam, Jon grabbed my arm. The house was a hundred metres away, slightly above us on high stumps and we could see underneath to the parking area on the other side.

'That's a cop car up there. What'll we do?'

Every remembered tale of police corruption and involvement in crime set fear, doubt and insecurity slamming into my guts. I sagged onto the grass. 'Let's wait till they've gone.'

Two hours later, almost mad with hunger, we hauled ourselves to the door and knocked.

Chapter Thirteen

'Peter! What're you...? What...?' Hank frowned and looked nervously up the drive. 'The police have just gone. They...they...'. He shook his head worriedly. 'You'd better come in.'

We stood in the hallway - awkward.

'Who is it, Hank?' called Celia, her voice tremulous.

Hank coughed uncertainly and didn't reply.

I wanted to shout, It's me! Peter! But controlled myself and said quietly, 'We couldn't let you know we were coming. Things have been a bit dodgy.'

'So I believe.'

I couldn't work out what was happening. Hank seemed almost unfriendly, suspicious, uncertain.

'Who is it?' Celia again; voice cracked, querulous.

'It's Peter.'

Silence.

Lack of sleep, festering wounds and physical exhaustion had me out on the edge. I looked at Jon in despair.

He took my arm and said quietly, 'We've arrived at a bad time, Peter. Let's go.'

'Peter.' Celia came in and stood beside her husband, voice low and serious, eyes fixed on mine.

'The police have just left. They came to tell us that Frances is dead. They said you murdered her.'

I suppose I looked as blank as I felt.

'That's bloody ridiculous!' shouted Jon. 'How can anyone who calls themselves a friend...'

I put my hand on his. 'And what do you think, Celia?'

'I find it difficult to believe.'

'How difficult?'

She burst into sobs and hugged me, burying her head in my chest. 'Impossible! You could never do such a thing. Forgive me. It's just that the police were so insistent and... and Patrick isn't answering our calls.'

I looked over her shoulder at Hank.

He frowned deeply and said apologetically, 'In my heart, I knew it was ridiculous, but the police are adamant it was you. They say they have proof!'

'Proof? What proof?'

'MacFife saw you and... and your friend driving away from the gallery in the early hours of the morning - just after Frances was murdered.'

It was too stupid for words. 'But I didn't even know she was dead! How could...'

Jon interrupted brusquely. 'I'm Jonathan, Mr Fierney, Jon Moore. Remember we met the other day at Peter's. I didn't realise who you were then, but I knew Max. He befriended me when I first arrived on the coast. I worked for him.'

Celia gazed at Jon, uncomprehending, then took hold of her husband as if for support. 'You knew Max?'

'Yes. He was the kindest and best man I've ever known – until Peter.' Jon hurled the last two words like missiles, then stood still, daring them to disagree.

Hank and Celia stared, searching his eyes for something. They didn't find it and with a small cry Celia turned away as if ashamed. Hank bent to comfort her and suddenly I realised they were old - old and tired.

'Peter's on his last legs.' Jon said gently 'His wounds need dressing and we're both hungry and thirsty. We've just walked from his place.'

They looked up sharply.

'And neither of us is a murderer.'

'No. No, of course you're not.' Hanks' voice was almost inaudible 'I'm sorry. Terribly, terribly sorry. Come through... come through...' He turned and shuffled into the lounge.

We followed, embarrassed. I was light headed, dizzy, and couldn't think what to say.

'Mr Fierney,' Jon said firmly, 'can you look after Peter? I'll help Mrs Fierney prepare something to eat and drink, and then we'll tell you what really happened.'

He took Celia by the hand to the kitchen where crockery was soon clinking. Hank led me into the bathroom, visibly startled when I stripped. He bathed, disinfected and dressed my wounds and expressed concern about the infected ankle, but asked no questions.

The sandwiches were superb, the tea a fragrant elixir. We ate like starvelings. Afterwards we carried the dishes out to the kitchen and helped wash and clean up. I wanted to re-establish our old easy friendship before returning to the lounge and telling them Max's death had been murder, not an accident.

They listened to my tale quietly, too miserable to react. Hank was the first to break the silence.

'It makes sense,' he said wearily. 'Max was a mountain goat. He'd never have lost his footing. It had to be something like that. They found an old broomstick on the roof, I remember.'

I nodded miserably.

'And they tried to pull the same trick with you and Jon.' He looked at me, face white and drawn. 'Peter! Why do people do these things? What was it all about? And what's happened to Patrick?'

All I could offer was a hopeless shrug. 'I asked MacFife why. He reckoned it wasn't the money, it was the power money can buy.'

'Power over what? Over whom?' demanded Celia.

'Beats me. I've no idea what he wants the gallery for. Selling drugs? Money laundering? Frances was lying to Max when she said they were going to keep their noses clean – she was already in cahoots with MacFife. And when Max refused to play along they arranged an accident and got rid of him. Then they tried to do the same to me. As for Patrick, I've no idea where he might be. All I know is he saved our lives.'

'But... why would they take him with them?'

'Panic? He burst on the scene firing his gun, shouting and yelling abuse and threats. They had to silence him in case he identified them later. But I'm sure he was alive when they loaded him into the car.'

Celia stifled a sob. 'Mr MacFife can have no idea you're still alive, Peter, so that proves his guilt.'

Hank mused over this. 'You're right, Celia. It's a damned clever plot. Accuse a dead man of murder, so when he disappears his friends will assume he was guilty and did a runner. And if the coroner decided Jon's fall wasn't an accident, the cops would assume Peter got rid of him as well as Frances before taking off.'

'But thanks to luck and Patrick, we're still here.'

‘And wanted for murder.’ Jon muttered sombrely. ‘What exactly did McFife tell the police?’
Celia unwound a little from her cocoon of sadness.

‘He told them that he and Frances shared a belated wedding celebration at the gallery that evening with you and Peter. He left the party early, around seven o’clock, to meet someone in Caloundra, and didn’t get home till around four-thirty. He wasn’t worried about leaving Frances alone because you and Jon were sleeping in Max’s old room. He arrived home some time between half-past four and five.

As he pulled into the parking area, you two drove away in the Mercedes. He waved, but neither of you responded. You seemed in a great hurry. Not wanting to disturb his wife he curled up on the sofa in the lounge and fell asleep. At seven o’clock he woke and took her in a cup of coffee, but she wasn’t there. He found her in the gallery, at the bottom of the internal staircase. She had been sexually assaulted, tortured, and her neck was broken. He telephoned the police and reported the death.’ Celia took Hank’s hand, playing absently with his fingers.

I broke out in a sweat. It was too plausible. ‘When did she die?’

‘Between midnight and four a.m.’

‘The story’s too good! I was in Frances’s bedroom that evening until seven o’clock. There’s no way I can prove I was buried alive and trapped in the storm-water drains. Even my alibi with the Alconas doesn’t hold up because I didn’t get there till after four. We could have murdered Frances, faked my wounds, driven up to the Alconas and, while I was conning Mad and Brian to give me an alibi, Jon could have driven on up to the studio in the Mercedes on his own.

That would cover Scumble and Glaze if someone remembered seeing the vehicle on the road that morning. If anyone heard the gunshots, the neighbours would have assumed I was shooting hares. I often take pot shots in the mornings. As for the all-night meeting in Caloundra, Scumble and Glaze would provide an alibi. I’ll bet MacFife’s had something like this worked out for ages. Simply waited for an opportunity. He probably turned Frances over to those two animals as a reward when they returned from dumping me.’

‘Poor Frances,’ whispered Celia. ‘As ye sow...’

‘The only glitch occurred,’ I interrupted, unable to find any sympathy for Celia’s ex daughter-in-law, ‘when Patrick arrived. If there’d been an inquiry he could’ve identified them, so they knocked him out and took him away.’

‘Poor, silly Patrick,’ Celia interrupted sadly. ‘So hot-headed. At least some good came of it this time.’ When she looked up, tears were streaming. ‘Hank confronted him, you know, and he admitted setting your place alight and vandalising the studio.’ She shook her head, dabbed at her eyes and blew her nose. ‘He has marital problems - not that that gives him the slightest excuse. We hoped he would apologise and make good the damage. It seems he had decided to do neither.’ She turned miserably to Hank. ‘Darling, isn’t it strange he hasn’t been reported missing?’

‘His secretary will probably assume he’s taken the day off, she’s getting used to coping, and he’s been sleeping in the flat above his office so Margaret and the children won’t have missed him yet. I’ll ring and make certain he hasn’t returned, and then report him missing.’

‘And if he turns up dead, you know who’ll be blamed!’ snapped Jon. ‘The way Patrick arrived, shouting, cursing and letting fly with his rifle, it was perfectly obvious he nursed a deep grudge against Peter. The cops will assume Peter got rid of him too, because Rory and Lida, the neighbours, also know that it was Patrick who trashed the place.’ He stopped abruptly, embarrassed. ‘Sorry, I told them about our suspicions. It wasn’t till I phoned Peter on Sunday evening that I realised I should have kept my mouth shut.’

Tears ran unheeded as Celia buried her face in her husband’s arms. He stroked her hair helplessly. My brain was churning, trying to find a flaw, a chink in the case against me. I couldn’t.

‘The awful thing is,’ I said, ‘that it doesn’t really matter to MacFife that Jon escaped. He’ll still have the murder pinned on him, and when I don’t turn up he’ll be charged with murdering me as well. Have you an alibi for Monday night, Jon?’

He shook his head angrily. 'After telephoning you at five, I worked till it was dark then took a book to bed.' He shook his head in disbelief. 'MacFife looks so charming and pleasant.'

'Perhaps being able to murder at will is what he means by power,' said Celia chillingly.

I looked around. We were a tableau of impotence. I ran through everything again in my head, but MacFife had it all sewn up. It seemed impossible that it was less than forty-eight hours since the orgy in Frances's bedroom and Glaze had shoved me onto the beach.

The memory of the Alconas' generosity sent a spurt of shame. They'd be worried if they didn't hear from me. And we had to plan. It was impossible now for us to stay with Hank and Celia. They were exhausted and needed to be alone. And the cops were sure to return, knowing we were friends. I excused myself and telephoned from the kitchen.

Brian answered, the obvious relief in his voice exacerbating my guilt. I apologised for my tardiness and asked if he'd heard about Frances. After an alarmingly extended silence he said carefully, 'Yes. It was in the paper and on the news. You and a Jonathan Moore were named as being required to help the police with their inquiries. Anyone who knew of your whereabouts should contact the nearest police station. I'll read you a headline, Brutal Murder of Recently Married Gallery Owner. Police seek Director and Manager. I was waiting to hear from you before contacting them. You might need us to vouch for your whereabouts.'

'No good. I arrived at your place too late.'

Another weighty silence.

'If that's the case,' he said ponderously, 'then it would be better, in the short term, for you to remain dead – in MacFife's eyes – and on the run as far as the cops are concerned. I have every confidence in our police force, but they are under extreme pressure at the moment, what with all the looting and other fallout from the floods, and it's not inconceivable that MacFife's money and position may influence them more than your sincerity.'

'I'd decided the same thing and we've already made plans to lie low for a while.'

'Where?'

'I'll let you now.'

'Which means you've no idea.'

'I'm not an idiot.'

'No, you're not. That's why you'll stay with us until the matter's cleared up. The police are certain to be keeping an eye on Max's parents' place, in case you go there.'

I hesitated.

'When and where do we collect you?'

'Jon's with me. You can't take him as well, so thanks for the offer; it means more than you could ever guess, but honestly... we've got everything planned and... I'll keep in contact.'

Silence. Then, 'Would Jon fit in ... with us?'

'As well as I do.'

'I'll trust your judgement. Jeff will pick you both up this evening at seven o'clock. Give him directions.'

Jeff came on the line bubbling with relief. 'Peter! I've been shit scared something had happened to you. Your Mercedes passed me as I turned on to the highway. I've been going nuts worrying, and...' Muffled voices interrupted him and he came back, 'Dad's just told me to shut up and listen. I've got a map and pencil and paper, where's the rendezvous?'

I gave him directions to the place we'd been dropped that morning. As I couldn't pinpoint the exact spot, I told him to cruise up and down a couple of kilometres each side of it with the interior light on. We couldn't guarantee to be there exactly at seven because of the long hike down. We'd hide at the side of the road and flash a torch at him.

'Gotcha. See you in about three hours.'

I replaced the receiver shakily. What had I done to deserve such friends? I wondered whether I would behave as well if the roles were reversed. I told Jon and Celia the news while Hank

telephoned Patrick's secretary, and Jill, his wife. As neither woman knew his whereabouts, he informed the police Patrick was missing, taking care not to mention he'd been to my place. He appeared slightly calmer when he returned to the lounge. The process of righting wrong had begun.

Talk on other topics was impossible, so we went over the details again and again as though trying to undo the past and unlock the key to future justice. Hank, aware of the power of moneyed crooks, agreed it would be better to await developments before going to the police with our tale. Celia looked less than convinced.

'But, Peter,' she implored, 'why would Mr MacFife do that to Frances?'

'Would you like to live with her?' asked Jon tersely. 'He married her, so he'll inherit the gallery and all her assets. Why keep her?'

'Terrible. Terrible,' she murmured.

'Human nature asserting itself,' muttered Hank. 'Never underestimate the depths to which the avaricious will descend.'

'It's as if there are two totally different types of human beings – evil and good.'

'More like a continuum, from the inexpressibly horrible to the unimaginably good,' Hank said quietly. 'We each wobble around on a spot somewhere along that line, tending to meet similar types, insulated from people who are completely different. Lawyers, social workers, soldiers and police are among the few who get to see, first hand, the horrors humans are capable of.'

As though emptied of life, the elderly couple sat, softly sad. Polite protestations over our imminent departure couldn't conceal their relief at not being required to take responsibility for another two souls. We didn't tell them where we were going, and they didn't ask. Hank gave us his mobile phone number.

'I still have a few contacts. I can find out what, if anything, the police are doing, and perhaps some useful information. So you must keep in contact.'

There was time for a lie-down and meal before setting out to cross the rough terrain we had so laboriously traversed only six hours previously. Just after seven o'clock, sweaty, scratched and nervous, we hid ourselves in the long grass at the roadside. A couple of minutes and about ten cars later, the Volvo appeared, interior light burning. As I flashed my torch Jeff was passed by blinding headlights and missed the signal. A short time later he returned, saw our beacon and drew into the side of the road.

Chapter Fourteen

Jeff drove straight into the garage and closed the doors before putting on any lights. Jon and I unwound from the floor where we'd been concealing ourselves, and went through to the entrance hall. Jeff took the internal staircase upstairs. We stripped, hung everything in the vast wardrobe and, slightly nervous, let ourselves into the living area.

Until that evening I'd not talked about the Alconas to Jon, they'd been my secret to savour in miserable moments - proof that the entire human race wasn't composed of mindless consumers of self-destruction. I hadn't even introduced him to them at the opening of Mad's exhibition - we were still a bit wary of each other at that stage. Therefore, while we were resting on the spare bed at the Fierney's before going down to meet Jeff, I'd filled him in on the most important details.

'The Alconas are nudists. We'll have to be naked too,' I said casually.

'Good one. Hope they keep the place warm.'

Encouraged by his easy acceptance I told him about Hank's bad back, Mad's hairless body and Jeff's unrequited love life. He had nodded perfunctorily, emitting the usual grunts and responses we make when hearing news about mutual friends. Lastly, I described Der and Dra, the word-games they played, their light-hearted seriousness, and as though it was an unimportant afterthought added, they're very much in love and sleep together.'

Jon looked across at me with a dreamy smile, ran a finger softly across my cheek and whispered, 'That's beautiful. Remember I told you I moved my bed out to the washhouse?'

'Yes. Your homework.'

'That was the excuse. The real reason was because I had to share a bed with my brother and was worried I was turning into a pervert. I kept wanting to stroke and kiss him, lie against him and.... He's better looking than me. If I rolled over against him during the night he went berserk and used to hit out. I always acted bewildered innocence, but if Dad had discovered my feelings he'd have killed me.' Jon looked away. 'Literally. He would have killed me.' He turned back, smiling quietly. 'I think it's excellent about Der and Dra, and the whole family sounds very interesting, very pleasant and very special. So don't worry. I'll neither gossip nor disgrace myself.'

'I didn't think you would, but...'

'But you want to protect your friends. That's to be proud of. The large bedroom sounds cosy and loving. I haven't had much unconditional love in my life,' he murmured pensively, 'but enough to realise it's the only truly precious thing.'

The family was standing in a tight, nervous circle. Equally nervous, we stood before them.

'This is Jon, everyone. Jon, this is Mad.'

Jon took Mad's hand, smiled and said, 'You're as perfect as your drawings.'

She laughed lightly, and plonked an impulsive kiss on his cheek.

Brian's still fragile spine was supported by a surgical corset. Jon asked after his back, complimented him on what he'd seen of the house so far, and then twinkled, 'I love the lingerie, swap you for my bra.' We all burst out laughing. It was a ludicrous sight – a couple of naked men, one in a brassiere of bandages, the other in a corset.

Brian curtsied awkwardly, 'Wait till you see my bottom drawer.'

We all cracked up as Jon turned to Jeff. 'Chauffeur extraordinaire. You've saved my life twice in the last forty-eight hours. If I wasn't already spoken for I'd be yours.'

More laughter. It wasn't what he said, it was the way he said it. When he's in the mood Jon can make even the most banal sentence sound witty. He deposited a noisy kiss on Jeff's forehead and turned to the twins.

'You're exactly as Peter described,' he said seriously. 'Two halves of a perfect whole. Plus and minus, joy and solemnity, tension and relaxation. Wise indeed are those who know when they have found their mate.'

They stood before him; mystical celebrants, eyes shining, laughter on lips. For although it reads like sentimental tripe, as the words slipped from his lips they fluttered light-heartedly about the room, enchanting their targets. Suddenly shy, he turned to me for reassurance.

A babble of relief. By artlessly suggesting his hosts' anxieties were groundless, Jon had granted them absolution. Their fears had been exposed as phantoms. From that moment he was one of the family - a state he accepted as perfectly natural, whereas I'll go to the grave wondering how I deserved such friends.

All eyes turned to me, mainly because of the blood dribbling onto the polished floor and also because I fainted. It was partly the warmth, partly the stress of wanting Jon to be liked, and mostly everything that had happened over the last two days. I came to my senses on a plastic sheet on the dining table, encircled by concerned faces as Brian removed dressings, looked up seriously and said, 'Now, if this were a dog...'

'Hey! Watch it,' I grunted. 'I'm not...'

'Not much different. People think vets aren't as qualified as doctors, but we have to know the physiology of lots of different animals and perform surgery quite as complicated as most surgeons do on humans. I'd like to see them make an accurate diagnosis for a patient who can't tell them where it hurts.' He gave a snort. 'So watch it, Corringe, or we'll witness an amputation.' He looked up seriously. 'Speaking of which, this ankle is badly infected, it might be simpler if I did remove the foot. What do you reckon, Jeff?'

Jeff nodded. 'Off with it. Clean break with the past.'

Everyone else laughed, I couldn't. A sudden wave of nausea engulfed me as Brian swabbed and inspected.

'I'm sure it wasn't so bad when I dressed it,' murmured Mad.

'You were hardly expecting him to traipse fifty kilometres across rough country. He deserves what he gets, treating his body in such a cavalier fashion.' Jon took my hand and the pain lessened.

'It'll have to be stitched,' Brian murmured. 'I'll give you a local anaesthetic, but it could still hurt a bit.'

It did hurt, but not unbearably. He scraped everything out, tidied up the ragged edges, doused it with peroxide and sewed it back together. 'You just missed the tendon,' he announced cheerfully, snipping off the last thread. 'Another millimetre and you'd have been a cripple for life.'

The clarinet solo from Rossini's Variations filled the stillness, soothing shattered nerves with its daring.

When all my external bits had been stitched, cleaned and patched, Brian hoisted my legs. A collective sigh settled over the watchers.

'Jeeze, Peter, how have you been able to shit?

'I haven't dared.'

Apparently it looked worse than it was. Brian held a mirror and the pulpy, empurpled mess made me want to chunder. I wished I hadn't seen it.

'No splitting of the rectum, merely fissuring, minor infection, bruising and so on. Another couple of days and you'll be back to normal. Was it a hard or soft dildo?'

'Purple vinyl. Translucent and hugely realistic.'

'In the bad old days they were made of hard plastic and there were occasional cases of perforated rectums, or is it recta? Even bruising of the pelvis. Next time you visit MacFife get in a few rehearsals beforehand with a cucumber.'

My nether regions became the butt of several more tasteless jokes before I was released from the stirrups and helped to the sofa while Jon's bruises were checked, ribs strapped, and he was pronounced battered but healthy. A pair of crutches appeared for me and, after a much needed sponge bath and shave in the downstairs bathroom, we found ourselves tucked into bed in the study, sipping a warm milk drink.

'Had you planned that excellent speech?'

'No. I can never think of what to say till I'm in front of someone.'

'You've a silver tongue.'

Jon seemed pleased at the idea. 'As soon as I saw them I knew I liked them - so it was easy, thanks to you telling me about their little quirks. Without that I'd probably have made a balls-up.'

'Not likely. Any way, I'm proud to know you.'

'Now, that's a right purty thing to say to a simple country boy. Sweet talk like that deserves a little reward.'

It had to be very little; the flesh was willing but the spirit weak, and sleep almost instant.

The next four days were bliss. When we weren't on voyages of mutual discovery in bed, I rested my mistreated body on the lounge by the pool while Jon chatted to Mad in the studio, worked out on the home gym, swam, and prowled through the house. He kept returning to regale me with details of the ingenious design, excellent workmanship and cunning devices that made the house so special. Max had designed the place, and his brilliance showed.

Every day I telephoned Hank. He had nothing to report and Patrick had been declared a missing person; one of several hundred. Bodies were being washed up daily along the riverbanks or left behind by receding tides. One newspaper had labelled the area Corpse Coast, an epithet that might be hard to dislodge. Our conversations were short. I could think of nothing to say to relieve his misery and he never tried to prolong the call.

When the kids and Brian returned in the evenings, we played cards, talked, argued, discussed, and solved the major problems of the world. On Saturday, Jon and I received the ultimate compliment; trusted to be alone all day in the house while sports, markets and other family business took precedence.

On Sunday we drove about fifty kilometres into a National park; Jon and I hiding under blankets at the back until we were out of town. Towering, dank and fecund rainforest, a perched lake of crystalline amber, wildflowers on the wetlands and transparently clear skies transported me to a realm bordering on dementia. Jon was as bad. We held hands, flitted from tree to tree, hugged ferny tree trunks, swam and threw water at each other, burrowed under mountains of leaf-mulch, sang and laughed.

I'm not sure what the Alconas thought, certainly nothing censorious or I'd have felt it. It was a day for loving. Der and Dra took off somewhere, Mad and Brian wandered around dreamily, and Jeff disappeared for a while. I worried he might feel forlorn, but if he did it didn't show.

'I like being on my own from time to time,' he answered with a whimsical smile when I asked if he wanted to join us.

As always, the joy of forest, fresh air and freedom was overlaid with the melancholy of transience. But perhaps it's the impossibility of holding such experiences beyond the present moment that makes them priceless, as does the knowledge that every year these few wild spots are slipping from our grasp as they succumb to the predation of alien plants, animals and humans.

We returned refreshed, tired, sad, happy, and ready for revenge. It was time to make plans.

Chapter Fifteen

Monday the nineteenth of August dawned overcast, thundery, windy and cold. After breakfast, Brian removed the stitches, pronounced me fit and healthy and left with the kids for work and school. Jon and I joined Mad in the studio where she was rummaging in a large suitcase.

'Ah! This is what I'm looking for.' She held aloft a brown wig of short curls streaked with blond. 'I never waste money on hairdressers. Wigs are best if you want to look glamorous. Try it on.'

The transformation was miraculous. My eyes deepened, mouth and chin grew smaller, nose bigger. 'I fancy myself in this,' I laughed. 'What do you reckon, Jon?'

'Sort of hippie-cute. Depends what you wear with it.'

'Does it suit me?'

'If you want to look like Harpo Marx with a huge honk. Certainly doesn't hide your faults.'

'Careful, Jon,' laughed Mad. 'Surely you know one's lover has no faults?'

He shook his head in amazement. 'You need glasses, Mad.'

I dragged him to his knees in a headlock.

'It's ideal for the purpose,' Mad said equably, unperturbed by the fracas.

'What purpose?' he gurgled.

'To make Peter look non-threateningly dippy.'

'He already looks... aagh!'

'Do you want a broken neck?'

'Just kidding. You look scrumptious.'

'That's better.'

'Now, what about you, Jon?' Mad mused. 'That tawny mane has to go. What will it be? Skinhead?'

Protesting, but only from principle; most of us are glad of an excuse to change the way we look, Jon was shorn to the scalp. His eyes gleamed as he studied himself in the mirrors. 'Brilliant! What do you reckon?'

‘It glows like a newly risen moon. Calls for tattoos, and lots of piercing through nose, lips and ears.’

‘Not to mention eyebrows and tongue.’

‘Don’t worry, we won’t.’

‘What?’

‘Mention them.’

‘I’ll rub on some browning cream,’ said Mad. ‘Otherwise it’s obvious he’s just had it shaved.’

‘I reckon it was a mistake.’ My turn to cast doubt.

‘It does make him look rather criminal,’ Mad was pensive.

‘Mmm. I certainly wouldn’t have dragged him out of the drain if he’d looked like that the first time I saw him.’

‘But he does have an interesting head.’

‘If you’re into deformities.’

As with many charming, outgoing personalities, the reverse side of Jon’s character was deep insecurity. I caught his apprehensive frown and felt a rush of love. We reassured him with outrageous compliments and sorted through things to wear. I ended up in a white linen suit of Brian’s. It was a bit large but the bagginess added to the eccentric look. Cream walking shoes, steel-rimmed glasses and a slightly battered Panama hat completed the picture. Jon squeezed into skin-tight jeans, scuffed trainers, a multi-coloured waistcoat, and a choker of green glass beads.

‘One earring at least.’ Mad implored. He succumbed and sat, ears buried in plastic bags of ice while I prepared a needle, cork and flame. Mad looked in her trinket box for suitable jewellery and soaked them in alcohol. When he announced himself sufficiently numb, I held the cork behind his ear, sterilised the needle in the meths burner and plunged it three times into each ear. He hardly winced. Mad was ready and before he had time to protest, he was adorned with an assortment of rings, hooks and studs. As if in competition with the baubles, both ears turned bright red and began to swell.

‘The price of vanity, Jon. Dip them in antiseptic and keep the ice on. In half an hour you’ll have forgotten you were ever without them.’

Mirror sunglasses were almost gilding the lily.

‘I think I’m in love,’ he whispered half seriously, gazing at himself from every angle. ‘I’m irresistible. Isn’t there a danger I’ll be mobbed and raped if I go out?’

‘Yes.’

‘What do you reckon, Peter?’

‘I reckon we make a fascinating pair.’

‘Lucky we’re not trying to look like one.’

We had decided on espionage. The only things we knew about MacFife were that he was rich, drove a Porsche, now owned the gallery, and had a canvas palace somewhere in the hinterland hills where he’d taken Frances for naughty weekends. Our plan was to spy on him while acting as though we didn’t know each other. That way we could watch each other’s backs. I’d suggested dressing conventionally and trying to blend in, but Brian, an addict of crime fiction, had assured us that something completely different from normal would distract attention from any unconscious mannerisms that might otherwise give us away.

The previous night we’d walked around, sat down, stood and chatted to each other and tried to behave naturally in front of the family. Recognising someone has as much to do with posture and the way they hold their heads as knowing their facial features. That’s why it’s as easy to identify someone we know from behind as from the front. I tend to stand stiffly erect and walk with confident strides while gazing down my nose.

When our critics pointed this out, I practised hunching my shoulders slightly, shuffling just the smallest bit, not difficult as my ankle was still hurting, and tucking in my chin so I appeared to look up at people. I also cultivated the slightest of frowns, as though I wasn’t sure what was happening.

The spectacles were discarded. They were Brian's reading glasses and made me dizzy. He also suggested we try to copy the speech patterns of whoever we were talking to, thus avoiding speech recognition.

Jon is fluid. If you're not watching carefully you get the impression that instead of walking he melts down and reassembles himself further down the room. By trying to copy my usual gait he became awkward and gangly. Not that anyone knew Jon that well, their only contact had been to bash him around before hog-tying. Only Frances had ever looked at him closely, and she was dead.

Mad telephoned the local car rental company and within half an hour a small hatch-back, insured for multiple drivers, had been hired in her name and delivered to the front of the house. Meanwhile we practised our walks, stuffed cotton wool into my cheeks and under Jon's top lip, giving him a slightly buck-toothed look, slung a small rucksack over his shoulder, filled both it and my baggy pockets with 'could be useful' paraphernalia, and our disguises were complete.

After a quick morning tea we were ready to go. It was too cold to wear only the waistcoat, so Jon put on a psychedelic windbreaker of Der's, and I carried a plastic raincoat. It was eleven o'clock when I stopped the car a few blocks from the gallery.

'I'll go in and distract whoever's in charge. When it seems safe, you come in and nose around.'

Jon looked thoughtful, nodded slightly and said slowly, 'I've been thinking about what Brian said – you know, bread and butter; bacon and eggs; drugs and prostitution. The things that go together. I know we've no proof of either prostitution or drugs, but the way they treated you set me thinking - and all this ArtWorks nonsense could so easily be a front for something illegal.'

'So?'

'So... I've no idea how I'll act or what I'll say till the time comes. Just don't freak out. OK?'

'For god's sake be careful. These are mean people.'

'There's nothing to worry about unless you start laughing and give yourself away. I might just go in and out like a gormless galah, but then again...'

'I promise to stay in character. But be careful!'

With an impenetrable wink, he let himself out of the car and I drove on. I almost didn't recognise the place. The council had given up trying to stop the inevitable, so the piles of rubble had gone leaving a clear view of the new river, now over a hundred metres wide as it flowed between the still-growing island and the rocks below the rear car park. The gallery, perched only fifty metres from the edge of the cliff, was as imposing against the darkening sky as it had been in brilliant sunlight.

I parked on the road in front, expecting twinges of fear but feeling as though I was simply going back to work. Inside, only six of Mad's drawings and eight of Bill Smith's paintings remained. No new works had been added to the few Jon and I had hung. In the chilly air the walls looked undernourished. I was the sole patron and, as no one arrived to harass me, I pretended to browse until an elderly woman, bright red ringlets framing a mask of powder and paint, tottered towards me. A thigh length split in her turquoise brocade sheath exposed varicosed legs on wavering high heels. Clutching with scarlet talons at a lurex-spangled shawl, she offered smiling assistance. At least I think it was a smile, her teeth were bared, but it could have been in pain.

I enticed the crone to the furthest point from the entrance with chatter that suggested an interest in both her and the display, and kept her simpering while Jon sauntered in, looked in the storeroom, under the stairs and office. It was too easy. Mad had to take the rest of her drawings away immediately. The security was abysmal.

'What's in here?'

Startled by the harsh nasal whine the woman spun round and snapped, 'A staircase!'

'Where's it go?'

'None of your business!'

'Snappy old bitch,' Jon ground out nastily. 'They reckoned I could get some stuff here.'

'Get out! Get out!' she hissed, wobbling towards him. 'Or I'll call the police!'

‘Hey, hey, hey. There’s no need to be like that.’ Jon’s voice was silky, his mouth a leer as he removed his jacket, thrust his hips forward and caressed nipples and navel with his free hand until she was in front of him.

The woman’s mouth was a tight, twitching line.

Jon slid his fingers down the front of his jeans. ‘You don’t really want to call the cops. Not a good-time dame like you.’ He raised an eyebrow, gave a sardonic smile and rubbed suggestively at the bulge in his crotch.

She didn’t take her eyes off him. Neither did I.

‘A bloke at the pub told me to come here. Tough bugger.’ Jon described Scumble. ‘Told me I could get some stuff here. Said something about the... Arty display... or something.’

A flicker of doubt undermined the woman’s confident glare. ‘What do you mean... stuff?’

Jon closed one nostril and sniffed, ending with a leering wink and a repulsive clearing of throat as if ready to void a wad of phlegm onto the polished marble floor.

‘There’s nothing like that here,’ she snapped. ‘But if you don’t leave instantly I’ll go upstairs and get the owner.’

‘Yeah, you do that. Because the bloke also said that I’ve got something you guys want in exchange.’

Her sneer equalled his. ‘I can’t imagine someone like you would have anything to interest Mr MacFife.’

‘You reckon, do ya? What about these then?’ Unzipping his fly he flopped out his cods and posed provocatively, hands on hips, mouth a mocking curl, slit eyes calculating.

‘I can’t imagine what you mean! I’m getting Mr MacFife,’ she said angrily, casting an apologetic glance over her shoulder at me.

I shook my head at the decadence of today’s youth and indicated with a conspiratorial nod that I’d keep an eye on the place. She scurried upstairs. Jon just as quickly zipped himself up and took off down the road.

She returned within a minute followed by MacFife, as suavely handsome as ever. The sight brought sweat to my back and armpits and a wave of nausea that threatened to undo me. Heart thumping, certain I was going to be recognised, shoved under a passing steamroller and crushed to death, I manoeuvred myself into an ill-lit corner.

‘He’s gone,’ wailed the woman, looking across at me questioningly.

My voice refused to function. The sides of my throat were so dry they’d stuck together.

‘He took off as soon as you went upstairs,’ I managed to croak with a helpless shrug before turning back to gaze with round-shouldered intensity at one of Bill Smith’s more obscure works.

MacFife barely wasted a glance on me. ‘Ian’s going to regret that big mouth,’ he snapped before dropping his voice. ‘That.... . a risk.’ I sidled closer, ears straining. ‘...timerid... .’ He swung round and started back up the stairs, stopping just out of sight. ‘Cherie,’ he called impatiently. She scurried over.

‘Would he be any good?’

‘At what?’

‘Singing opera arias, you stupid bitch.’

Stung, she replied with hauteur, ‘Perfectly adequate. Rough and... disposable.’

‘He’ll be back. Send him straight up.’ MacFife disappeared

The woman nodded and turned to me. ‘I do apologise. I can’t imagine what the dreadful young man was talking about. This is a respectable gallery.’

I smiled my sympathy.

‘The youth of today. I don’t know. No respect. No...sensitivity.’

I nodded sage assent.

‘A new exhibition is opening next week,’ she gushed, desperate to distract. ‘Come to the opening?’ Red-taloned claws proffered an embossed card.

I studied it. 'Are you Cherie Culworth?'

'Si, si,' she simpered, pleased at my groaning recognition of the pun. 'I'm the curator.'

'Have you been with the gallery long?'

'Oh... ages. I live upstairs – wonderful views. But enough of me, you handsome young man,' she burred coyly, laying a bony claw on my arm. 'Is there any work here that interests you?'

Barely controlling an urge to slap her down, I constructed a collage of the best excuses I could remember for not buying anything, and shuffled towards the exit. As I opened the door, she repeated her invitation with a fluttering of mascara, and I assured her I wouldn't miss it for the world.

Jon was stamping his feet to combat the chill drizzle when I picked him up. We sat in the car with the heater on full blast.

'A tough old bag,' he said quietly.

'The idea of drugs on the premises didn't appear to astonish.'

'Wasn't too astonished by my dangly bits, either.'

'I made up for her. Did you find anything interesting?'

'There's a display unit in the storeroom with about twenty of those kitsch paintings you told me about, so they're obviously going ahead with whatever that scheme was. Nothing else. No bloodstains at the foot of the stairs, no sign of Patrick. Unless he's up on the roof?'

'Unlikely. I can't imagine even a brazen turd like MacFife would keep him at the gallery.'

'What happened when he came down? Were you nervous?'

'Shat myself.'

'Thought you would.'

'One of these days I'll beat the shit out of you.'

'If only. No, seriously, do you think he recognised you?'

'Didn't take a second look. Mind you, I don't suppose he was expecting to witness the resurrection. I tried to eavesdrop, but all I understood was something about a risk, he was mad at Scumble and they had to rid themselves of something. Could be Patrick, could be a poorly toilet-trained dog, could be Scumble. Then when he'd forgotten I was there, he asked if you'd be any good at it.'

'And what did she say?'

'Adequate – and disposable.'

'Damned by faint praise. Chilling, though.'

'Indeed. He said to send you up when you came back. That was some display, by the way.'

'Yeah.'

'Wanna talk about it?'

'Later, when I've had time to think.'

'Fair enough.'

We drove into town through curving streets flanked by slumping, desolate, vandalised canal homes. The depressing sight didn't, however, prepare me for the main shopping and business district. When the river mouth became plugged by debris, the entire flow had been redirected through the canal that ran under the entertainment complex and between the gigantic shopping centre and Kmart car parks. Within minutes it had burst its banks.

Towering apartment blocks on the foreshore had dammed the waters for nearly a day before their foundations collapsed and the resulting gigantic piles of rubble diverted the flow south along the main road, turning it into a swiftly flowing river until it burst through the dunes at the old sports ground. Then, blocked by a new island of debris, the torrent followed the coastline past the gallery before swinging out to sea after colliding with a rocky headland further south.

We parked on the top floor of the only remaining multi-story car park, got out and gazed; speechless. Scattered islands of twisted metal, fragments of walls and roofs, bits of cars, telephone

and electricity poles and thousands of unidentifiable lumps, reared through a stinking mess of sand and mud - a swampy plain fringed by stagnant pools and sluggish turbid streams. Judging by the smell, no one had been able to isolate the sewage lines and a chunderous effluvium lingered.

I'd imagined a clean sweep. A grand flushing out of the old, decaying and cluttered entrails of commerce. But it was never going to be like that. This nauseating bog would take generations to recover anything resembling ecological health.

Gaggles of goggle-eyed tourists wandered. Barriers, detour signs and one-way systems jostled with notices directing potential and previous clients to the temporary offices of such and such establishment. They were going to be temporary for a mighty long time as far as I could see. Directly below, two workers in red overalls were loading a plastic body bag into the back of a van.

'I wonder if all these people die of natural causes.'

'You mean drowning?'

'Yeah.'

'It's certainly a great chance to get rid of the nagging wife.'

'Or abusive husband.'

'Or gormless kid.'

'Or shaven-headed flasher.'

A few minutes were enough. Awed by the devastation and chilled by the wind, we returned to the relative warmth of the car.

'When did you decide to flash the family jewels?'

'As soon as I was sure the ugly old witch didn't recognise me.'

'Do you know her?'

Jon squinted out the window as though wondering whether to go on, smiled to himself, sighed and continued. 'There are a couple of things I haven't told you about my life in Brisbane. When I was sleeping rough with other street-kids, CC used to cruise around with a couple of heavies and offer some of us jobs.'

'What sort of jobs?'

'The first time, for fifty bucks I was taken to a large, empty room in an office block, and we set up a few fake pillars and curtains, scattered plastic-covered mattresses over the floor and changed all the light-bulbs to red. The second time, she asked me if I wanted to earn an additional hundred. I nodded as though I didn't care one way or the other - it's dangerous to seem too keen if you're desperate - so she told me to strip off. When I balked, she got impatient and said it was just to check I wasn't covered in scabs and lice because she was organising an 'Ancient Roman' theme party for some rich people, and needed a 'slave' to hand round drinks and savouries. I'd never seen a hundred bucks all at once, so dropped my gear, was pronounced 'adequate' and one of the heavies fixed a fake collar and chain round my neck. Felt a bit stupid, but shit - a hundred bucks!

Some girls came and got into skimpy costumes, then half a dozen middle-aged blokes arrived, stripped off, wrapped sheets round their paunches, were introduced to their 'slave-girls' and sprawled on the mattresses. The heavies, dressed as slave drivers, served the meal. I was a drinks waiter. The 'Romans' drank too much, watched a strip tease, groped their girls and made a lot of noise.

After the food they got down to sex. The girls were all good lookers but the men! Fat, pasty, unhealthy-looking bastards. Made you chunder to look at them. Each time I went out to the kitchen, CC would tell me what to do next. Like... there was one idiot who wanted to be looked at, so I had to stand beside him and gawk as though I was interested while he dipped his wick. One of the heavies laid into one of the blokes with a fake whip while he screwed. That sort of thing.'

I stared at Jon with renewed respect. 'Spicy.'

'You aren't shocked?'

'Of course not. It sounds harmless.'

‘That’s what I thought, so I became a semi-permanent fixture at these... orgettes.’ He looked away and chewed on a thumbnail before continuing. ‘One night she told me to strangle a bloke while he was pumping away at his tart. Not really strangle, but pretend to. Apparently it makes for a more earth-shattering orgasm. CC said it was safer if I did it, because the girls sometimes got a bit carried away.’

‘That could pose a few problems.’

Jon grunted. ‘Yeah, but I hated straddling him and clutching at his fat, sweaty throat, watching his blubber quiver over a nice looking girl. But I wanted the money and it just seemed kinky, not evil or anything. But the last time, it was evil. There were hardly any lights and the girls were chained to rings in the floor or up against the wall.’

They giggled a bit, I know they didn’t like it, but it paid double. The blokes were decked out in leather harnesses and spikes and carried whips and other instruments of torture – all fake Hell-Fire Club. I was given a pathetic little whip and told to flick here and there to spice things up. Lashing at their repulsive flab was almost pleasurable – pity it didn’t hurt.

‘Then one of the girls got hysterics and seemed to choke. They’d all been putting on an act, screaming and moaning and so on, but this one made your hair curl. CC rushed over, but the girl was dead. The fat prick had clubbed her head in with the butt of his whip as he orgasmed. I don’t know what happened then. We were hustled out, given a double pay packet and warned that we’d also end up dead if we told anyone. I believed her and made bloody sure I never saw her again.’

‘That’s terrible!’

We sat in silence for a minute.

‘C. C. - Cherie Culworth.’ I showed him the invitation. ‘But surely she would’ve recognised you?’

‘That’s why I came on so aggressive at the start. I thought so too, but she didn’t have the faintest. Why should she? It’s a couple of years ago. I was a long-haired young innocent from the bush. She must have gone through dozens of blokes and girls since then. We weren’t people to her, just bodies she could market.’

‘But you must agree it’s a hell of a coincidence.’

‘I read once that during our lives we meet a relatively small number of interconnected people. I knew Max. Max was in business with Frances. Frances knew MacFife. MacFife knew Cherie who traded in street-kids. After my brush with Frances, I became a street kid – it’s not so strange.’

‘You reckon she’s continuing her career?’

‘You saw the professional interest when I flashed my cods.’

‘But... why?’

‘Why did I do it?’

‘Yes.’

‘I don’t know. Bravado? Making sure it really was her – she’s aged a lot– and the germ of an idea.’

‘I don’t like the sound of that.’

‘Suppose she still organises orgies, for MacFife. If I was there, I might learn something useful.’

‘Like what?’

‘Names of people whose arms we could twist, who might be prepared to grass on him to save their reputations. I could sow dissent amongst the troops... I don’t know... Anything.’

‘You’ve started well, dumping Scumble in the shit.’

‘He’s going to get more than that,’ Jon said quietly. ‘When he told me you were dead... When you told me he murdered Max...’

In the safety of the Alconas house it had seemed simple. Find Patrick and incriminate MacFife. But of course nothing was simple. I was out of my depth, sinking fast, and took several deep breaths to ward off panic.

‘Do you still like me?’

‘Don’t ever doubt it. But I don’t want you taking risks. Forget the orgy.’

He gave a relieved nod then perked up. ‘But you haven’t told me what you thought of my act.’

‘Was it an act?’

He grinned. ‘That’ll keep you on your toes. Maybe I’m really in league with MacFife and it’s an elaborate plot to involve you so deeply that you’ll end up a sex-slave of the organisation for the rest of your tortured little life.’ He uttered a spine-chilling cackle and I almost believed him.

‘Lunchtime?’

‘How’s the expense account?’

It ran to fish and chips and a can of fizzy sugar-water, as far from the stench of the muddy mausoleum as possible.

There had been no listing under MacFife in the phone book, I had no idea where any of Max’s other properties were situated, and we had no real leads. Where to begin? I telephoned Hank and gave him Cherie Culworth’s name. He said he’d find out what he could about her.

As to the whereabouts of MacFife’s mountain eyrie, as it was obviously an architect’s one-off, he suggested a land agent. I spruced myself up and entered one of the few up-market-looking real estate agents left in town. An overweight and over-scented young man thrust a soft hand at me.

‘Aaron Hawky!’ he brayed. ‘At your service.’

‘I’ve been looking at the destruction - I had no idea the flooding had been so severe,’ I effused. ‘It must have been terrible for you!’

This brilliant conversational gambit spared me further effort, apart from occasional gasps of admiration as Aaron recounted his involvement in the recent horrors that proved him to be the bravest and most resourceful of men. When the wellspring of conceit finally dried, I confided that I was an architect from Melbourne, keen to see the Sunshine Coast design sensation which had astounded the architectural fraternity a few years previously. His ears pricked and I had merely to utter the words “canvas palace with flags, on hills overlooking the coast,” to set him jiggling with excitement.

‘I know it! My boss reckons it’s a monstrosity, but I like it. Just wait till I tell him it won awards. My wife loves it too!’

‘I could tell you had good taste the minute I walked in the door,’ I gushed. ‘I suppose you have to waste most of your time on those sad little brick and tile tombstones littering the land.’

Heaven-turned eyes accompanied a magnificent shrug of frustration. ‘That’s the way of the world.’

‘Perhaps when they rebuild the washed-out areas there’ll be a little more artistry?’ I ventured.

He lowered sorrowful eyes to mine. ‘Only if it’s the cheaper option.’

We smiled in mutual dismay at the tyranny of profit.

‘Would it be possible for you to give me directions to the house?’

He whipped out a photocopied map of the area, dragged a transparent yellow line along the roads we should take, placed a cross at the spot we were heading for, and handed it across. It was as simple as that. Pride left no room for concern that we might be invading another’s privacy, and I made a mental note never to employ him as an estate agent.

Jon followed at a discreet distance and we met at the car. He was champing at the bit, having had a policeman frisk him for drugs and ask his business, and a skinny girl of about fourteen ask him if he wanted a fuck. Only twenty bucks.

‘Were you tempted?’

‘To chuck her in the river.’

‘You never know, you might get to like it.’

‘Might get lice and all the rest as well.’

‘So that’s why you refused?’

‘Of course. Why else?’

‘Can’t think.’

‘Jealous?’

‘Of what?’

‘Everyone ogling my body?’

‘Ogling’s fine. It’s when ogling becomes abuse that I worry.’

‘Me too. Let’s swear to defend each other to the death.’

‘In blood?’

He grinned, let out a loud whoop and shouted, ‘You’re on! I’ve always wanted to do this.’ He opened his pocket-knife and nicked his thumb just above the nail. I held out my hand and he did the same to me. We squeezed out a few drops and licked each other’s.

‘For ever,’ we whispered earnestly before bursting into laughter at the absurd, yet profound sincerity underpinning the schoolboy pledge.

Chapter Sixteen

We took the riverside road. Trees, shrubs, chunks of buildings and what looked like half the local rubbish tip were bobbing past in the swirling, cocoa coloured water. Some sections of the road were one-way due to undermining and subsidence. Detours led through desolate residential streets with their debris, mud, and devastation. A surprising number of houses showed signs of life. Windows were open and mattresses, furniture and every imaginable personal treasure were spread out on sheets of plastic to dry, guarded by anxious householders, eyes scanning the heavens.

Several huge drops splashed on the windscreen and the scene became an anthill. Front and back yards filled with scurrying figures beginning the laborious task of dragging everything inside once more. They couldn’t afford to replace everything. It was flood damage – the act of a loving god - uninsurable. By the time the road began its climb towards the hills rain was falling in solid sheets and roadside gutters were torrents.

At the top of the escarpment we turned north along the edge. A swirling grey mantle of clouds obscured what would otherwise have been spectacular views to the coast. Jon was driving, I was map reading. After three kilometres the road cut through a rocky ridge jutting seawards. It wasn’t until we reached a turn-off that I realised we must have missed the entrance. We turned and drove slowly back.

At the southern end of the seaward side of the cutting, an unremarkable farm-gate hung between a couple of unpainted hardwood posts. A rough track had been bulldozed into the side of the hill and wound out of sight behind the bluff. No name, no number, nothing to indicate it would go anywhere other than to a small block of land. We studied the map again in disbelief.

‘That’s got to be it. It’s exactly where your flatulent friend marked it.’

‘Verbal diarrhoea, not flatulence.’

‘Equally disgusting. Shall we drive in?’

‘Of course. Sounding the horn, flags flying and chanting Advance Australia Fair.’

‘Open the gate then.’

‘Or... we could wimp out and sneak around the other side of the hill for a reconnoitre.’

‘Yeah, let’s be wimps.’

Jon turned the car and drove slowly north again. The childish banter had done nothing to stop encroaching fear and I wished I were braver. A council road-works dump about half a kilometre further along on the left provided the perfect parking spot. We concealed the car behind a pile of gravel, swapped our disguises for drab overalls and filled pockets with useful things.

After crossing the road we crawled through a sagging, four-strand barbed wire fence and trudged through misty drizzle back the way we’d come. A narrow strip of wind-blasted trees bordering the almost vertical drop to the plains below, served as cover from passing cars. At the cutting we swung around the base of the hill towards the sea, and ran into a two-metre high, chain-mesh fence.

‘Promising.’

‘Yeah. Over or under?’

‘Let’s follow the bandicoots.’ Jon knelt and scrabbled at a patch of mud already deepened by the nocturnal burrowers. The rain-softened soil would have let us push the poles over, but there seemed little point in leaving such a proclamation of our visit. It took only a minute to scoop a hollow and slither underneath, covering ourselves in mud.

‘Yuk!’

‘What are ya? It’s camouflage.’

The steeply sloping block was larger than I’d expected. Scrubby melaleucas gave way to tristantias and eucalypts with an understorey of lank, rain-drenched grasses about two metres tall that showered us, washing off much of the mud. Overalls clung like chafing membranes and cold crept up from the soles of squelching feet.

A sudden wind change cleared the mist, making walking easier and the cold colder. After about five-hundred metres we came upon what looked like a stage-set for a medieval tournament. Perched on the edge of the cliff, pennants fluttered enthusiastically in the stiffening breeze, were two large, blue and white striped ‘tents’ about ten metres apart, connected by a walkway. Jon reckoned it looked romantic. I thought it absurd.

We slunk around the side and under the building - a forest of galvanised poles. A peep over the edge of the cliff set pulses racing. It was a very long drop to the rocks and scrub beneath. Storm clouds in every conceivable shade of grey had heaped themselves along the coastline fifteen kilometres away, and slanting torrents of rain were already lashing seaside towns and suburbs. Below, the river glowed palely against a monochrome land, and over the ocean, lightning set a colossal cumulonimbus glowing fitfully pink. Overhead, blue-black clouds parted briefly permitting an ominous ochreous aura to bathe the scene, before closing ranks again and dumping their load.

Under the building, the downpour was reduced to a venomous hissing. We prowled around clinging to the foundations and listening for signs of life. No pressure-pump turned on, no lavatory flushed, no drain gurgled, and no tiny feet pattered above. The place appeared empty.

Scuttling beneath the walkway to the second ‘tent’ was nerve-racking. We were invisible to anyone on the driveway but visible from windows on both sides. No spotlights blinded, no hail of bullets tore us to shreds, no siren wailed its dread alarm. Beyond the second tent a large empty carport opened onto a driveway on which no vehicles were visible, so we were probably alone. The covered way between the structures was also the entrance to both ‘tents’, so, unwilling to venture into the open; we crawled back to the shrubs directly beneath the walkway. About six metres to our right, a set of stone steps led up to the main door.

Just as I prepared to break cover, a pair of muscular missiles erupted out of nowhere. In one of those miraculous bursts of agility which only blind fear can bestow, I found myself up on the covered way, Jon beside me, staring in shock at a matching pair of bull terriers slavering two metres below. Half a second’s delay would have seen one or the other of us, probably both, smashed against the foundations with chunks torn from fleshy bits.

The dogs were huge, fit and very angry. They leaped and flung themselves up at us, hurling curses through slobbering maws, but fortunately didn’t think of detouring six metres to the steps. Beside us, safety was blocked by a heavy wooden door flanked by coloured glass panels. The doors would have withstood a battering ram, the glass a slight kick, the walls a blunt knife.

Jon’s knife sliced effortlessly through the plastic-coated canvas, we slithered through and dragged a chair against the almost invisible slit, hoping the dogs wouldn’t notice. They stood guard below, maintaining a subterranean rumble. We’d arrived in what appeared to be a large pavilion with a vertiginous view towards the coast through enormous plate-glass windows. It was cosy, dry and surprisingly warm after scrambling around in the wind and rain for half an hour.

Although it was only about four o’clock, the place was so gloomy I tried the lights. A dim glow from dozens of concealed, low wattage bulbs added to the air of oriental mystery. It would be

magnificent in the evenings when the lights of civilisation spread their jewelled carpet. Costly rugs littered polished parquet floors and the furniture was expensive and comfortable - three lounge suites, ten assorted armchairs and half a dozen low tables.

Despite the quantity, the place seemed under-furnished. At the far end of the space was an immense dining table in dark wood, surrounded by twenty-four high-backed chairs. The atmosphere reeked of professional interior design – prodigality producing paucity. It was a conference centre, not a private residence. The unlined walls flapped cosily against their poles and the patterns of the rope lashing added a nautical feeling akin to being on board a luxurious yacht.

Blue painted doors gave access to a pair of well-appointed bathrooms and toilets and a varnished door led to an ultra modern kitchen with an outside door. We risked a glance out. A small, paved courtyard, gate firmly bolted in the enclosing high brick wall, was empty of everything except a couple of rubbish bins. We inspected. They were not only empty, but scrubbed clean.

The laundry cupboards contained exactly what they should, and no space was large enough to conceal a body. Retracing our steps to the kitchen, we checked the refrigerators. They contained beer, fruit, sauces and the usual packaged items. Freezers were full of frozen dinners and cuts of meat; not human, Jon reckoned. We checked all cupboards and drawers. Nothing but what you'd expect - tablecloths, cutlery and useful odds and ends. Nowhere anything personal - magazines, letters, paintings mess – only an expensive sterility.

The dogs' menacing growls had become furious barking, so we peered out, fearful someone had arrived. They were barking at the gate to the courtyard. Probably for food. Us if possible.

'We'll have to do something about them,' Jon grunted. '

'Only if we want to leave. Any good at knife throwing?'

'I've an idea that might shock 'em a bit. See if you can find a long extension lead.

I found three in a cupboard stacked with electrical heaters, so made them into one, knotting them securely at the joins. Jon, meanwhile, was hacking off swallowable hunks of beef and defrosting them in the microwave. He then cut the unused socket off the extension lead, bared a long length of the phase wire, threaded it through and around the meat securely, clipped off and isolated the other two wires, plugged the cord into a switched outlet beside the door, and carried the bait outside. The dogs heard the door opening, smelled the meat, and howled for blood.

'Stay at the switch and turn it on as soon as I yell,' he called above the growling and thumping of dogs hurling themselves at the gate. He unlatched it and screamed for help. I rushed out and together we just managed to re-fasten it.

'That was insanely stupid,' I snapped.

'Mmm. Calls for a re-think. Rubbish bins.'

We stood them upside down against the fence beside the laundry door. This was much better. From inside I could see over the fence and watch Jon lean over, dangling his bait just too high for them to reach. Both dogs leaped at it, snapping viciously at each other. When it seemed they'd expire from apoplexy, he lowered the lead. The smaller and quicker of the two lunged and swallowed. I closed the switch. As paws touched earth, eyes bulged, legs went rigid and body thrashed and twitched for several seconds. The other dog howled bleakly. Jon tugged at the lead, clamped between muscled jaws. He had to lift the dead weight off the ground before the wire snapped. He denied it later, but I'm sure his hands were shaking as he rewired the bait.

The second dog was smarter. He played with the meat, pawing at it until it worked loose from the wire before swallowing it. We tried again. This time Jon teased the poor beast unmercifully, holding the bait just out of reach until it was practically demented. When it was finally lowered the dog sank his teeth, I switched on, and the mutt's jaw locked in death spasm. We were both shaking by the time it was over and could barely summon the energy to drag the dogs into the courtyard and dump them in the bins.

The other pavilion, also accessed by knife-blade, was not quite as large; about twenty metres long and ten wide. Like its twin, it was floored with polished hardwood parquetry, but there were no

carpets. Four metres from the entrance a wall separated a large circular bed from a similar sized square one behind it. Armchairs were arranged around the circular bed, and a complex assortment of lighting and cameras, both video and still, huddled around the other. The far end of the room had been arranged as an intimate theatrette, complete with tiny stage, large video screen, lights and curtains. The seating for thirty was comfortable.

‘Obviously I’m not the only one who entertains MacFife and his mates.’

‘Could be me flashing my bits here soon, Jon muttered.’

‘Not if I can help it.’

‘Spoil-sport.’

‘Check out the videos?’

The cassettes were all in their original boxes behind undisturbed wrappers. As with the other pavilion, there was nothing personal, nothing incriminating, nowhere to hide a body and no clues about the owner. Not even a change of clothes. Doors in the rear wall led to three well-equipped bathrooms, toilets, and two well-mirrored dressing rooms. In one was a large steel cabinet bolted to the wall and securely locked. We hammered on it, but if someone was inside he was either asleep or dead. Cleaning implements were stored in one corner. The last door led to a tiny kitchen, and off that was a guardroom, complete with TV monitors, a panel of switches and the electrical switchboard. An external door gave onto the parking area. We looked speculatively at each other.

‘The power’s on,’ I mused.

‘The monitors aren’t.’

‘Not here.’

‘You mean?’

‘Either that, or recording. Anyway, in the vain hope we haven’t yet passed in front of a camera, we might as well turn off the security devices before exiting.’

‘Agreed.’

Everything was labelled - heat sensors, lights, video monitors and alarms. As a memento of our visit we smashed the monitor screens and snipped through non-electric wires.

‘Reckon we got everything?’

‘Probably not, but there’re no red lights flashing. We’ll have to hope for the best.’

‘And expect the worst.’

‘We had the same mother!’

‘Oh, brother!’

In case we’d missed anything we made another quick tour of both pavilions, but they remained as impersonal as airport lounges. The wind was already enlarging the slits in the walls. They’d be great flapping gashes in an hour.

‘This is not MacFife’s home.’

‘Good one, Sherlock, but I had hoped it was a prison.’

‘What’s the power source? It’s a long way from the road and there were no poles.’

‘Underground? Solar?’

‘If it’s solar there should be batteries and a back-up generator.’

‘There was nothing underneath, so that means a shed.’

We wandered around the grounds. No attempt had been made at a garden. Native trees and shrubs had been left to run wild. The drive passed under a monumental brick archway before winding between the trees on its muddy way to the farm-gate at the roadside. Jon was staring at the grandiose arch.

‘Sensors,’ he murmured. The brickwork concealed not only infrared sensors, but vid-cams and spotlights as well.

‘It should be impossible for strangers to approach the place undetected.’

‘We approached. Have we been detected?’

‘There’s no way any of these could have picked us up the way we came in; they’re directed down the drive, onto the parking area and into the carport. Not at the front door, I’m glad to say. Lucky you turned the system off,’ he said thoughtfully. ‘Otherwise we might at this very minute be appearing on a TV screen in a police station somewhere near you.’

‘Police station?’

‘Well, Scumble’s bedroom.’

‘Even so, I wonder why there were no alarms when we cut our way in.’

‘Who’d hear them? This is to protect them from intruders while they’re here.’

‘Figures.’

‘Where are the solar cells? If it’s solar powered.’

We climbed the high ground behind the arch and there, arranged along the top of the brickwork, was a bank of collectors.

‘Very neat. Now for the batteries and generator.’

There wasn’t a shed anywhere. It was getting too dark to look further. The rain seemed to be increasing, if that was possible, and we were about to give up when I took another look at the archway. The base widened on the side away from the house into an unnecessarily large and thick wall about six metres long, two metres wide, and one and a half metres high, roofed with tiles. We made a circuit. Tucked into a niche in the end wall was a stout wooden door, held closed by a simple hasp and padlock.

‘What’s the stench?’

We stared at each other in horror before yanking at the door. It was solid. I broke my thumbnail opening the screwdriver attachment on the knife, but then it was only a minute before the hasp hung loose and we could drag open the door. The smell was overpowering, but it wasn’t death. A low snarl issued from the gloom, followed by a white hand clawing at the doorjamb.

‘Patrick,’ I whispered, ‘Is it you?’

The creature groaned.

Almost vomiting from the combined stink of diesel, faeces, urine and fear, we eased him out of his prison, slowly unbent his tortured frame and leaned him against the archway. It was Patrick. Naked, blue with cold, growling strangely and shaking off any attempt by me to touch him, he closed his eyes and licked at rain spattered lips. Both hands closed and unclosed jerkily. Jon opened the water bottle from his rucksack and placed it against Patrick’s mouth. He grabbed at it with shivering hands and gulped the contents. When he’d finished I tried to wrap the plastic raincoat round his shoulders but he ripped it off, cringed against the wall and gave vent to a howl of such despair and pain that my hair stood on end.

Again we tried to move him, but he flattened himself against the brickwork and slashed at us with his nails. Squatting down in the hope that a smaller man would appear less threatening, I noticed a chain hanging between his legs. One loop of a pair of handcuffs had been clamped around the base of his scrotum and penis, the other end left dangling. Not wanting to think about what it meant, I took hold of the loose end and pulled gently. After two strangled little screams of anticipated agony, he followed docilely through increasing darkness back to the fence. I scrambled under first, Patrick followed, and Jon brought up the rear. As we stood up I touched Patrick’s shoulder gently, saying, ‘It’s all over Patrick, you’re safe now. We’ll take you home.’

He stood, mute, refusing to move further. I wanted to avoid taking hold of that terrible chain again, so tried once more. ‘Patrick,’ I implored, ‘it’s me, Peter Corringe.’ He thrust me violently away and raced into the darkness. We followed until stopped by a cry, followed by the noise of falling rocks. We quartered the area to the cliff, then slithered forward on our bellies. I played the torch over the rocks below, but every little outcrop cast a moving shadow, every shape looked like a crushed and broken body. The beam didn’t reach anywhere near the base of the cliff, so we had no idea how far he’d fallen. I switched off the torch and lay there in disbelief.

Jon grabbed my arm. ‘Listen!’

A soft sobbing, the gentlest of sniffs, then silence. I shone the torch in the direction of the sound. Patrick was sprawled on a rock-shelf about three metres below. The cliff was steep, there was no safe way down, and forethought hadn't provided us with a rope ladder.

'He'll be OK as long as he doesn't roll around. We'll get help,' I whispered.

'I'll stay with him.'

'You will not! There's nothing you can do and I'm not leaving you here to be discovered by McFife!'

The rain had stopped but it was pretty cold and Jon didn't take much convincing. We stumbled back through the darkness, tying strips of the toilet paper Mad had thoughtfully put in the rucksack, to branches as a guide for our return. Grazed and bruised we finally negotiated the barbed-wire fence, crossed the road and raced to the car. Ten minutes driving took us to the next town and a telephone booth. The phone-card worked and Hank was on the line. I told him the situation, gave precise directions and the number of the telephone in case he wanted to contact us. A mobile phone was on my mental shopping list.

'What'll I bring?'

'Bolt-cutters, extension ladder, two ropes, blankets, clothes, food, drink, good torches.'

'Right,' and he was gone.

Neither of us mentioned the police, fire brigade or State Emergency Services. They are wonderful organisations and extricate people from the most appalling situations, but they also advertise their successes. If Patrick survived and recovered, the last thing he needed was to face clients who had seen on television and the front pages of every newspaper that he had been abused, handcuffed by his scrotum and locked naked in a box for six days. It might help our case against MacFife, but it could never help a man as conservative as Patrick to regain his sanity.

We were about forty kilometres from Hank's place on winding, secondary roads. Anticipating an hour's rest, we settled to our carton of milk and packet of chocolate biscuits with a gusto only slightly tempered by the plight of the poor man trapped on the cliff face. It was too unreal to contemplate; we could do nothing, and wouldn't be as useful if we were hungry.

Hank must have broken all the rules because the utility truck he kept for rough work pulled up next to us barely forty minutes later. Celia in the passenger seat. They followed us to the quarry and parked beside us. No one spoke as we unloaded and retraced our steps to the edge of the cliffs. I carried the ladder, Jon the tools and ropes, Hank and Celia blankets and food. With three good torches it was much easier. Patrick was still there. The wind had dropped, a sliver of moon supported by unwinking Venus hovered above, and hope fortified our hearts.

Hank and Celia lay on their stomachs and peered into the darkness.

'Patrick? It's mother, darling. Can you hear me?'

Silence

'Son, we're coming down on the ladder you used to build your tree hut. Remember? Stay where you are and we'll be with you in a moment.'

Neither sound nor movement broke the stillness.

We extended and lowered the ladder. I tied the ends of both ropes to a tree. One secured the top of the ladder, the other was for Patrick. Jon offered to go down but Hank was worried about Patrick's reaction to a stranger. It was an act of the utmost bravery, difficult enough for a young man, but for a seventy-five year old to clamber down an unstable ladder perched on the edge of a cliff at night, was stupendous.

Celia kept torchlight on her husband's feet, Jon kept a firm grip on the rope round Hank's waist, and I clung to the ladder like a madman. Hank recited calming words and phrases into the silence. At the bottom he knelt beside his son and touched him on the shoulder. Patrick's cry of bewildered misery sent goose flesh across my spine. Hank stroked his son untied the rope from his waist, slipped it under Patrick's arms, knotted it, and tried to get him to his feet. He wouldn't move.

'You're going to have to use the handcuffs, Hank,' Jon called.

Celia gasped.

Like a puppet, Patrick got to his feet and mounted. Jon kept a tension on the rope, then, assisted by Celia, took his hands and pulled him onto the cliff top where he lay, panting, near exhaustion and suffering from hypothermia. I kept the ladder steady for Hank, and then it took a few seconds to cut through the cuffs with the bolt-cutters. I only made a small nick, unnoticeable beside the swollen chafing. Patrick groaned with relief. We wrapped him in blankets, gathered up everything and, praying the rain wouldn't return, set off.

The trip back was uneventful. Celia got in the back of the rental car with Patrick, Hank leaned against his ute, exhausted.

'He can't go to your place,' I said. 'As soon as he's missed, your's is the first place they'll look.'

'The flat above his office?'

I shook my head. 'What's his secretary like?'

'Hank dredged up a smile. 'She's his mistress. That's why Jill threw him out.'

'Where does she live?'

Jon drove Hank in the ute, I drove the car.

Elizabeth, a motherly soul about the same age as Patrick, did not conform to the usual idea of 'mistress'; she confirmed Graham Green's assertion that man's deepest desire is for companionship. I liked her warm, brisk efficiency, absence of histrionics, obvious love, and cosy clean house. In the light, Patrick looked worse. Apart from severe bruising and scratches and what looked like a broken collarbone, he was covered in small, septic sores.

'Cigarette burns,' whispered Jon.

We left him tucked up warmly in bed. Elizabeth's doctor was on her way and there was nothing more to be done. Within the hour we had informed the Alconas of our safety and were sipping warm milk laced with whisky at the Fierney's.

'Peter, Jon – how can we thank you?'

'A warm bed?'

'Of course, but...'

'Patrick saved Jon, so we're quits.' I turned to Jon. 'It was fun, wasn't it?'

'Wouldn't have missed it for the world. Anyone else you want rescued?'

Celia turned anguished eyes on us both and said with chilling intensity, 'Not someone – something! Decency! I want you to rescue decency! I want revenge on the man who murdered Max and tortured you and Patrick. I want him to pay for the horror and misery he's caused; for murdering his wife, although she deserved it. I want him stopped from committing indecencies against innocent victims of his lusts. I want him in prison. Not dead! I want him to suffer! To lose all his ill-gotten gains... I want him to be... broken!'

The passion underpinning the last word sent tickles up my spine. I pictured MacFife broken on a wheel, a ragged mess of body parts begging for relief as madness choked his mind.

'You're on,' chirped Jon cheerfully, snapping the tension and stopping a slither into melodrama. 'Apart from everything you mentioned, Celia, it's been bugging me that he's going to inherit all Frances's assets. Especially when they're due to Max's brains and hard work. He's even got Peter's car and clothes.' He squatted in front of Hank and Celia and gazed tenderly up at their ravaged faces.

'I loved Max too, you know. He was the first person to do me a good turn while expecting nothing in return. He saved me from topping myself. I reckon I owe him one.'

'And so do I!' I couldn't help adding. 'So don't worry, we've got it under control. We'll sleep here tonight in case you get an unexpected visit, and tomorrow you're off to stay with Maureen.'

They looked at each other. 'But...'

'No buts. They've a large house, only one kid still at home, so you won't be in their way. You can go whale watching. What's the time?'

'Just on ten o'clock.'

Fifteen minutes later the visit was arranged, we'd showered, and were tossing about, unable to sleep.

'Wanna talk about it?'

'Might as well.'

It was a long and fruitless regurgitation of everything. We must have slept eventually, because suddenly it was light and Celia poked her head round the door.

'Cup of tea?'

They hadn't slept much either and were already packed, ready to head north. She perched on the bed.

'We're both excited about staying with Maureen. She seemed genuinely pleased.'

'Of course she is. The trouble with parents is they remain intimidatingly competent and their offspring always feel like children, even when they're fifty. So let her pamper you both and realise you came to stay because you need her help and comfort.'

Celia smiled and patted my cheek. 'You're a wise old thing for twenty-eight. I'm so glad I know you. You too, Jon. Take care of each other.' She turned at the door. 'About last night. I was overwrought and said what I would like to happen, not what I expect will happen. I couldn't sleep worrying about you two risking your lives for my pathetic revenge. Promise you will leave it to the police from now on.'

We both started speaking at once.

'You first.'

'No, no. After you.'

'Anything you want, Celia.'

'No, Peter. You must promise!'

'OK. But that means we'll have to tell them about Patrick.'

Celia swallowed nervously and her voice was tinged with panic. 'No! Not Patrick yet. I telephoned Elizabeth this morning and the doctor is worried about his sanity. He's on strong sedatives. Elizabeth made the doctor promise not to report it. If the police get to Patrick they'll go over everything before he's ready – they'll have to. No. Please leave Patrick out of it until he's recovered.'

Hank had appeared at the door. 'If MacFife's got the money he appears to have, he's sure to have a snoop in the police force who'll inform him of Patrick's whereabouts if we tell them.'

'We agree,' Jon said brightly. 'So relax and leave everything to us.'

'I haven't had a chance to find out about that woman; Culworth,' Hank apologised.

'That's OK, Jon's met her before. A brothel madam, apparently.'

'I won't ask how you met her.'

'I wouldn't tell you.'

'It's a wise man who keeps his own counsel.'

'Indeed. Can we raid your wardrobe for a disguise?'

'What's mine is yours.'

'And mine.' It was a relief to see Celia smile.

'Can we swap the rental car for your ute, and take any gear from your shed we might need?'

'Of course. And pop this in your expense account.' Hank handed me a cheque for two thousand dollars. The look in his eyes brooked no refusal, so I slipped it into my wallet.

After breakfast we loaded cars and ute, locked up, bid farewell, and by eight o'clock the place was empty.

Chapter Seventeen

Mad was waiting on the intersection three blocks from the house. John handed over the keys, shook hands in a businesslike manner and joined me in the ute. We drove down to the coast through a landscape of crystalline purity; the sky a cloudless blue, a sweet crispness on the air and views of such heart-stopping perfection that one feared an incautious sneeze might shatter the scene into billions of brilliant shards.

Jon sneezed – the scene remained the same.

‘Caught a cold?’

‘Sun in my eyes.’

‘Takes a bit of getting used to - all this light after weeks of wet.’

‘I think I’ll manage. Where’re we going?’

‘Spying.’

‘And?’

‘Shopping, then to the gallery and take it from there?’

‘Good one.’

We deposited Hank’s cheque in Jon’s almost empty account. That way we both had access to funds on our own cards. A shopping centre about half a kilometre north west of the gallery provided a couple of mobile phones, food and sundries. We left the ute in the shoppers’ car park and, in Hank’s old clothes, wandered down to the beach and along the eroded shoreline. Towels under our shirts suggested beer-guts; fishing rods provided cover. John carried lunch and a few cans in his rucksack; I had other things in mine. Casting our lines occasionally and fruitlessly, we ended up at the rocks below the gallery.

A cap with side flaps hid Jon’s hairless head and earrings; wisps of wig escaping from an old, wide-brimmed straw sun hat distracted from my profile. We lounged against the rocks at the top of the cliff with a view of the rear and one side of the gallery. It was a day made for lazing. Jon unpacked the sandwiches.

‘What’ll we do when this is all over?’

The same question had been revolving in my own head. I knew what I wanted, but it’s difficult to know how to reply to that sort of question. If you’re too enthusiastic the other person can feel pushed. If you’re noncommittal he’ll think you’re not keen. His expression gave nothing away. To hell with it, I thought. A relationship in which you’re always worrying if you’ve said the right thing can never work. ‘When this is all settled,’ I said firmly, ‘we’ll live happily together for the next couple of centuries; fighting, loving, arguing, agreeing, disagreeing, laughing, crying, and...’

‘Catching anything?’

I nearly shat myself. ‘Na, mate. Bloody good excuse to get away from the missus, but.’ I had the words ready, but wasn’t ready for Glaze to be standing beneath me. He’d approached the same way we had, along the low-tide sand. What the hell had he heard? Had I been talking too loud as usual? Jon hunched over his line concentrating on a knot. I screwed up my face to peer down at the enemy. ‘Y’ on holiday, mate?’ I asked, querulously nasal.

‘No such luck. I work over there.’ He hauled his lean frame easily up the rocks and indicated the gallery.

‘Pretty bloody posh place,’ whined Jon. ‘Bet it’s worth a few bob, right on the sea and everythink. My place got washed out. Have to live with the fuckin’ in-laws. Jeeze, what fuckin’ wankers. They’re on my bloody back day in and day out. D’ya live there then?’

Glaze pulled a face and turned towards the gallery as if in search of classier company. ‘I stay there when it’s busy. My place in the hills was unaffected by the flooding.’

‘House in the hills, eh? Costs a packet to buy up there, I reckon. Especially now. You’ve gotta be worth a bit.’

‘A bit.’

‘Nice place?’

‘Not as remarkable as this.’

‘What’s it like waking up right next to the sea? You must have an important job. Are you an artist?’

Glaze’s air of distracted disdain settled my nerves. We mightn’t be worth looking at but he couldn’t resist showing off.

‘I’m an artist - of sorts,’ he said airily. ‘Not with paint and suchlike – more... body art, you might say, for a select clientele.’

I wanted to smear his self-satisfied smirk across the rocks.

‘Must be great to work here and have a place in the hills. Fuck, I wish I was rich.’ Jon vented his frustration on the increasingly knotted line. ‘Bet you drive a beaut car.’

‘Mercedes.’

‘I bloody knew it. A fuckin’ Merc! And I have to walk because even the fuckin’ busses aren’t running properly.’

Glaze was torn between going, and gloating.

‘Get yourself a job, man. There’s work out there for those who really want it.’

‘Says Richie Rich. You don’t know the half of it, mate. You give a show for a bunch of rich wankers and bingo - money in the bank. No one wants an honest day’s work from an honest bloke.’

‘I work bloody hard for my money! I’ll be working my butt off most of tonight, while you’re home screwing your missus.’

‘Here? You’re giving a show here? Can I come?’

‘Not here, and not unless you’ve a spare thousand bucks to chuck around. So don’t try and tell me about hard work. You’re bone idle, the pair of you.’ His mobile phone interrupted what looked like developing into a reason for us to thump him. He turned his back and mumbled, but there was no disguising the reaction. His body stiffened, he grunted twice, shoved the phone into his pocket and took off.

‘Reckon they’ve heard the good news, then?’

‘I reckon.’

My Mercedes burned off up the road towards the hills.

For the next couple of hours a constant stream of sightseers drove past the gallery, about a dozen stopped, one came out clasping a purchase. Halfway through the afternoon, Brian pulled up in the Volvo, went inside and re-appeared fifteen minutes later with Mad’s remaining drawings. Two overweight blokes in business suits pulled up at three thirty in the latest model four-wheel drive, but came out empty handed. A short time later a van pulled in to the car park and drove to the front entrance, out of sight. About twenty minutes later it took off again. Around four o’clock the Mercedes came back, followed by MacFife’s Porsche and another car. Doors slammed and irritated voices echoed.

We were starting to feel conspicuous, so packed up and wandered back the way we’d come. After stowing the props in the back of the ute, we changed into conservative gear; sports coats, neat shirts and ties. Jon looked good in a tweed cap. Hank’s trousers were a little baggy round the waist and slightly too long in the leg for Jon, but it was amazing how well the clothes of a seventy-four year-old fitted two guys in their twenties. We strolled back along the road as if enjoying the warm evening, and stopped for a natter opposite the well-lit gallery. The van from the afternoon reappeared and drew up to the front door.

‘Looks like the show’s going to be here tonight. Probably getting a bit draughty up in them thar hills.’

‘Must be mighty sad they’ve lost their doggies.’

‘And their prisoner.’

‘Reckon they’re feeling vulnerable?’

‘Hardly. Those types think they’re gods.’

The inside of the huge front windows of the gallery were already half covered with silvered insulating paper. As we watched, a workman up a ladder dropped another roll to the floor, holding it in place while his assistant taped it securely. There was apparently going to be a need for privacy.

‘Uh-oh! Keep that bitch off me!’ Jon wandered a few metres away and leaned over a fence to peer intently at a couple of mould-infected citrus trees. I stared vaguely out to sea. A high-pitched squawk roused me in time to steady CC, who had caught one of her ridiculously high heels on the edge of the gutter and was toppling towards me. It was well done - almost believable.

‘Oh, how foolish of me, thank goodness it was you.’ She giggled seductively. ‘What a happy coincidence. Imagine falling into the arms of a complete stranger!’

I smiled, extricated myself and pushed her upright.

She leaned on my shoulder and checked her shoes for damage. ‘Everything’s simply bedlam at the gallery.’

I tried to look excited. ‘Is it the opening tonight? Don’t tell me I got the date wrong!’

‘No, no. Just an impromptu little party for a few of the director’s friends. But he always goes to a great deal of trouble and suddenly we’re short staffed, such a nuisance.’

‘Must be.’

She nodded dolefully then visibly brightened as an idea slipped into her head. ‘I don’t suppose... No of course you wouldn’t, a gentleman like you. How silly of me.’

I smiled vaguely, not wanting to hear what was coming, and started to move off. ‘Well, have a happy party.’

She clawed at my arm as though for support. ‘Wasn’t that young man extraordinary the other day?’ she burred fatuously. ‘I don’t suppose you’ve seen him since? I know it sounds ridiculous, but he was looking for work and we do need someone to help in the kitchen.’

I frowned.

‘I know it’s stupid, but I’m such a softie. I always try to overlook people’s faults and search for the virtues behind them.’ She smiled up at me expectantly and I tried not to puke.

A sudden poke in the back from Jon as he wandered past, nearly thrust me into the woman’s arms. He grunted something. I nodded vacantly at his back.

‘Nice meeting you,’ I called vaguely, before once more gazing into the mascara’d depths of CC’s watery eyes. ‘I think... no, it probably wasn’t...’

‘What?’

‘I think I saw him sprawled over a bench back there.’

‘Where?’

I pretended to rack my brains. ‘In front of that pizza place, I think it was. But... I’m not certain. Those types all look alike.’

‘Yes... and he’d be completely unsuitable. I can’t imagine what I was thinking. One should never trust people like that – especially at a respectable party. My dear departed husband always said my soft heart would be my undoing.’

She shook herself, bared yellow teeth and glanced over her shoulder, impatient to go. ‘Well, I’ve recharged my batteries. They’ll be docking my salary if I stay away any longer. Lovely to see you again.’ A pat on my arm and she crossed the road in the perilous scuttle enforced by high heels and tight skirt.

Jon was already out of sight, so I walked briskly back, rehearsing all the arguments I could think of to dissuade him. CC passed me in her car, tooted and waved.

Hank had fitted a windowless, fibreglass canopy on the back of the ute, so we’d slung our sleeping bags and all the gear in there. It was bedroom, kitchen and anything else we needed. Jon had already changed into his ‘sex clobber’. I composed my face into a mask of enlightened rationality and asked, ‘What’s the rush?’

‘She’s obviously trying to find me. Wants me to work tonight. It’s our chance to get some dirt.’

‘I don’t want you to.’

‘You’re mad! We’ve got to grab every chance we can get!’

‘It’s too dangerous.’

‘You’ll be there.’

‘Outside.’

‘If you hear me scream – call the cops on the mobile.’

‘Ha, bloody ha.’

He put his hands on my shoulders and said slowly, ‘I’ll go and meet her and see what the job is. She won’t need me for a couple of hours, so there’ll be plenty of time to sort out a fail-safe plan.’

Before I could argue he jumped down and swaggered through the golden haze of evening, head high, hips thrusting - visible to anyone driving in either direction. I’m not sure which emotion was uppermost – foreboding, love, or lust. I couldn’t believe that glorious creature was my friend, companion, lover. Life couldn’t be that generous. Something was going to go terribly wrong! Thus did fear spoil both happiness and the beauty of the evening.

To take my mind off the dangers I sorted and stacked all the ‘just-in-case’ gear we’d appropriated from Hank, making a space large enough to sleep, prepared sandwiches and made a list of all my worries. Fears faced are supposed to lose their power. When the gallery was being built, Max hollowed out a section of a rear windowsill and hid a spare master key, concealing the gap with stucco. A tap with a stone would break the cover and I’d have a key! Only he and I knew of it. My phone rang.

‘Yeah?’

‘She’s gone, but I’m not sure where. Spending more than five minutes with CC makes me paranoid. Drive to the far end of the old K Mart car park where the canal’s become a swamp. When I’m sure I’m not being followed I’ll join you.’

‘Roger.’

‘Eh?’

‘Will do.’

‘Great.’

‘I’m on my way.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Hang up, you great galah.’

‘Where? There’s no hook – Oh... you mean switch off... Roger.’

‘Eh?’

‘Will do.’

‘What?’

For answer; the sucking noise of a sloppy kiss. My heart was full. I drove to the rendezvous and parked in the deepest dark and shadow. A minute later Jon was beside me. ‘Drive to that park by the river.’

‘It’s a smelly mess.’

‘That’s right. No one’ll be there.’

I drove, parked, we climbed in the back, accomplished a few intimate exercises on the sleeping bags, then lay contentedly in the darkness.

‘I needed that.’

‘What?’

‘Deep physical and mental contact with someone pure and simple.’

‘Simple?’

‘As in straightforward, uncomplicated, honest and trustworthy.’

‘That’s me. Well?’

‘She picked me up just past the Pizza place. I acted as though I didn’t remember who she was – a bit spaced out. She offered me two hundred to help out at a dinner tonight. A group of business people from Melbourne, sizing up the Coast for investments – at least that’s the story. They want a

bit of entertainment – nothing very heavy. There'll be five girls and two guys to match the five men and two women in the party. No fucking, just eye-candy - sort of 'pet for the evening' – something like that.'

'Do you want to do it?'

'No. But I will. Do you mind?'

'Yes.'

'Enough to forbid me?'

'I can deny you nothing.'

'It's up to me?'

'Yep.'

'I promise I'll be careful.'

'What time?'

'Nine.'

'It's nearly eight, that gives us an hour to eat and plan.'

'I've eaten. She fed me – that's why I was so long. She wanted to make sure I was going to be sober.'

Our plan was simple. I'd park the ute as close as possible to the gallery without being obvious. Jon would go to the private entrance while I made my way down to the beach and climbed up the rocks so I could approach the back entrance unobserved. After retrieving the spare key I'd throw a rope onto the roof and wait. Jon would grab the first opportunity to sneak up to the roof, secure the rope, throw the end down, leave the roof door open and we'd take it from there. As I said, simple – or do I mean simplistic? He probably wouldn't even get near the door to the roof.

By ten o'clock I was starting to panic. Eleven cars and their occupants had arrived. Music and laughter sounded faintly above the lapping of waves. Suddenly, the slightest of thumps and a black line jiggled against the white, moonlit wall.

Somewhat less than invisible in dark tracksuit and woollen hat, I hauled myself up, slid over the coping and froze. Someone was coming out of the door to the stairs. Fortunately, he wandered over to the other side of the roof where he stood smoking, gazing towards the hills. I pressed myself back in the deeper darkness behind the coping, not daring to move. Music and light drifting up through the opened dome had camouflaged my noise. After a couple of minutes he flicked the glowing butt into the car park, gazed down through the dome, grunted and returned to the gallery.

It was a while before I dared move – there might be someone else. I tried the door - locked. I hauled up the rope and peered cautiously over the edge of the dome. In front of the blocked out windows, a small stage flanked by urns sprouting gilded foliage, was splashed by the glow of eight candelabra on small tables beside eight armchairs. The rest of the gallery was lost in shadows.

On stage a blond and a redhead wrestled indolently under an amber spotlight, watched by five middle-aged, overweight males and two fashionably scrawny women of a similar age dressed for a subdued cocktail party. Wearing black thongs and nothing else, three young women were serving something colourful and creamy while Jon and a curly haired youth topped up glasses. Soft music drowned conversation.

CC, her bones wrapped in lurex spangles, kept an eye on proceedings from the gloom. MacFife, the only healthy-looking person seated, lounged in the eighth armchair while Glaze, gauntly elegant in white linen suit, slithered among the guests; chatting, charming, smarming. The girls' lazy nude wrestle progressed to erotic fondling. Plates were cleared, glasses recharged, and guests exchanged nods of anticipation.

Easy-going music became a staccato beat as Scumble's massively muscled naked body prowled onto the stage. He grabbed the blond by the hair and thrust her face in his groin, then upended the redhead and buried his head between her legs. She gazed vacantly into space until Blondie, having aroused the beast, took a well-earned breather while Scumble copulated doggy style with the

redhead before carrying them off, one tucked under each arm. It was surprisingly funny and the audience was appreciative.

Glasses were refilled while CC herded the staff upstairs and closed the door. MacFife stood and asked a question. Everyone laughed and raised hands. CC wheeled in a chromium tea trolley and handed out straws and lines of what was obviously coke, on slabs of black glass. The excitement was palpable. Glaze, lean and mean in black codpiece, boots, dog-collar and armbands bristling with shiny metal spikes, leaped onto the stage, hands on hips, solemn, hard, and not even slightly ridiculous. The music thumped - insistent.

The trolley was wheeled away, music swelled and the waiters and waitresses, now in gold Lurex g-strings, lap-danced for their guests. Jon gazed at the ceiling while his woman busied her hands inside his pouch. Scumble reappeared with a whip and chased the young people away.

The music switched to a jolly rendering of The Teddy Bears' Picnic, and a prepubescent-looking girl carrying a basket of fruit skipped onto the stage, sat on a beanbag, peeled a banana and used it as a dildo before enticing her partner from his armchair to join her and experiment with different fruits and vegetables.

What followed was chilling. Two beautiful naked girls chased each other onto the stage and fought like wild cats. Blood dripped as they bit flesh and tore hair. There was no music, no sound other than their grunts and snarls. Eventually, one girl pinned the other with a knee on her neck, strapped on a dildo similar to the one that had done me such damage, and performed. I felt sick but the audience loved it.

Glaze, in crotchless leather harness, returned to the spotlight dragging a girl by the hair. Jon and the other boy followed and watched from the floor as Glaze flicked at her with a whip till she stripped. She cowered back in fear. The audience sat forward in their seats. However, before he could do anything else, Jon and the youth leaped onstage, snatched the whip and forced him to back off. The audience booed. The wailing girl clung to the other boy's legs for safety, but he simply held her while Jon ripped off his g-string, rolled on a condom and mounted her. After a noisy and obviously faked orgasm, the boys changed places, then each took an arm and dragged the sobbing creature off.

During the last act, in which Scumble and Glaze both misused a girl, Jon slipped in and whispered in MacFife's ear. He stood and accompanied Jon into the shadows. At the end of the act, CC replenished glasses and MacFife beckoned a sweating Glaze and Scumble into the shadows. There appeared to be a disagreement, but eventually they nodded, MacFife returned to his seat, and Scumble escorted a simpering CC to him. MacFife kissed her on the cheek and offered the arm of his chair, where she perched awkwardly. Glaze, still naked, jumped back on stage, fondled himself lewdly and grinned.

'We've decided that as you've been such a great audience we'll give you an encore to make your hair curl before you take your boys and girls home to practise what you've learned.'

They clapped in drugged dissatisfaction. Sex without love, affection, caring or tenderness, creates a gaping appetite. The greater the dissatisfaction, the more perverse the acts until only cruelty, pain and suffering can trigger release. I was trying not to think. It couldn't be real – could it? I'd been amazed at Jon's erection, until I remembered Frances's gigolo. I wasn't jealous. Loveless coupling with a stranger is pitiable, not something to excite jealousy.

My mind was a mess. Relief Jon had worn a condom. Fear he'd be forced to do worse things. Afraid of what came next – because CC had lied. The kids were going back to hotels with those revolting people. Hatred and fear prevented thought. I was hurting for the kids, although they didn't seem concerned for themselves. What horror story their childhood? I rolled away from the edge. All thought of trapping MacFife had vanished. Jon had to get out of there!

An insistent, thumping beat dragged me back to my post. Scumble, a priapic satyr, sweaty, glistening, was dancing towards CC, hips thrusting. He pulled her gently to her feet and kissed her long and passionately on the lips. She was obviously perplexed, but unworried as he led her onto

the stage. Glaze shoed all the kids out and up the stairs, locking the door behind them. The audience tensed.

Scumble was a tomcat taunting, encircling his prey. Mesmerised, CC turned with him, eyes captured in his. He made little dashes forward, she backed off – unsure. He retreated and smiled. CC held her hands to her throat, a gesture of uncertainty. Not yet fear. Scumble turned away, bent over and thrust his bum at her, wagging it obscenely, poking his tongue out at the audience. They sniggered.

Suddenly, arms swinging like a hairless ape, he bounded round the stage and, with a shout of triumph, pounced onto the woman's back, dragging her to the ground. A shriek of pain as something snapped, her ankle in those stupid heels. She grabbed at it in agony.

Scumble stood astride her, pulled her head up and thrust his penis in her face. She tried to push it away but he kept jamming it at her eyes, nose, ears, mouth. She grabbed it with both hands and tried to pull herself up. He stood firm, hands on hips, mouth a leer. She swung weakly for several seconds before her attacker nonchalantly raised a foot, sent her crumbling back to the floor, and wandered into the shadows.

The audience shifted in their seats – confused.

CC froze - terrified.

Glaze ran onto the stage and lifted her to her feet. She threw her arms round his neck and clung, ankle bent at a sickening angle. He smoothed her hair comfortingly. The music throbbed. She could have screamed her lungs out – no one outside would have heard. Out of the shadows crawled Scumble. He squatted behind her and slid his hands under her dress. She tried to pull away, but Glaze held her firmly while the shimmering garment was ripped from bottom to top and thrown away. Glaze stepped back, leaving the skinny, pale, pathetic old woman in ridiculously small, black-lace bra and panties, wobbling on one high-heeled foot.

A snigger rippled through the audience.

Scumble lumbered forward brandishing a knife. CC toppled. Glaze caught and held her while bra and panties were sliced off and tossed away, exposing grey pubic hair and breasts that were mere flaps of skin. Her whole being shrivelled as Scumble took hold of a nipple, rolled it viciously between finger and thumb, then held the knife as if to slice it off. He laughed, repeated the threat with the other, then turned to the audience, his face a question.

Their expressions were as frightening as the action on stage.

Scumble turned back to CC, shrugged apologetically as though to say he was only doing his job, took a nipple delicately between the finger and thumb of his left hand and gazed into her eyes. Her mouth was working but no sound arrived. He shook his head, shrugged again, then stretched the sagging, blue-veined flesh taut before slicing cleanly through the base of the nipple. Blood spurted – but only briefly. The pain must have been horrendous. Eyes seemed to occupy half her face, mouth opened to scream, tongue moved, lips stretched in agony and her throat worked, but the scream was silent.

Glaze bent forward, doubled her up, grabbed hold of thin thighs and lifted to expose the old woman's private parts. Little spurts of urine set the audience guffawing. Scumble bounced off stage to the nearest table, pulled out a candle, grinned cheerfully, waved it at the audience, then extinguished it between her legs.

The music was a soft heartbeat as Scumble wrapped his left arm around CC's neck and pulled her head against his chest as though regretting what he'd done. After gently brushing stray hairs from her eyes, he placed the heel of his right hand against her temple and gave a quick shove. The snap was audible from the roof. I rolled away and threw up.

I lay there, sick to the core. How could I have agreed to Jon's being part of this? A shout from the car park sent me to the front parapet. Cars were driving away, but Jon and his woman were arguing with MacFife, who took out his wallet and pressed money into her hand. She looked at it, nodded

angrily, slammed into her car and sped off. Scumble, now in a tracksuit, stepped up behind Jon, knuckled him in the temple, then tossed the slumped body into the boot of the Mercedes.

Chapter Eighteen

I don't remember getting to the ground, but the rope burns lasted for weeks. Fortunately, it took several minutes before MacFife was ready. No one saw me race round the dark side of the building to the ute, and by the time they drove away I had the engine running. It was after midnight so traffic was light and following difficult. When we got to the motorway with the extra traffic it was easier and I let a couple of cars slip between us.

At the Caloundra exit, the bloke in front of me stopped on an orange light while the Mercedes turned left. When the lights changed I passed dangerously and shot after them, catching up at the next set of lights where they turned right and disappeared under a block of apartments. I parked illegally just beyond the entrance and raced down the ramp in time to see them supporting Jon towards the lift.

I raced up the stairs, checking every floor. They reached the tenth before me, but not much. I peered from the stair well in time to see the door to 1002 clunk shut. Time to call the cops. As I dialled 000, the door opened again. I scurried out of sight and disconnected.

'Find out how much he knows and who else he's told,' McFife snapped. 'I'll be back with Bob as soon as he's cleaned up the gallery.'

'No worries.'

Scumble's door closed and MacFife walked softly to the lift. As it started to descend, my mobile rang, frightening the shit out of me. No one I knew would be ringing at that hour. It had to be Scumble trying Jon's shortcut keys. I switched off. With McFife gone I had a chance. I scoured the corridor for weapons. Nothing, unless...?

I swung the fire-hose reel out, turned off the nozzle, opened the tap, then dragged the hose to the door of 1002. After pulling myself plenty of slack I took a deep breath and knocked firmly. Inside, a chair fell over and feet scuffed to the door. I pressed my back against the wall on the same side as the opening. The door opened slightly, not enough for Scumble to see me. If it was on the safety chain, I'd had it.

It was. The chain glistened in the light. Fuck!

'Who's that?'

In what I hoped were the fruity tones of his master, I said, 'It's me again, Ian'

Scumble disconnected the safety chain and pulled the door a fraction wider. 'What's up, b...'

I kicked the door wider and directed a jet of water between his eyes, knocking him back into the room. He opened his mouth and the jet must have nearly ruptured the back of his throat. He collapsed to the floor, gagging. I smashed the nozzle against his head, let it go and belted him as hard as I could on the skull with a solid looking chair. He slumped, shook his head and lowered it for a charge. I belted him again. This time he stayed down.

Before he could revive I unplugged a standard lamp, ripped off the cord and bound his wrists together. There wasn't enough for his legs so I grabbed sheets from the bedroom, used Der's knife and tore it into strips for his ankles. The nozzle was still thrashing around so I caught it and turned it off; more for my safety than anything else, then I lost it. I took off his socks, rammed the stinking things into his mouth and couldn't stop tying and wrapping till he looked like an untidy mummy.

Where was Jon? I searched the bedroom, lounge, study, bathroom, toilet, kitchen and dining area, balcony. Panic. MacFife might be back at any moment. Crazy with fear I forced myself to take ten deep breaths and a slow, more careful look. The lounge was cluttered with empty cardboard cartons and chairs. Jon's mobile was lying on a glass-topped table. I shoved it in my pocket. There was only one cupboard, and it was empty.

The main bedroom – nothing. The study had never been used. I looked in the bath. In the linen cupboard. Back to the study again, a curtained window, but it was an inside wall! The curtain concealed a door to another bedroom. Jon was on his back on the mattress, tied to the frame with nylon line. Der's knife again. Jon was groaning, sluggish. I'd already been there too long. I sat him up and tried a bit of gentle slapping and sweet talk. He groaned again, then slumped, head in hands.

'Fuck I've got a headache! Stop hitting me! Whadaya want?'

A sharp blow with the knuckle to the temple causes temporary blackout. It can also cause memory loss, internal haemorrhaging, stroke symptoms, paralysis, brain damage. I fought back a scream of frustration and a desire to finish Scumble off.

'I need your help.'

'What's the prob.?'

'We've got to carry the bloke in the other room down to the ute.'

'Who's he?'

'Scumble.'

'Do I know him?'

'He's the bloke who gave you the headache.' I led him into the lounge.

'What's with the bandages?'

'He had an accident.'

Scumble groaned.

'Good.'

Scumble was heavy. Much too heavy to carry, so we dragged him out to the corridor and rolled him to the lift. Expecting MacFife to step out when it arrived, I had ready a cast-iron frying pan from the kitchen. Fortunately, it wasn't needed.

Down at the garage I checked the coast was clear, then we kicked and rolled Scumble to an alcove behind the lift. I smashed the nearest light bulbs with the frying pan, told Jon to stand out of sight, and dashed up for the ute. Hoisting Scumble into the back was gut breaking; he must've weighed a hundred and forty kilos. I closed the canopy door, told Jon to get in the passenger seat, and drove sedately up the ramp.

MacFife and Glaze sped south in the Mercedes as we drove north. They didn't give us a glance. For the first time that night I relaxed, although I had no idea where to go with our cargo of unlovely flesh, or what to do with it when we got there. Jon was humming monotonously.

'Jon.'

'Mmm.'

'Do you remember what you've been doing tonight?'

'Driving?'

'Do you remember performing at the gallery for CC?'

'I wish she was dead.'

'She is.'

'Good.' He continued humming.

'How's your headache?'

'What headache?'

Grateful for the moonlight, I drove around ruined canal estates looking for empty houses. The rear halves of three in a row had disappeared into the mud. The garage of the middle one was leaning but intact, and with a bit of shoving and heaving I pushed up the roller door, drove in and closed it behind us. I was desperate for a shit. Jon joined me in the garden.

'Are we staying here?'

'For a while. I need a rest.'

'Me too. I'm utterly stuffed.'

I dropped the tailgate of the ute and rolled Scumble onto the concrete floor. He landed with a thump, groaned and struggled. I checked his wrists and ankles to make sure they hadn't loosened,

and his pulse to ensure there was still enough blood circulating to keep him alive. I didn't care if he was hurting. I hoped he was. After a much-needed drink of water we rolled out the sleeping bags and clambered in without undressing. I tossed and turned; brain a seething morass. Jon leaned across and stroked my forehead. Within seconds, I was asleep.

Something woke me. I was sweating, pulse hammering in my throat. It was dark. I sat up and bashed my head on the side of the canopy. Jon groaned, rubbed his eyes and stared at me, jaw dropping stupidly. I put a finger to my lips. There it was again, a dull thumping, vibrating through the floor of the ute. Cautiously, Jon crawled to the back, opened the flap and peered over.

'Who's the inexpertly wrapped mummy kicking our tyres?'

'Scumble.'

'So,' he said softly, 'it wasn't a nightmare.'

'Yes it was.'

'I remember arguing with MacFife outside the gallery, and then you and me rolling that bundle of shit along the ground ... And then a car ride... And that's about it. Jeeze, I've got a headache.'

'Food'll fix it.'

We had enough salami, bread and tomatoes to keep appetites at bay, and washed everything down with bottled water. Scumble could live off his muscle and fat. Eventually I relented and poured some water onto his gag and let him suck a bit, but wasn't generous. During breakfast I told Jon what'd happened.

He shook his head in disbelief.

'It's like something out of a cheap thriller. You're so fucking brave and I'm the jerk in constant need of rescuing.' He gave an embarrassed grunt. 'How can I thank you, fair knight?'

I was tired and couldn't stop the irritation. 'You stupid prick! You were the one laying his life on the line – not me. So don't come over all grateful or I'll thump you.'

He grinned. 'So, wonder-boy, what now?'

'Pass.'

'Let's check out the neighbourhood.'

Dull clouds obscured the sun and threatened more rain. Walking cleared our thoughts, and talking removed my fears for the actors in the previous night's show. The girl that Jon and the other bloke screwed was a professional. She did the same show regularly - sometimes a victim, sometimes a nympho. He'd been arguing with Scumble beforehand because he didn't want to risk the injection. The younger chap, who was twenty, not fifteen, was a gigolo and used injections regularly, so did it for him. Luckily, nothing had gone wrong. As for the wrestling girls, it was an elaborate act. The blood trickling from chewed nipples and other bits came from capsules in their mouths, which burst when they bit on them. The hair ripped out was false.

We stopped and gazed vacantly across at the remains of jetties and villas on the other side of a swamp that had once been a canal.

'You said CC's dead. How?'

I told him.

He nodded, sighed, skipped a stone across the marsh, disturbing a dozen scavenging birds, and said in a voice devoid of emotion, 'It's my fault.'

'How?'

'I told MacFife CC had been putting the hard word on me, and when I turned her down she threatened me.'

'Did she?'

'No.'

'Clever.'

His look was inscrutable. 'I told him that when I told her to fuck off, she got angry and said MacFife eliminated people who annoyed him, and he'd erase me if she asked him to. I told him I

didn't believe her because he was obviously an A1 guy. But I thought he shouldn't let CC spread such rumours because someone might believe her.'

'Cunning.'

'Perhaps justice isn't an idle concept after all' He turned cold eyes on me. 'And I want an even worse end for Scumble, Glaze and MacFife.'

I waited in vain for his usual lop-sided, just-kidding grin. Gentle Jesus nonsense of turning the other cheek had cluttered my head since childhood. I feared that if I acted like the MacFife's of this world I would become as evil as them. My silence probably seemed accusatory, but I couldn't think what to say. Jon sat on a pile of rubble and tossed stones. I watched the gulls.

'You think I'm as bad as them, don't you?'

'No I don't! It's just that... that I don't want us to become like them.'

'When I was a kid,' he said quietly, 'a bull got under a fence into Mum's garden. He was a mean bastard and refused to budge. We tried to shoo him out the gate but he got nasty and threatened to charge. I took a stick and tapped him on the nose, but he flicked it out of my hand, lowered his head and began pawing the ground. Mum got frightened and told me to get out while she waved the rake at him. She only just escaped. He had deadly horns and could easily have maimed us.'

I ran to Grandpa's and he came over with a pitchfork. It was really something to see a skinny old man stalking such a huge beast. He held the pitchfork at the ready and inched forward, daring the bull to do something. Suddenly the bugger charged and Grandpa buried the tines deep in the bull's nose. The poor beast stopped dead, shook his head and, nearly pulling grandpa over, yanked backwards to pull out the spike. He then stood quietly, head down, blood pouring from a fucking great hole in his nose, flanks twitching. Grandpa walked around behind him, patted him on the rump and the bull trotted quietly out and back to where he knew he belonged.'

I tried to look intelligent, unsure what he was getting at.

'What grandpa did to the bull taught me you've got to treat people in ways they understand. Humans are just animals – no better, no worse.'

'You make me feel like a snag.'

'Snag?'

'Sensitive, new-age-guy. A wimp.'

'You're certainly not a wimp. I'm an Old Testament lad. Eye for eye and tooth for tooth. In my book, CC had it coming - and I'm glad.'

'If I'm honest with myself, I guess I am too.'

'Good on ya.'

'But I can't get away from the idea that if I retaliate in kind I'm as bad as them.'

'You're joking.'

'No.'

'Who started all this crap?'

'They did.'

'Do you have the right to defend yourself?'

'Yes.'

'Will they stop persecuting us if you ask nicely? Will they go to the cops and confess to the murder of Frances and tell them you didn't do it? Will they give you back your inheritance from Max? Will they apologise for trying to murder us and Patrick? Will they...?'

I shoved my hand over his mouth. He was getting worked up and I didn't want to draw anyone's attention. Not that there were people about.

'You're right. A hundred percent right. I agree. It's like our Dutch neighbour used to say, soft doctors make stinking wounds.'

He wasn't to be mollified. 'Are you easy about the fact that everyone thinks we're murderers? That the cops are after us? That...' He stopped, slumped onto his knees and buried his face in his hands.

I prised his fingers apart. He was crying. 'Hey. Hey. I agree with you. I just needed to be reminded. I'm sorry.'

He wiped his eyes roughly, almost angrily, then stared into the distance, unsmiling.

'Come on,' I said with laboured joviality. 'We'd better keep moving. My head isn't clear yet.' I dragged him to his feet and we strolled on, arms round each other's waists, bravely uncaring. We saw no one so our bravery was untested. After half an hour of silent plodding, an idea began to bubble. I closed my eyes and let Jon lead me until I tripped.

'Lift your feet, bumblefoot.'

'Sorry. Had my eyes shut.'

'Eyeless in Gaza.'

'I've seen a way out of this mess.'

'The Blind Seer, no less.'

'We get Scumble to telephone MacFife and say that somehow you escaped, he recaptured you and took you somewhere, and now he wants them to join him. We hit them on the head as they come through the door and hand them over to the cops.'

'I escaped from the bed with wrists and ankles tied to the legs with nylon fishing line. Good one.'

'OK. The gas man came to check for a leak, so he had to get you out of the place and...'

'At two in the morning.'

We mulled over all the reasons we could think of for Scumble taking off with Jon, but had to give our brains a rest. Finding a safe hiding place was more important. Back at the garage we unwound the bandages from our prisoner. He was looking bruised, pale, and turning yellow at the extremities.

'If I take out your gag, will you shout?'

He shook his head, but as soon as the socks were out, gave vent to a bellow. Jon clonked him on the head with a length of timber he had picked up from the road. Our little talk had done me good; worries about Scumble suffering from concussion or brain damage never crossed my mind. While he was unconscious we removed the torn sheets I'd used to secure his wrists and feet, and replaced them with cord. It wasn't too soon. Much longer and we'd have had a gangrenous corpse.

I rubbed his toes and fingers until the yellow turned blue and then pink. The pins and needles of returning blood set him groaning. He struggled and nearly strangled himself. We had replicated his hog tying of Jon, lying him on his stomach with a noose round his neck, wrists secure behind his back, knees bent and ankles tied securely together, a short line joining ankles, wrists and neck. Very neat, very efficient, very satisfying.

'Thirsty,' he rasped.

'Open wide.' Jon pissed over Scumble's mouth. The joke wasn't appreciated. I trickled some water between dry lips, before stuffing the socks back and securing them.

'What's the stink?'

Scumble had shat himself. We looked at each other, nodded in agreement, and with Der's knife hacked off the big man's clothes, leaving him naked, blood speckled, and squirming on the filthy floor of the garage. I took a bucket down to the canal, found a patch of water between the mud, and hurled it at his filthy rump. Jon went for the second bucket, returning with a long-handled toilet brush.

Scumble's posterior was raw but clean by the time we bundled him into the back of the ute. The place wasn't safe. The house directly opposite had sprouted signs of life in the form of five tattooed youths and a motorcycle, and several other houses were obviously occupied. Even if they were squatters like us, we couldn't afford to make contact. After checking the coast was clear we opened the doors and drove sedately away from the coast.

'Where are we going?'

'Home.'

'Won't the cops be watching the place?'

‘Probably, so we’ll drive straight past and visit Rory and Lida. They’ll be wondering what happened.’

‘About time. I haven’t seen them since the night before that bastard in the back tried to kill me. Must be ten days ago.’

‘Only ten days? Seems like a year.’

‘I reckon. D’you think they’ll have heard about it?’

‘The cops have probably been pestering them.’

The drive was uneventful and, in Hank’s little truck, as bumpy as I remembered. Scumble was going to be bruised. We drove quietly past my gate. No evidence of visitors. Rory and Lida’s place appeared deserted. We parked and knocked at the caravan door. No reply. Their ute was in its usual spot, so they had to be around somewhere. A flicker of movement a dozen metres away between the trees and there was Rory, shotgun at the ready. I waved and called out, but he brandished the gun as if to say, clear off. Jon waved and started to walk towards him. This provoked a stream of abuse that ended with, ‘...so get ya fuckin’ arses off a my place.’

‘Either he doesn’t recognise us,’ I whispered, ‘or he does and thinks we’re murderers. I’ll do the talking.’

‘Rory. It’s me, Peter. This is Jon. He’s shaved his head and borrowed those stupid clothes.’ In the unforgiving morning light, Jon certainly looked a desperado. Dark rings round his eyes, head bald, too many earrings, tight jeans and bare chest, and like me, in need of a shower and shave.

‘Get your hands up!’

We held our hands high, open palms facing him. He took a couple of wary steps towards us, squinted intently, and snapped, ‘Taking a risk, aren’t you?’

‘How do you mean?’

‘Cops are after you for killing that woman at the gallery where you worked. You’d better get out of here.’

‘Rory, we didn’t kill that woman. Do you honestly think I’d kill someone? It’s a frame-up and we’re the patsies.’

‘They said you’d say that.’

‘Who did?’

‘The plain-clothes cops who came looking for you the next morning.’

‘Did you check their ID? They weren’t cops. They were the killers!’

‘Oh yeah? How come they’re after you?’

‘I discovered they’d murdered Max, so they tried to get rid of me, but I escaped. Then they came up here to kill Jon, but I got here first.’ I was pleading, in danger of crying, and despising myself for the weakness.

‘It’s true, Rory. And you bloody know it.’ There was no pleading in Jon’s voice. ‘Be a man for chrissakes. Put the stupid gun down and go and get Lida. She’s got more sense than you. She’ll know we’re telling the truth.’

Lida appeared at the edge of the trees. Cautious but curious.

‘Is it really you, Peter? And Jon? Surely it’s too dangerous for you here? The police keep checking your place in case you return.’

‘We guessed as much. Can we go inside in case someone wanders over?’

They looked at each other. Lida nodded and Rory waved us towards the caravan. We sat at the table. Rory stayed at the door, gun at the ready.

‘Put that thing away!’ snapped Lida. ‘They’re not going to hurt us.’

When he tucked it behind the bed, I felt as though I was coming up for air after too long under water. Shotguns can be very tense making, especially when pointed at your useful bits.

‘OK. What’s the story.’

I gave them a fairly graphic résumé of the past ten days. The stunned silence was gratifying.

‘It has to be true. No one would make something like that up.’ Rory stared at us. ‘Where’s he now? Still in the back of the ute?’

I nodded. ‘You might recognise him. He was probably one of your plain-clothes cops.’

‘I’ll switch out his lights while you and Jon dig a big hole.’

‘Thanks, but we need him.’ I outlined our idea.

‘Risky. But as you say, you can’t go to the cops; they’d never believe you. Hell, if we half believed you’d killed the woman the cops certainly will.’ He pushed himself to his feet. ‘But it’s a crappy plan.’

I shrugged, feeling like a kid who hasn’t done his homework properly.

He sniffed. ‘What’s the real reason you came up here?’

‘Like I said, to let you know what had happened and make sure you were both OK. After I spirited Jon away from my place there was no telling what they’d do. If they thought you’d helped him, they might have got nasty.’

‘They weren’t nice, but they weren’t nasty.’

‘They were menacing and I hated them.’ Lida was angry.

‘And you waited ten days to find out if we were OK. Some friend.’

‘Rory! I was busy!’

‘Yeah, yeah. Just winding you up. So you want me to give you a hand?’

‘It never entered my head. Honestly! There’s no way I want you risking anything for me.’

Rory grinned and turned to his wife. ‘Make us some coffee, Liebling, while we take a look at the murdering bastard in the ute.’ Outside, Rory winked, ‘Let’s put the wind up him, eh?’ When we got within hearing distance he began talking loudly, accent slightly stronger than usual and dripping with menace. ‘Yeah, no worries. Back home I got rid of dozens of slimy infiltrating commie bastards. One quick tap on the back of the head, and dump them in a pit. There’s so much land here no one will ever find the body. Grows good vegetables after a while too.’

‘But what if the tap doesn’t kill him? Jon grinned.

‘I make bloody sure it doesn’t! Much better if he wakes and dies real slow while the dirt works into his lungs.’ He gave a resounding and evil cackle.

‘If he doesn’t do as he’s told, he’s all yours,’ I said. ‘I’m in no mood to muck around.’

I opened the back door of the canopy. Rory peered in, poked Scumble in the ribs and laughed, ‘Plenty of meat on him. Ever tasted long pig?’

‘Long pig?’

‘Roast human.’ He smacked his lips noisily before adding, ‘I sure hope he doesn’t cooperate. I’ve got a sudden hankering for a tasty bit of flesh.’ He roared with laughter, landed a resounding wallop with the flat of his hand on Scumble’s bare buttock, slammed the door and led us back inside to coffee and cakes.

‘Here’s what we’ll do. You sort out your plan, get everything ready, then give us a ring.’ He slapped me on the thigh and turned to Jon. ‘You’re a bloody wizard, mate. The ute’s as good as new. That’s the only reason I’ve offered to help. Can’t risk losing the best mechanic in the neighbourhood.’

‘And he feels guilty for believing you might have killed that woman. But even if you had killed someone,’ Lida added darkly, ‘I would still love you, Peter.’

Rory blushed and nodded. ‘I was stupid.’

‘I’d call it sensible, so stop apologising. We’ll need your number. If I’d had it I could have rung you and got you to warn Jon.’

‘Think of all the fun you’d have missed.’

I turned to Lida. ‘Is it OK with you for Rory to help us?’

She looked perplexed. ‘But of course, darling. I want to help too.’

I found I couldn’t speak, so mumbled something I hoped sounded like thanks, and stood up to go.

Rory took me by the shoulders and shook me. ‘Take bloody good care, mate. Some time tomorrow, then. I’ll be sitting by the phone.’ With a thump that almost dislocated my shoulder he led us out and they both stood waving.

Jon drove and I telephoned the Alconas to let them know we were still alive. Mad was out so the call was redirected to Brian’s surgery. He was relieved to hear from me, had no news, and didn’t know any Justice of the Peace who was young, active and a freethinker. The only one he knew was an elderly, fundamentalist Christian opposed to birth control, abortion and homosexuality, but in favour of corporal and capital punishment.

I called Hank on his mobile. He and Celia were enjoying themselves, had gone whale watching and fishing, spent a couple of days on Fraser Island and were feeling relaxed. Patrick, according to his secretary, was physically recovering but still a neurotic mess. In my opinion he always had been, but I didn’t say so. I told them everything was fine with Jon and me and we were making good progress, but I needed the services of a trustworthy and adventurous JP. He gave me the number of his accountant, Matthew Kingstone.

‘But no funny business, Peter. Patrick and I still need his services, and so, I imagine, do his wife and kids.’

I promised to take as much care of Matthew as I did of Jon, and said I’d ring as soon as I had anything to report.

Chapter Nineteen

Back at the coast we looked for a safe house in the washed-out beachside suburbs because they were now the least populous. It sounded simple; find an isolated place where we could come and go without attracting attention, but by four o’clock we were getting desperate. I was gazing in despair at the mess that had once been a sports ground, when something caught my eye.

‘What’s that behind the trees?’

Jon backed up. The playing fields had dissolved into a foetid swamp, but the concrete changing rooms with their upstairs clubhouse were intact. The houses and shops opposite had been abandoned to encroaching marsh, and a clump of dying cottonwood trees hid the building from the road. The entrance was on the side furthest from the shops and road, invisible unless you went round the back. Ideal.

We stopped in front of the door and dumped our cargo. I untied the rope between neck and ankles, grasped it firmly and prodded. The downstairs changing rooms were knee deep in muck, so we forced Scumble to slither up the concrete stairs, scraping off a few patches of skin on the way. One false move and I could yank on the rope and strangle him, or kick him back down.

The stairs opened into a large and airy room, on the far side a door gave on to a smaller space with high windows along each side. I lengthened the noose rope and tied it to a stanchion between the windows on one side, then slipped a second noose round his neck and fastened it to the stanchion on the other. There was enough slack for him to sit down, but as his hands were still behind his back, not enough to let him reach the knots. The gag stopped him chewing on the rope.

We spread ourselves in the main room and pooled ideas. After an hour we still had no plausible reason for Scumble to take off with Jon, stay hidden for a couple of days, and then ring MacFife for assistance.

‘My stomach thinks my throat’s been cut. Who’s getting dinner?’ We tossed for it and I drove the couple of kilometres to the nearest store, where I stocked up on tins of ham, fresh apples, bananas, bread, biscuits, and a crate of bottled water. There was certainly no shortage of food in the shops. Scumble got a couple of bananas.

An idea jelled. ‘How about this?’

‘I’m all ears.’

‘The police were called to a domestic dispute in the flat next door. They knocked on Scumble’s door and told him they would need to interview him afterwards, so he took off.’

‘How serious was this argument?’

‘It’d have to be life threatening.’

‘And if MacFife checks the story?’ Jon pulled a face. ‘You can do better than that.’

‘OK. He got a call from the cops asking to see him. Guessing that one of their many enemies had dobbed him in, he thought it best to scam before they arrived.’

‘And the fire hose? Water everywhere?’

‘Beats me.’ I had run out of ideas.

‘And why would the cops ring first?’

‘OK, smart arse, your turn.’

‘Instead of cops, how about if a buddy had rung to warn him of a rumour that the cops were searching suspect houses?’

‘Better. And the fire-hose?’

‘That was a warning to MacFife that something was wrong.’

‘Clever.’

‘Mmm. Let’s see what the expert has to say.’

‘Right. But, exactly what did the police suspect?’

‘Drugs? You told me they were snorting lines at the party.’

‘And the blokes with briefcases the other day. They’d come to pick up supplies, you reckon?’

‘Perhaps.’

‘And ArtWorks?’

‘Let’s ask Scumble.’

Our prisoner looked more humble than Scumble and made no attempt to call out when we removed his gag. His flesh was grey, unappetising and soft; a muscle freak with withdrawal symptoms. At the orgy in Frances’s bedroom and again at the gallery, he had pumped himself up. Now belly, tits and bum were sagging.

I stared at him. He stared belligerently back.

‘You’re not as beautiful as the first time I saw you.’

‘Who the fuck are you?’

‘I’m the guy who’s arse you split open with a purple dildo and then dumped tons of rubble on, at the back of the gallery, before going back inside with Bob Glaze to rape and murder Frances. And this is my partner, whose neck you were going to break before tossing him off my roof.’

Like all good and true Aussie blokes, Scumble had no use for displays of emotion. If he was surprised, he kept it hidden. Although after the previous twenty-four hours he’d probably used up his meagre reserves of feeling.

‘Whaddaya want?’

‘What’s ArtWorks?’

‘Get fucked.’

Jon thumped one of the noose ropes with the side of his hand, making Scumble’s eyes pop.

‘Answer the question,’ he said evenly.

‘Get fucked.’

‘Is he into drugs?’

No answer.

We tightened the ropes from neck to window until he was standing, and left him to his thoughts. Having forgotten to buy candles, we went to bed. The concrete was hard and cold through the sleeping bags. Even a heart-warming cuddle couldn’t keep the bogeyman at bay, and sleep was fitful until dawn. Scumble was nearly dead on his feet. I lengthened his ropes. He sagged onto his knees, breathing ragged.

I tried the salesman's trick – first names.

'No one knows you're here, Ian. No one at all. If you do as we say – convincingly, we will feed you well, and if the outcome is successful, we will let you go.'

'Like fuck you will.'

'We will let you go. You're no prize. Neither is Glaze. We want MacFife. He's the one who took my inheritance. It's all about money, Ian. You're just a lump of useless shit. Certainly not worth a murder rap. When Frances died I should have inherited half her estate. It was in Max's will. Do you know how much that is? Millions, Ian. Millions of dollars that should be mine.'

Fortunately for my credibility, Scumble was ignorant of the contents of Frances's will. His eyes focused. Money was something he could understand.

'But you also want revenge,' he said with quiet certainty.

'For what?'

'What we did to you.'

'You're joking! You didn't do anything. You failed. But I bet MacFife won't fail when he discovers you and Bob couldn't eliminate a naked bloke bound hand and foot. And when he realises the stripper who told lies about CC so he got you to cut off her nipple and snap her neck in front of seven strangers, was the same bloke whose neck you were supposed to snap at my place, what do you reckon he'll do? Why should I bother with revenge when MacFife will do it for me?' I stopped to let that sink in. 'Unless, of course, you help me get to him before he gets to you.'

He flicked me an indecipherable look.

I shrugged and continued as though it was neither here nor there. 'I don't blame you for what you've done. You were just doing your job. Not very well, but I imagine you were doing your best. No, Ian, I'm not interested in revenge, I just want my money.'

Scumble had gone a funny colour.

'How'd you know about CC? The kids were all upstairs.'

'Openings in roofs are not only for shoving people to their deaths, they also provide front row seats for snuff shows.'

He turned to Jon. 'So CC hadn't been blabbing?'

Jon smiled evilly.

Scumble shook his head in guarded admiration.

'Fuckin' clever. You did me a favour; I hated that bitch.

'Glad to be of help. Were the shows in that tent place in the hills any better?'

'It was you!'

'What was?'

'You set that fat pig free. You... You... Fuck you! Fuck you! Fuck you!' He spat, missing by miles.

'And you,' Jon grinned.

Scumble turned his face away and sulked; offended more than frightened. Time was disappearing. He had to be more frightened than offended. We shortened the noose ropes again until he was standing on his toes. Jon took out his knife and started cleaning his nails, looking speculatively at our victim.

'Ian's not circumcised, Peter. That's unclean. We ought to set things to rights before he meets his maker.'

'Good idea,' I agreed, hoping he wasn't serious.

Scumble nearly strangled himself when Jon puled out his foreskin and pricked it with his knife, drawing a drop of blood. A high pitched humming squeezed through Scumble's clenched teeth. My flesh crept.

'How about infection?' I asked innocently. 'It smells as though he hasn't washed that thing for a while. And shouldn't you wear rubber gloves?'

‘Yeah, get me some. As for infection – the way he’s going he won’t live long enough for it to matter.’

I brought in a couple of plastic bags. Jon shoved his hands into them, grabbed the penis again and made another slight nick. Droplets became a trickle. Scumble slumped, gurgled, eyes popped. Swaying on his ropes. Jon slapped him across the face.

‘What are ya? A fucking girl? Come on, take it like a man. I know what I’m doing, I’ve castrated dozens of bulls and rams. Circumcising can’t be that much different. Hey!’ He turned to me excitedly. ‘Let’s castrate him at the same time.’

I shrugged, apparently indifferent.

‘Suits me. I’ll get a bucket for the blood.’ I left the room again. We were running out of bluff and I was beginning to panic. When I returned Jon was making another, deeper cut.

Scumble’s resolve collapsed. ‘OK! I’ll do anything! Anything! Just get that fucking knife away from me!’ His voice was high and hoarse, neck knotted with strain.

John looked up, disappointed. ‘Are you sure? I was just getting the hang of it.’

‘Of course I’m bloody sure! And you’ll let me go afterwards?’

‘As soon as MacFife’s in the same situation you’re in now.’

‘Just tell me what you want me to do.’ He sounded convincingly broken. But then he had managed to look sorry for CC just before breaking her neck.

We let him sit, gave him a meal and a bucket of water for ablutions, threw a rug over his shoulders to remind him that life would be better if he cooperated, and discussed the story he was going to use to set the trap for his boss and Glaze. It took the rest of the morning.

Scumble reckoned he knew nothing about MacFife’s business arrangements. As far as he knew, no drugs had been sold through the gallery. Indeed, he seemed confused by the idea. He was simply a bullyboy, a performer, and part-time pimp for a house of prostitutes further up the coast. In the middle of a discussion about how best to entice his boss to our lair, he began losing concentration so I wrote everything down for him while Jon went out and bought a pizza and bottle of wine. When he’d eaten we made him more or less comfortably secure, and left him to recover. He had to sound convincing.

I went outside to telephone. The JP Hank had recommended had a pleasant voice and was very friendly until I told him I was the bloke accused of murdering Frances. He drew an audible breath, but didn’t interrupt while I gave him an outline of my side of the story. I waited a full minute in silence before he snapped, ‘Why are you ringing me?’

‘Hank said you might help.’

‘How?’

I told him.

‘It’s going to be dangerous.’

‘Not for you, unless...’

‘Exactly.’ Another long silence. ‘Hank Fierney. It was Hank who recommended me to you?’

‘Yes.’

‘OK. Give me a call when you’re ready. I’ll keep the mobile switched on.’

Relief made me giggly. When I telephoned Rory to tell him we were running a day late, he asked if I’d been drinking. I told him the good news then went back to relieve Jon at his post.

Our prisoner slept like an innocent all afternoon and right through the night. It wasn’t a question of no brain, no pain, it was no conscience no insomnia. The following morning we fed him well, let him wash himself and defecate in the bucket, and at six o’clock guided him through a dozen dummy runs with a block of wood instead of a phone. When he had his spiel off pat, I dialled the number he gave me. Nothing. No sound.

‘Flat battery?’

‘It’s brand new.’

‘Maybe the concrete’s insulating us.’

We encouraged Scumble to slither up the stairs onto the flat roof, and tried again.

‘It’s ringing.’

‘You’re a dead man if you stuff this up.’ Jon’s tone even convinced me.

Scumble’s face came to attention, his body tightened and a nervous twitch played with his lips. ‘How’s your mother...? Yeah, my mother’s well too.... Yeah, sorry boss, things got a bit hairy there for a while, but it’s all sorted... It was that fuckwit, Argyle. The cops picked him up for speeding, breathalysed him, searched the car and found grass. The bastard slimed his way out of it by naming me as the supplier! Then he reckoned he felt guilty and rang to warn me. Christ he’s dead meat... Yeah, it was a bit of a rush... I threw the hose and water around to warn you and give the cops something to think about... Na! I’m not stupid. The place is clean as a whistle. There’s nothing there... Yeah, you do that. Bloody Argyle needs topping. He’ll deny it of course. Fuckin’ slime ball... Yeah, I bloody know it’s two and a half days. I’m not stupid... Like I said, I couldn’t ring you because I left my mobile behind in the rush. I wrapped the kid in sheets and didn’t realise till this morning that he had one in his pocket... Yeah, I know I should’ve looked... OK. OK! Here’s the number.’

Jon passed him a paper and Scumble read it out, then listened to a long diatribe from MacFife before butting in angrily.

‘I nicked a fuckin’ ute from the basement car-park, that’s fuckin’ how... Why the fuck would I run out on you? I was protecting you! Making sure I hadn’t been followed! That’s why I left it a couple of days before contacting you! Because I didn’t want you walking into a trap! ...Yeah, that’s right. If I’d been followed they might have been lying in wait to see who joined me.’

Scumble was irritated and that was excellent. Much more convincing than crawling. ‘Exactly!’ he sighed in exasperation. ‘That’s exactly why I didn’t go near the gallery... I’ve got me a perfect place for the moment, but I need Bob to spell me, and you to make the bugger talk. I’ve been a bit heavy handed, so it’s best if you take over while he’s still got a mouth he can talk out of. What’s a fuckin’ cert is that he knows more than’s good for us, and he’s told someone else. But he’s an irritating cunt and I’m gunna get so mad I’ll kill the bugger before he tells me everything... Ha, ha. Beaut... Right. Here’s where we are...’

Jon leaned over and switched off the phone.

‘What the fuck?’

‘If you give directions now, even if you tell him not to come until twelve-thirty, there’s nothing to stop him checking out the place. Then he’d see Rory and the JP arrive.’

My spine tingled. How many other things had we forgotten? The phone shrilled. It would be MacFife, wondering what had happened.

‘Hang on!’ Jon stared at Scumble. ‘When you answer it, speak very quietly. Tell him about having to come up on the roof because the walls are so thick, and some kids were hanging around outside and you ducked so they couldn’t see or hear you, and inadvertently shut off the phone. Tell him the building’s locked and these are the first people you’ve seen near the place, so it’s perfectly safe, but midday will be best when everyone’s at lunch. If he asks the address, pretend you can’t hear, the reception’s fading, and you’ll ring him at twelve if the coast’s clear.’

Scumble, frowning in concentration, whispered into the mouthpiece. ‘Yep, it’s me again. Sorry about that,’ and followed Jon’s instructions almost verbatim. He was shaking when he disconnected. ‘He’s suspicious.’ He looked across at me in fear. ‘It wasn’t my fault! You heard me. I did my best.’

‘Yeah. You were bloody good, Ian. Take it easy.’

Jon brought us back to reality. ‘We’ve got two and a half hours.’

Scumble’s protests at being bound and gagged again in his room were stopped by a pull on the neck ropes. I went back up to the roof and telephoned Rory and the JP.

Rory, in overalls and heavy boots, arrived within the hour. He parked his ute in an adjoining street and jogged over with a holdall from which he took his shotgun, a pump-action .22, a vicious-looking knife with a zigzag blade, a pair of sports trousers, flowered shirt, shoes and socks.

He and Jon went in to Scumble's room, untied him and told him to get dressed. I waited out at the road trying not to panic, certain I'd forgotten something. A snazzy little metallic-gold sports car zipped in to the kerb. I got in and we drove a couple of blocks away to park. Matthew Kingstone, in baggy beige knee-length shorts, white shirt and leather scuffs, was tall, skinny and palely freckled, with short-cropped auburn hair. He offered an engaging smile, tripped over his feet, dropped his briefcase, laughed and suggested I carry the camcorder if we wanted it to arrive in working order.

Showing no surprise at Scumble, now dressed in the smaller room, he asked us to remove the gag. After introducing himself, he told Scumble he was here to get the real facts, his voice suggesting that everyone except Ian was a liar. Ian relaxed. Matthew set the camcorder on the floor, checked the viewfinder, set it going, and began chatting. But the camera unnerved Scumble. Rory's knife pushing his Adam's apple a millimetre or two out of alignment magically freed his inhibitions. Rory withdrew and went downstairs to keep guard.

Then we couldn't stop him. Matthew's grunts of compassion and comprehension, coupled with sympathetic tuts of commiseration fuelled the confession and denouncement of his corrupt and vile former boss. In Scumble's bosom dwelt a simple, peace-loving soul, desiring nothing more than the chance to live an honest, law-abiding life. He had been an unwilling slave for nigh on five years, after hitting someone too hard during a game of cards. It was an accident, but when the bloke died, MacFife convinced him that if the cops got to him he'd spend the rest of his useful years in jail.

He admitted to pushing Max over the edge of the dome, but it too was an accident. He'd just decided to disobey MacFife's orders and not murder Max, when Bob Glaze pushed his arm. So it was Bob's fault. When bulldozing the rocks onto me, he had deliberately missed me and tried to create a cave so I could dig myself out. Thus, he had saved my life. Frances had attacked him with a knife. In self-defence, and not realising his own strength, he had accidentally knocked her down the stairs and killed her.

Of course he'd had no intention of snapping Jon's neck! He was only waiting for a chance to immobilise Bob before letting Jon go. Patrick arrived before he could manage that. He had pleaded with Bob to let Patrick go, but when they telephoned MacFife, he insisted they imprison him, so their hands were tied. He had tried, ever since the capture, to find an excuse to go up to the hills to release the poor man, and he only discovered Patrick had escaped because he had secretly gone, that very day, to release him.

As for CC, it was a dreadful accident. MacFife had forced drugs on him earlier in the evening, knowing they would blow his mind and he would be unable to control his strength. Not only that, but Bob had told him CC's nipples were false, like the blood and hair of the two wrestling girls, and he had no idea her neck was so fragile. The river of contrition dried, and he directed a trusting gaze at Matthew.

'Thanks, Ian. That will certainly convince everyone of your true character. You've been very wise and brave. Well done!' He leaned forward to shake the misunderstood man's hand, but was wrapped in a bear-hug. I released the safety-catch on the .22, and Jon stepped behind, ready to slit Scumble's throat. He looked up, apparently surprised.

'Hey! Cool it. I only want to hug the first man to try and understand me.'

'Let him go.'

'I thought you trusted me?'

'It's the old problem of actions and words.'

Scumble looked stupid, and suddenly I realised that he was. He was cunning-dumb and I almost felt a pang of pity. Almost.

'We believe you, Ian, but you have to prove it by finishing the job.'

'You're right, Peter.' He blushed and looked almost shy. 'Is it OK if I call you Peter?'

‘You can call me on the phone, if you like.’

He thought I was laughing at him and a flash of anger flickered, to be quickly replaced by the usual expressionless stare. My guts turned queasy. He looked at Matthew.

‘I’ve just thought of something. I reckon MacFife won’t come inside unless he sees me.’

‘So?’

‘So you’re going to have to let me go down and talk to him. If I just shout down from the window, he won’t come up. He’s suspicious already.’

Matthew looked at us. ‘This is your department, gentlemen. ‘I’m merely your quasi-legal eyes and ears.’

We argued for a bit, then Rory came up with the solution. We’d let Scumble do as he suggested, but a length of nylon fishing line would be round his neck, trailing invisibly up the stairs. We went over everything again. I reminded Scumble that MacFife would kill him if he found out the truth, so he’d better keep all his hopes in our boat. He nodded distractedly.

Having twenty minutes to spare we went over the plan again. Rory would wait in the downstairs changing rooms with his loaded shotgun in case someone stayed behind in the car. If they did, he’d capture them. If both went upstairs, he’d follow and prevent their escape. No one dared think about what we’d do if half a dozen thugs arrived.

Jon and I would be out of sight at the top of the stairs, hanging on to the nylon noose round Scumble's neck. Matthew would wait with his gear in the smaller room ready to record two more confessions, and Scumble would wait at the foot of the stairs, ready to welcome MacFife, allay his suspicions, and usher him up.

‘Hang on,’ I said. ‘What’s going to happen to the line when Ian comes back upstairs?’ I slipped it round my neck and tried it. It was hopeless. The line curled, tangled, knotted and tripped me. We’d have to trust him.

‘If big-boy runs for it, I’m waiting with the shotgun.’

‘You can’t watch two people.’

‘I’ve got two barrels, but to make certain, you wait at the window with the rifle until I shout, Jon. Just make bloody sure the guys in the car don’t see you.’

In the increasingly unlikely event that we managed to lure them upstairs, Jon would cover them and Scumble with the rifle while I immobilised them. We had rope, lumps of wood, and not much else. If Scumble decided to change allegiance, we’d had it. If MacFife had a gun, we’d had it. If ... so many ifs.

I avoided looking at Matthew’s increasingly pale and worried face.

It was twelve o'clock. Back on the roof, Scumble telephoned MacFife. ‘Yeah. Giddyay, Boss. Everything’s clear. No one’s been near since I called last. It’s a fuckin’ cemetery, so you can come on over... Whadaya mean I didn’t tell you? I bloody did. Jeeze, must be getting old timer’s.’ He laughed unconvincingly, gave precise directions and disconnected.

‘Fuck I need another piss. This is bloody nerve wracking.’ He leaned over the edge and urinated down the wall.

My Mercedes, in need of a wash and polish, drew up at the bottom of the stairs where Scumble waited. He’d complained about the flowery shirt, reckoned it was a give-away as he’d never be seen dead in a poncy thing like that. We convinced him MacFife would think it was a brilliant disguise. Rory hovered unseen and unseeing in the gloom of the changing rooms below. I peered down on Scumble’s bristly head and massive shoulders from the top of the stairs. Jon, .22 at the ready, squatted under the window. Matthew waited in the back room. The air was utterly still. Not a breath stirred the dying leaves. No sound came from either the town or the marshes beyond the low dunes.

The car window whined down and MacFife said, ‘Raise your hands above your head, Ian, and no sudden moves. It’s not that I don’t trust you, simply a precaution.’

Scumble raised his hands. ‘No worries, Boss. I don’t trust no one neither.’

‘Very wise,’ replied MacFife.

Two pops, and Scumble collapsed onto the bottom step where he twitched and kicked several times before rolling onto his side. A trickle of blood stained the flowered shirt and ran on to the concrete. Silence for several very long seconds, then Glaze's voice, 'I reckon it's all clear, Boss.'

The murder left me blank. We'd planned for everything except that. I froze. Jon looked a question, and Rory, unaware of the killing and unable to see what was happening, stayed listening for someone to go upstairs. Matthew later said he was wetting himself in the back room.

Two shadows crossed the threshold at the foot of the stairs and a suede shoe nudged Scumble's thigh. I scuttled across to Jon and whispered, 'They shot Scumble.' We tiptoed into the back room, closed the door, warned Matthew to silence with fingers to the lips, and flattened ourselves behind the door. There was nowhere else to hide.

Glaze and MacFife made no noise on the stairs and didn't speak. I was nearly insane with fear when the door burst open, slamming against my knee.

Glaze grunted. 'The fuckin' place's empty.'

MacFife's voice, 'Behind the door.'

Glaze leaped into the room and landed on his toes facing us, pistol at the ready – just like the movies. Before his heels touched the ground, Jon's discharging rifle smashed my eardrums and something burned the side of my head above the left ear. Glaze spun back, gun flying as he clutched at his shoulder.

In the eerie silence we heard MacFife run down the stairs into the waiting arms of Rory. But what had seemed like hours to us upstairs, had been less than a minute. Rory, unaware Scumble had been shot, had remained at his post to cover the car and be available when we shouted. As soon as he heard the rifle he broke cover, raced for the stairs and tripped over Scumble's body. Before he could pick himself up, MacFife knocked him flying. He fell against the steps, gashing his arm.

I raced downstairs to find Rory scrabbling for his gun, and the Mercedes racing away. Rory cursed and shook his fist, then turned to me in despair. Blood was pouring from a deep cut on his upper arm.

'Come on, let's get back upstairs before the neighbours get curious,' I said, brushing sweat from my eyes. My hand came away bloody.

Chapter Twenty

Muttering angry apologies, Rory stomped up, to be met by Jon.

'Stop apologising, Rory,' he said roughly, 'it wasn't your fault.' He grasped Rory's arm, inspected the cut, took off his shirt, ripped it into strips, and gave them to Rory. 'Here, wrap it tight.' Turning to me, he wet a piece of torn shirt, wiped away the blood, reckoned it was nothing to worry about, but bandaged it 'just in case.'

Rory continued apologetic as he used the rest of Jon's shirt to try to stem the flow. A shaking, sweaty and very nervous Matthew joined us.

'That bloke in there... his shoulder's bleeding. He's in agony.'

'Good. Is he safe?'

'Well and truly trussed. I'll get his gun.' He turned to go back.

'Leave it!' Rory snapped.

Matthew was turning green. 'You... you're both bleeding too... and... where... where's the third man?'

'Got away, thanks to me,' Rory muttered.

'Crap,' I snapped

Jon caught Matthew as he fainted, lay him on my sleeping bag, then went downstairs to look at Scumble.

Matthew groaned, sat up, saw the blood seeping through my bandages and threw up over my bedding. I took a deep breath, quelled my own nausea and fetched him a tumbler of water. While he sipped I massaged his neck and head until colour returned. He swallowed the last of the water, handed the tumbler back and stared at the floor.

‘Sorry about that, Peter. I’m not used to violence.’

‘Neither are we. Well, not until recently.’

He looked at my bandage. ‘You’ve been shot!’

‘He missed. It’s only a nick.’

‘You could be dead.’

‘You could be driven into by a semi-trailer on the way home.’

‘I told Sally it was just going to be a routine witnessing of a statement. But suddenly I could picture myself dead, and her and the kids alone, not knowing where I was, or anything and... I’m sorry about chundering.’

‘Shut up, Matthew. I owe you an apology. I was so keen to trap that bastard I closed my mind to the possible consequences. I knew he was a killer, but somehow thought we were immune.’

Jon ran up the stairs. ‘Well, that was a waste of videotape. Fuck, what’s the stink?’

Mathew blushed and helped me throw the sleeping bag out the window.

‘Who shot him?’ Rory asked. ‘I heard nothing.’

‘He used a silencer.’

‘Who?’

‘That moaning bugger in there.’

‘And who shot him?’

‘Jon,’ I stated proudly.

Jon winced.

Rory nodded appreciatively ‘Bloody quick thinking, mate.’

Jon shrugged. ‘Not quick enough.’ He turned to me. ‘You OK?’

‘Yep, thanks to your reflexes.’

‘Plenty of practice on rabbits.’

I tucked my hands into my armpits to hide the shakes. ‘I was certain we were done for. Thank goodness it was you with the rifle. I’d have just stood there while he picked us off.’

‘Course you wouldn’t.’

‘I bloody would.’

Matthew added his praises.

‘OK. I’m a hero,’ Jon snapped. He turned to Rory. ‘What sort of ammo was it?’

‘Solid longs.’

‘Then it probably went straight through, I’ll see if I can find it.’ He slipped into the other room, muttered something to Glaze, and the moaning stopped.

Rory turned to Matthew. ‘Camera OK?’

Matthew came to life. ‘Crikey, I left it in there. I sure hope so, otherwise it’s all been for nothing.’ He stood up, blinked and whispered, ‘I think I’m going to faint.’

It was hot and very humid. I sat him on the floor, far from Jon’s sleeping bag, and went in to find the camcorder. Jon was digging at a patch of stucco. Glaze was writhing in the corner, blood seeping from his shoulder, a continuous groan seeping through clenched teeth.

Jon turned to me with a grin. ‘Viola, viola, as they say in France.’ He held up a flattened bullet. ‘All evidence removed.’ He stepped over Glaze, kissed me lightly on the lips, and I followed him out.

Rory had removed the fainting man’s shirt and was fanning him with it. Matthew’s bony white chest, pale nipples, thin arms and jelly-belly made me wonder how he kept his wife faithful. Jon stood beside him, watching. The comparison was cruel, but Matthew didn’t notice. I tried to imagine what I’d have done if a runt like him had come knocking at the gallery doors on a wet and

windy night, instead of Jon. Matthew tested the camera, breathed a sigh of relief, swallowed manfully, stood shakily and said bravely, 'Time for interview number two, gentlemen?'

'Na, let him wait. He's only in pain. Not bleeding to death. I need a coffee.' Jon was full of surprises.

We sat in a circle in front of Glaze, dunking biscuits into our coffees and slurping disgustingly. Glaze affected not to care. Matthew set the recorder going. I started chatting.

'You're in the shit, Bob.'

'You're the fuckin' shit. Wait till MacFife gets you.'

'Don't you recognise the bloke who winged you, Bob,' I asked sweetly.

'He's just a fuckin' stripper.'

'He's the fellow you planned to drop from the roof of my house.'

Bob turned red eyes on me. 'And who the fuck are you?'

'I'm the one you nudged off the rocks so Scumble could bury me under a pile of boulders before you went back to have your way with Frances.'

Glaze's sang froid wasn't as froid as Scumble's. His jaw dropped several centimetres and for a second he appeared to forget the pain in his shoulder. 'But... But... But.' He gave up, staring at me in horror. Then... you aren't dead? It was you who....' He stopped, unable to continue.

'Who rescued Jon. Then we freed that fat sod you entombed in the hills. You haven't been a very successful combination, you and Scumble.'

Sweat was pouring off him, he was turning yellow and obviously in need of medical attention, but first he had to talk. I laughed wildly. 'Not only did you luck out with Jon and me, but you helped murder CC because of a pack of lies Jon told MacFife. I wonder what sort of welcome party MacFife will throw for you when he finds out.'

No reply.

I tried to sound businesslike, but it came out bitchy. 'You've two choices. Either tell us everything about MacFife's little game, what he's likely to do now and where we can find him, or refuse to talk and we'll leave you here to rot until MacFife comes back to finish you off - like he did with Scumble. We've not murdered anyone, and don't intend to start now. We simply want what's due to us.'

'What're you going to do if I tell you?'

'We'll take you to a tame doctor we know and tell him you had an accident while target shooting. He'll patch you up and you can go home - or wherever you think you'll be safe.'

'You'll really let me go? Promise?'

'Of course. You're no use to us....' And so it continued until he wilted and poured his woes into the video camera. The story was so similar to Scumble's they must have concocted them together in an idle moment. Naturally, his murder of Scumble was also an accident. He thought Scumble was carrying a gun and had only intended to frighten him, but MacFife had moved, jolting the car and spoiling his aim. He regretted his friend's death more than he could say. By the time he'd finished, his voice was almost inaudible and his thoughts were wandering.

Rory drove his ute over to collect his gear, and a very relieved Matthew drove home to his wife and two and a half kids with the recordings, promising to make copies and await our instructions. Jon and I removed evidence of our stay, then helped Glaze downstairs, bundled him into the tray of Rory's ute, covered him with a tarpaulin and followed Rory in our vehicle to the emergency bay of the main hospital.

As Glaze was loaded onto a gurney by a couple of orderlies, he came to his senses. 'You promised!' he yelled. 'You fucking bastard! You promised! I'll get you for this!'

I walked across and patted him on the arm. 'This is Australia, mate. You forgot to ask if it was a 'core' promise. You'll know better next time.'

Jon was acting dumb at reception.

'...but you must know his name!'

‘Like I said, Miss, I’ve no idea. He copped it while shootin’ someone. We was jogging past and seen it. I reckon you should tie him to his bed and call the cops.’ He turned to go.

‘But... you can’t go! Who are you? You’re having me on... Come back!’

Rory was waiting. ‘It’s just on five. What now?’

‘Go home and give Lida a kiss from us, and I’ll phone the cops and tell them to pick up Scumble and Glaze.’

‘Where’re you staying?’

‘We’ll go to a friend’s for a hot shower, a good meal and...’ I draped my arm around Jon’s neck and kissed him on the cheek, ‘a comfortable bed.’ Jon pulled away with an embarrassed grunt.

Rory laughed. ‘Mr Cool.’ He glanced at Jon. ‘What’re you blushing for? You’re a lethal combination, you two’ He climbed into his vehicle and leaned out the window. ‘I know I was worse than useless, but if you decide to go after the one that got away, I’m ready. I’ve a score to settle too, now.’ He tapped at his bandaged arm. ‘Wouldn’t mind another swing at the bastard.’

‘You’re not useless. Neither of us would have dared do what we did if you hadn’t been there. Your guns and support were essential. And we’re counting on you for next time.’

He nodded briefly and drove away.

Jon was staring at me, started to say something, shrugged, got in the ute and drove towards the hills

‘Better make those phone-calls.’ We’d stopped outside a small hall.

‘What’s the matter?’

He frowned. ‘Nothing. Phone the cops and get it over with.’

We got out and leaned on the cab, staring across the roof at each other. I punched in the emergency number and a string of computer generated voices eventually set a living policeman’s phone ringing. After about four lifetimes someone grunted, ‘Incidents.’

‘There’s a dead body in the disused sport’s club down by the beach, and the murderer is in the main hospital with a bullet in his shoulder.’

‘And who are you?’

I disconnected.

Jon was still frowning.

‘Come on, out with it.’

‘It’s nothing.’

‘You’re embarrassed because I pecked you on the cheek.’

He sighed, shrugged and said softly, ‘Are you always so open about being... you know?’

‘Queer?’

‘No! Yes. Oh, whatever!’

‘Not usually. In fact, that was a first.’

‘Why’d you do it?’

‘Rory knows I’m gay and unless he’s brain damaged knows you are too. Do you want to pretend we’re just mates?’

‘I thought so. But... it’s sort of a relief to have it out in the open.’

‘Hank and Celia knew Max and I were a couple, but because it was never discussed and we were never affectionate in their company, I had no idea whether they understood that two men can love each other deeply; what they thought about our relationship; or even if they approved! I loved them and they loved me, but there was always an invisible barrier preventing everything from being perfect. Are you listening?’

Jon was staring across the road. ‘Yeah. Go on.’

‘After Max’s funeral I had an argument with Patrick and they leaped to my defence. Only then did I learn they thought our love was the best thing that had happened to Max. That made me decide to be honest with all real friends. I must speak about it with them; must be sure they’re comfortable with it and still consider me to be a good man. It is not enough to have an ‘unspoken understanding’

because you are never sure and love is tainted by fear of what people might be saying behind your back.

‘That makes longwinded sense.’

‘Jerk. If we always censor our behaviour in front of friends, it’s conceding that it’s only OK for us to be lovers if we pretend we aren’t. As though, in reality, it’s something dirty and shameful. We’d go on imagining they don’t mind, not knowing whether they do or not.’ I was becoming agitated, remembering the years of pretence.

‘Gotcha. So now Rory knows exactly who and what we are - a couple of queers with no hang-ups, who like each other.’

‘Like?’

He grinned. ‘I wonder why it’s so hard to say? OK, we love each other. But you’re right. Now it’s out in the open with him I do feel sort of – I don’t know – sort of clean inside.’

‘And so you’re going to be honest with everyone?’

‘Everyone.’

‘What if they can’t handle it?’

‘That’s their problem.’

‘Brave boy.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘In case you hadn’t noticed, we share this planet with a lot of very nasty humans. Rory already knew I was gay and I knew he had no problems with it. He’d guessed we were an item. I was simply confirming it. I don’t intend to blab my secrets to everyone.’

‘Neither do I!’

‘Really!’ I was sounding unpleasant and hated myself. I knew perfectly well what he meant, but I was worried, tired, and couldn’t stop myself.

He pulled back in surprise. ‘Hey, you know I’m not a blabbermouth.’

Something poisonous was worming its way into my belly. ‘Everyone knows Patrick trashed my place.’

‘Peter! Stop it!’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’

‘Come on.’

‘You don’t want to know.’

‘I do.’

‘OK. You say you love me, but you’re everyone’s best friend. Rory, Lida, the Alconas, even Matthew thinks the sun shines out of your arsehole. You treat them better than you treat me. When we’re with other people I feel as though I don’t exist for you - and barely exist for them.’

‘You know that’s not true.’

‘Do I?’

‘Your friends are nice and... and I want them to like me too. I want them to be our friends.’

‘It’s not only friends. On your first day at the gallery you chatted up old man Smith so well he thought you were the director and ignored me completely. Same at Mad’s opening.’

He stared at me, incredulous. ‘You’re crazy. That’s so long ago!’ He shook his head in despair.

‘OK, I admit it. I’ve sometimes ignored you when other people are there because I didn’t want anyone to guess how much you meant to me. I was – you know – ashamed. Not of you! Scared they’d think I was queer. But I’m not ashamed any more.’ He blushed angrily and looked away. When I didn’t speak, he turned back with a sly smile. ‘You’re jealous! You’re jealous because when I’m there you’re not always the centre of attention.’

I wondered if it were true, but saved thinking about it till I’d got one more thing off my chest. ‘It’s not only that. Sometimes you’re so independent I’m... I’m not sure where I stand.’

‘On the passenger side of Hank’s ute.’

‘Smart arse.’

‘You’re the most important person in my life.’

‘For now.’

‘For ever.’

I grunted, knowing I was being stupid but unable to stop. I wanted him to prove something. I didn’t know what, but it was important. ‘Promises, promises.’ I was almost sneering.

Jon stared, then shrugged as though he’d suddenly realised I wasn’t worth arguing over, and began to walk away. My heart slammed against my ribs. He couldn’t leave me like this? Could he?

He turned back, caught the fear in my eyes and grinned. ‘You stupid fart. Perhaps this’ll convince you?’ Strolling around to my side of the truck he wrapped his arms round mine, pulled me to him and plonked dry kisses on forehead, cheeks, nose, and a long, succulent one on the lips. ‘Now do you know where we stand?’

‘In front of the Bridge Club, about to be surrounded by a bevy of ancient belles.’

The doors had opened and several women were descending the steps towards the car park.

‘Let’s make them jealous.’

‘Make them angry, you mean. Let’s go.’

‘Not till you apologise and say I’m the handsomest and perfectest man in the world.’

‘You’re the most handsome and perfect man in the world - and I love you,’ I shouted, shoving him into the cab. He slid across to the driver’s seat. As we drove away, giggling like a couple of kids caught stealing fruit, I waved at three elderly dames standing beside their cars. One waved back and winked.

‘Park at the top of the hill so I can phone Mad.’ I dropped my hand onto his thigh.

He looked across and blew a kiss. ‘Tell her to get the double bed ready.’

The phone rang twelve times before she answered it.

‘Hi, Mad, it’s Peter.’

A brief pause, then, ‘Kevin! How lovely to hear your voice. It’s been ages. Where are you?’

‘It’s Peter, not Kevin. Jon and I are on our way up – if that’s convenient.’

‘Oh, what a shame, you sound so close I thought you were nearby. You must bring Cheryl for a visit soon.’

‘You’ve got visitors?’

‘I have no idea, Kevin. Why don’t you give Brian a ring, he’ll know. Here’s his number.’ She read out Brian’s telephone number. We were both silent for a few seconds before she gave vent to a high pitched giggle, blew a couple of kisses down the line, said, ‘Me too. Love to Cheryl,’ and disconnected.

‘It seems Mad has visitors she doesn’t want us to meet. She pretended I was Kevin, whoever he is, and gave me Brian’s number. This needs thinking about.’

‘Stop fretting. It’s just the vice squad. They heard we were friends with the Alconas and want to know if they know we’re queer.’

‘That’s a relief. I thought it might be something serious.’

‘You’re just an old worrier.’

‘Warrior?’

‘Yeah, that too.’

‘Not so much of the old, if you know what’s good for you.’

I telephoned Brian and was informed that Dr. Alcona was in surgery. We should call back in about thirty minutes.

‘Where’s Brian’s surgery?’

‘No idea.’

It was in the telephone directory under Veterinary surgeons. Hilltop Animal Hospital: Dr. B S Alcona. We drove in the general direction, found a delicatessen, bought pies and bags of chips, took them to a park and washed them down with bottled water. Forty minutes later we rang again.

‘Sorry, he’s in surgery, can you ring.... Oh no, here he is. One moment please.’

‘Brian Alcona?’

‘Peter Corringe.’

‘Peter! So you’re still alive?’

‘Just. Brian, I rang Mad a while ago and she was either off her rocker or there’s something wrong. Do you know anything?’

‘Nothing.’

I repeated the conversation.

‘Where are you?’

I told him.

‘Wait there until I contact you.’

A few minutes later he rang back. ‘Mad had visitors. In case your name rang a bell, she pretended you were someone else. She apologises, but you can’t stay with us tonight, so here’s plan B. Drive to the corner of Alcazar Avenue and Fortune Street. Check you’re unobserved, lie down across the seats and throw something over you so it looks as though the vehicle’s empty. Lock the doors but leave the keys in the ignition. When I arrive, unlock the doors but stay lying down. Got that?’

‘I’ve also got a cloak and dagger.’

‘Good for you.’ He disconnected.

We decided he was over-reacting, but to humour him, drove to the appointed spot, locked the doors, snuggled together in the leg-well of the passenger side, and threw a blanket over ourselves. Jon smelled sweaty and sexy. A short while later someone tapped on the roof.

I flicked the lock up with my finger, Brian got in, started the engine, drove for a couple of minutes and stopped. ‘Stay there until I’ve closed the doors.’

A roller door clanged down plunging the place into shadow, and we sat up. Brian tapped on our window and I opened the door.

‘Where are we?’

‘In the surgery’s loading dock. Grab your important stuff and follow me. It’s OK, everyone’s gone home.’

‘Did Mad give you any details?’

‘No. She asked me to apologise, but said she’d prefer to wait and tell me everything when I got home. Sounded ready to cry, so although the kids will be home by now I don’t want to hang around.’

‘Right. Lead on.’ We took phones and wallets and trailed Brian through to the staff room.

‘What’s wrong with your head?’

‘I banged it on the corner of a building. It’s just a graze.’

‘Sure? I can look at it.’

‘No, really. It’s nothing.’

‘If you say so. OK then, make yourselves comfortable. There’s tea and coffee in here, showers are through there. I’ll drive your vehicle back to where you parked it and lock it, leaving the keys in the glove box. I left my car just round the corner from yours. You’ve got spare keys?’

We nodded.

‘Then I’ll go home and find out what’s up. If the phone rings, don’t answer. Leave it to the answer-phone. I’ll ring your mobile.’

We nearly shook his hand off. Words weren’t enough.

Brian grinned like a kid on an adventure. ‘I’ve always dreamed of being a spy. I planned this getaway when you two set off on your search for justice. It seemed entirely probable, with your track record, that you’d need rescuing and hiding again. Thank goodness it was me this time and not Jeff. He’d never let me forget it. Cheers.’ He left, and the air chilled.

I shook off the feeling and joined Jon in the laundry. There was a shower in there as well as a washing machine and drier, so we showered, shaved, washed and dried our clothes, then threw all the cushions we could find onto the floor of the staff room, wrapped ourselves in a couple of

blankets from a store cupboard, and collapsed. The sex was short but sweet, followed by a review of all possible next steps.

Glaze had reckoned his boss would stay away from the tent house, but would probably keep the gallery going. He was certain no one would be going near either Scumble's or Glaze's apartments, and had insisted he knew only one other business, an up-market apartment block in Noosa, where MacFife housed his girls.

Jon suggested going there on the off chance of catching McFife, but I'd had enough for one day. Instead, we talked until we'd convinced ourselves that, despite the murder weapon being still at the crime scene with Glaze's prints on it, when the cops went to the hospital he would still manage to pin the murder of Scumble onto us, get them to contact McFife, and be set free. We had to get the tape to the cops and make sure Glaze's next stop was the cop shop. Then there would only be MacFife to track down.

To this end I rang Matthew and asked him to contact the police immediately, suggesting they hold Glaze until they'd seen the tapes. Three minutes later he rang back. The cops had picked up Scumble, but when they got to the hospital Glaze had vanished. Did we still want him to take the tapes to the police? There seemed little point, so I told him to hang on to them until we contacted him again.

We stared at each other in dismay.

The mobile trilled.

'Peter?'

'Brian? Everything OK?'

By the time I disconnected Jon was twitching. 'Well?'

'You're obviously psychic. It wasn't the vice squad, but it was the cops. They'd jacked their ideas up and thought of questioning all the artists I'd had anything to do with at the gallery.'

'Took them long enough to think of that.'

'Slow and sure wins the race. Anyway, that's why they went to Mad's. She thought she'd fooled them, but they've a sixth sense that rings a little siren in their heads when someone's lying. They were there when I phoned, and when she put the phone down they pestered her with irrelevant questions until something she said must have triggered suspicions, because they returned with a search warrant and almost took the place apart. They found nothing of ours, thank goodness, but it was traumatic. They turned the main bedroom upside down, asking who slept where.'

Poor Mad's nearly out of her mind, worrying about us, what the cops are thinking, whether they'll be charged as bad parents – and her guilty worries about Der and Dra have exploded into full blown fears for the survival of the family.'

'But that's crazy! The cops don't give a stuff. They were just being nosy.'

'Brian told her that, and you heard me say something similar, but she can't stop worrying. He told me we could stay here the night, but to leave early in case the cops wake up to the possibility we might be here. What do you reckon?'

'It's only eight o'clock. I reckon we clear out now and sleep in the back of the ute.'

'Me too.'

We raced around putting everything back as we had found it, borrowed a couple of blankets to replace my sleeping bag and, unable to open the deadlocks on the doors, climbed out a rear window, pushing it back so it looked closed. Finding our vehicle wasn't so simple. We'd parked only a few blocks away, but having crouched down on the drive to the surgery we couldn't work out what direction to take. Jon went one way and I the other, checking all the side roads. It took twenty minutes, by which time I was sure it'd been stolen. We drove until we found a construction site, parked behind the office as if the ute was a left-behind company vehicle, crawled into the back and lay awake most of the night.

Chapter Twenty-one

Dawn was breaking as we drove north over the bridge to look for somewhere to breakfast. From above, the river appeared more swollen, swifter and much more dangerous than from the shore. I was amazed the bridge had survived and very relieved to reach the other side. Unlike the parks and beaches south of the river - either swept away or littered with flotsam and sewage - the northern beaches had escaped with little more than eroded sand dunes. We found a park with working showers and toilets, and our little petrol stove soon produced coffee, eggs and fried bread. Jon chewed his thoughts along with the food.

After an extended silence he looked across the picnic table, frowned and said quietly, 'It has to be MacFife who got Glaze out of the hospital, so we've lost our only weapon - surprise. He'll be on the lookout for trouble and if we're stupid and he gets to us first, you can bet your socks it won't be like a James Bond film where the villain sits and gloats, giving the heroes a chance to turn the tables. It'll be like it was for Scumble. Bang, bang, you're dead.'

'I've been thinking the same thing. We have to show the tapes to the cops, get Matthew and Hank to vouch for our upstanding characters, and hope for the best.'

'Yep. No point in ending up dead.' Jon agreed. 'Unless...'

He slipped a sly grin. My heart sank. 'Unless what?'

'Unless he comes after us and we have no option but to nobble the bastard.'

'Uh-oh.'

'Remember how Bill Smith talks?'

'Yes, and I know he took a shine to you, but isn't he a bit old?'

'Maturity adds allure, and think how grateful he'd be to escape that wife!'

'Is this leading anywhere?'

'Say something that sounds like him.'

I barked from the back of my throat, 'Bill Smith here! Rum show about old Glaze, what?'

'Excellent. A bit more plummy and you've got him to a T. Now, imagine you're him telling MacFife that the cops asked about us, and yesterday he saw us somewhere.'

'I don't like the way this is heading.' I cleared my throat and looked away so I wouldn't laugh. 'MacFife? Smith here! Bill Smith. Artist. The police were pestering me the other day about that chappie from the gallery. The one who murdered your wife! Bloody shame! Condolences and all that... What? Couldn't abide the fellow. Damned exhibitionist! Skimpily waistcoat and bare chest. Bad blood. Obviously a pervert. Harrumph. (I nearly choked on that) What's that? What am I ringing for? Ah! Yes! I've seen the young whelp. Thought I'd ring you. Can't be bothered with the boys in blue. Still on mother's milk, most of them. Yes, young Corringe. Saw him the other day in a house by a canal. Thought you should know... Don't thank me, glad to assist.' I was out of breath and my throat was sore.

'Exactly like that!'

'And what do we do once we've lured him and a dozen of his heavies to our non-existent hideout?'

'Dig a pit and cover it with branches and when they stand on it...?'

'A lot of work.'

'Shoot them?'

'And then dig a pit and throw them in?'

'A lot of work.'

'I thought we'd decided to leave it to the cops?'

'We will. I was just tossing ideas around.'

'Well, toss them back where they came from.'

It was the memory of a Roald Dahl short story that suggested the plan. I phoned Rory with the idea and he said to give him half an hour. We showered and washed my sleeping bag, cleaned and organised the back of the ute, aired our bedding and inspected the graze beside my eye. It was already healing. The weather was balmy, but our situation was depressing; Scumble's video worthless. Glaze's too.

MacFife could deny all wrongdoing because he had in fact done nothing. He had organised, paid for and provided space for the whole show, but as far as we knew his hands were clean of actual, physical dirt. He was nowhere near the gallery when Max was killed, nor when his wife was raped and murdered. He wasn't outside watching when I was being tossed over the edge, nor at my place with Jon. Nor did he have any dealings with Patrick. As for CC, probably no one would miss her. Maybe after a couple of years someone would ask what had happened to the scrawny bitch who used to manage MacFife's girls, but no one would miss her.

If we ever hoped to restore our reputations we'd have to get MacFife to confess. I tried to imagine what the reaction would be if we breezed up to the police station and told our tale. I probably wouldn't believe it myself.

'What do you reckon MacFife's done with Glaze?'

'Good question. He'll be no use to him for a while; that shoulder was smashed to bits.'

'And he took him away before they could operate.'

'Unless he's taken him to a private hospital.'

'Unlikely.'

'Yeah, poor bugger. He's been locked away to make sure he doesn't talk.'

'Perhaps he's been put down?'

'MacFife doesn't dirty his own hands. Unless he's got another assassin waiting in the wings he'll be stuck with Glaze until he dies naturally of a bullet wound to the shoulder.'

'He's not stupid enough to have any more thugs who know as much as those two.'

'I'll bet he's recruiting. Meanwhile, he'll wait and see what happens, hoping Glaze doesn't drop dead and leave him with a body to dispose of.'

'Where do you reckon he's keeping him?'

'Tent palace? Gallery? Brothel?'

'Or another place we know nothing about.'

The mobile buzzed. It was Rory with a list of requirements. I noted everything and said we'd call him as soon as we'd found somewhere suitable.

Jon read aloud what I'd written. 'Empty house on wooden stumps, more than shouting distance from other houses. Not too visible from the road. Electricity on. Water-tight. Not too much rot. We'd better get cracking.'

We drove all that day and most of the next without seeing anything remotely satisfactory. All the old houses we passed were either refurbished yuppie residences, or tenanted, or ruins, or cheek by jowl with similar houses. The road terminated at the wrought-iron entrance to a security-gated enclave for the wealthy. A guard came out and waved us away before we'd even stopped.

On the map, the route back to the coast looked promising; in reality it slunk through an industrial wasteland. Row upon row of small factories producing everything from paint to roofing iron, water tanks to glass, ceramics to sawn timber. A fish processing plant belched steam and stench and a used-car yard spread carnival flags over half an acre of restored wrecks. A road branched off to the right. On the right hand corner, a prosperous looking service station and tire repair parlour boasted a queue of cars. Next to it, a four-storeyed replica of a banana presided over the remnants of a failed amusement park.

Jon pulled in to the side of the road. 'Straight on, or turn right?'

I tossed a coin and we'd just completed the right turn when something caught my eye. 'Stop!'

He threw out the anchors and we skidded to a halt. 'Did I miss it?'

'What?'

‘Whatever it was I was braking for.’

‘Idiot. I’ve seen something – perhaps. Pull up over there.’

We parked next to a gate in a white picket fence, surmounted by an unnecessarily large sign declaring the place to be “Lovable Landscapes”. The corner block next door, opposite the service station, was an undeveloped couple of hectares of long grass. We got out, locked the ute, nodded to the woman nattering on the telephone in the Swiss-chalet-style office, and browsed among concrete cherubs, coy Venuses, bird-baths of every persuasion, concrete cats, birds, dwarfs, terracotta urns, fountains, garden lights, and an assortment of shrubs, potted palms, cacti and seedling boxes.

Arranged along the back boundary were piles of pavers and bricks, small mountains of gravel, sand, bark-chips and sugar cane residue - everything anyone could possibly require to create the garden beautiful. We leaned nonchalantly on the picket fence.

‘Try not to be obvious, but what do you see over there in the long grass?’

‘An old mango tree and a shed rotting away beneath it.’

‘A cottage. Probably the old farmhouse.’

‘Your eyes must be better than mine.’

‘Worth a look?’

‘Tonight?’

‘Tonight.’

The woman was still on the phone, so we smiled, displayed our empty hands and drove away in search of somewhere to park, make a meal and rest until nightfall.

‘It’s not rotting. Some of the stumps have sagged, but it’s sound.’

‘As far as we can tell by torchlight.’

‘And dry.’

‘As far as we can tell by torchlight.’

‘And the power’s connected.’

‘And there are no neighbours.’

‘Everything doctor Rory ordered.’

It was filthy, stank of rats, possums and snakes, most of the windows were broken and the chimney had collapsed, but apart from that, it was perfect. I phoned Rory, telling him we’d have it ready in a couple of days. He said it would take him that long to prepare his stuff, so we agreed to meet in forty-eight hours.

We slept the rest of the night in the back of the ute in the park where we’d had breakfast, and the following day bought three sheets of hardboard, a bucket, a broom, paint, detergent, and a set of tools. Under cover of darkness we drove up to the house, unloaded, drove back to a busy section of the road, parked and walked back to the house, making sure we were unobserved.

By the light of low wattage bulbs we painted rough black shapes on the boards and screwed them to the insides of the windows of the largest room. From the road they would look like the shadowy interior. After sweeping and cleaning we repaired the locks and hinges on the outside door at the back that opened into the kitchen, and screwed the front door to the jambs. The last job was to make sure no window could be opened, and to screw shut all internal doors except the one between the kitchen and the large room.

The sun rose, the road became busy, and we collapsed into sleeping bags on the newly cleaned floor, worrying about things we might have forgotten, and arguing about the best way to trap our prey.

‘Before I give MacFife my impersonation of Smith, I’ll have to ring him to make sure he hasn’t got a cold – or died.’

‘Why not ask him to phone for you while you’re at it?’

‘You think he’ll recognise my voice?’

‘Anything’s possible.’

'I'll disguise it.'
'What're you going to say?'
'No idea.'

Mrs Smith answered. 'Yes?'
'Is Bill there?'
'No! William is not here! Why do you want him?'
'To buy a painting.'
'Which one?'
'Can I speak to him?'
'No!'
'I must.'
'Then go to Canada!'
'How long has he been there?'
'Who are you? I know your voice.'

I disconnected.

'One good idea ruined. The man's not even in the country.'

'Good thing. It would have been too easy for MacFife to contact Smith and check. We have to be more subtle.'

'You mean this place ain't subtle?' I looked around. 'If someone told you your enemy was hiding here, would you approach at night?'

'Not without a small army.'

'Exactly, it's an obvious trap. We'll have to meet him somewhere he won't be suspicious, then overpower him and bring him here. Where would he feel secure?'

'Somewhere public?'

'Getting warm.'

'Sauna bath?'

'Not that warm.'

'Pass.'

'A hotel?'

'Excellent! We'll meet him in the Hilton Starlight Lounge.'

'Nope – he's used to class.'

'Then you've got me. Under the Storey Bridge is the nearest I got to class in Brisbane.'

'Do you know that mansion by the river? The one they made into a boutique hotel?'

'No.'

'Well, that one.'

'And what's the lure?'

'We'll make him a tempting offer. He'll come to our hotel suite to check the goods. We nobble him, bring him back here and torture him until he agrees to confess all to the cops. Simple.'

We argued over the details – all the details.

Rory, when he pulled up with Lida at the park the following morning, thought it a better idea than the first, but balked at being the bait in the trap. 'I know nothing about drugs.'

'Neither do we. All you have to do is make the phone call, meet him in the foyer of the hotel in Brisbane, smooth-talk him up to your suite without his body-guard, and leave the rest to us commandoes waiting inside.'

'He'll bring his body-guard inside.'

'We're three to two.'

'He'll be armed.'

'We've got a .22 and a shotgun.'

‘He’s sure to have another silenced handgun.’ Rory pulled a face and turned to Lida. ‘What do you reckon?’

‘We’ve done more dangerous things.’

‘Not in Australia.’

She shrugged thin shoulders. ‘Someone’s got to make it safe for Peter to return home.’ She said it simply, as though impatient with our procrastination, then turned to me. ‘We’ll both need new clothes, then I’ll go to the gallery to find how to contact MacFife. How much money can we spend?’

‘Whatever it takes.’ I gave them my card and pin number, knowing they wouldn’t waste a penny. After a quick cup of coffee we left Rory and Lida to turn themselves into believable members of the underworld, and set off for Brisbane to check out the hotel. We’d return the same evening to prepare the house for a guest.

Parking the ute as near the service entrance of the hotel as we could manage, we sauntered down the ramp in new overalls, tool kit slung casually over shoulder.

‘Yeah? Whaddaya want?’ The man’s shaven, sunburnt head merged into a matching thick neck and disappeared into dark blue overalls a size too small. Tufts of red hair sprouted from nostrils, ears and neck. He was tall, wide, suspicious, and our first setback. I’d imagined that, dressed as repair men, we would be able to saunter in unopposed, case the joint, decide on a plan of action, and...

‘Sink blockage on the second floor.’ How did Jon come up with such brilliant ideas?

‘Who are ya?’

‘Sunboy’s Plumbing.’ A woman rang. Said she couldn’t get the usual bloke.’

‘What woman? What’s her name?’

‘Who?’

‘The woman who phoned you?’

‘Didn’t ask.’

‘Mrs Robinson?’

We shrugged in unison.

‘Hang on while I phone her.’ He turned towards his telephone.

We scuttled, and drove a couple of blocks.

‘Plan B?’

‘Plan B.’

I changed into my by now slightly rumpled white suit, Jon into casual trousers, crisp white shirt and discount-store designer cap. The guests’ part of the hotel was even more splendid than I’d imagined. Creamy stone balustrades, polished brass, liveried footmen, polished wood, a stretch limo in the driveway, elegant patrons sipping wine and coffee on elegant furniture under the elegant shade of ancient trees, between which one could catch elegant glimpses of the river. Even the fluffy clouds chasing each other across the pale blue sky were as elegant as the muted scent of money. We sauntered into the garden bar and ordered beers.

‘Christ! At this rate, how much is a room going to cost?’

‘No price is too high for our good name.’

We were never going to get our money’s worth, no matter how long we sat, so after an unsuspecting interval we wandered casually into the main foyer, chatting relaxedly as we headed for the stairs. An impeccably uniformed, slim young man with perfect bone structure, rich olive complexion, thick black straight hair, deep soulful eyes and lips begging to be kissed, stepped in front of us flashing thirty-two perfectly-formed white teeth.

‘Excuse me, gentlemen. May I see your room cards?’

I fiddled in my breast pocket, frowned, turned to Jon and said tersely, 'You haven't left them in the car have you? After telling me I was getting forgetful.' I dowsed the young god with my best smile. 'Back in a minute.'

We strolled to the front door, bickering like a normal couple, and forced ourselves to walk slowly back towards the ute, ignominy tickling the base of our spines.

'That was quick thinking,' Jon laughed.

'Had to be. Another minute and I'd have dissolved in a puddle of lust.'

'You're easily pleased. The face wasn't too bad, but he had no bum.'

'Thank god. I can live again. Perfection's impossible to tolerate, don't you reckon?'

'But... I thought you liked me?'

'Ourselves excepted – naturally. Where to now? Shall we try somewhere less upmarket?'

'The whole world's security mad. Let's go back. I've a better idea that won't cost our entire savings.'

'What?'

'I'll tell you when we're out of the traffic. You drive, I'll think.'

'Drive where?'

'Where we came from.'

'But...'

'But we're too far from home. There's no way MacFife would come down here on his own. We're both out of our depth and sinking. Trust me.'

'I find it hard to trust anyone who says that.'

'I let you drive – that's evidence of greater than sensible trust in you, so you'll just have to trust me and wait till I'm ready.'

It must have been pissing down all day because the river was visibly higher than when we'd driven over the bridge that morning. It was almost dark by the time we arrived at our little park by the ocean. Rain began to fall steadily.

'Surely not more flooding!'

'I bloody hope not. The cops'll be too busy to listen to us.'

'At least they won't be chasing us.'

I parked beside the toilet block and changing rooms, and we ate our hamburgers in silence. Jon's plan was simple and obvious. Too obvious? But I couldn't think of anything better. I felt sticky, cold and stale.

'Fancy a shower?'

'It'll be cold.'

'Better than stinking.'

It was cold, short and invigorating. My cloud of pessimistic thoughts thinned, the plan began to seem plausible, and we each managed forty pull-ups, hanging from the rafters. A vehicle drove past, slowed, backed up, and turned into the parking area, headlights glaring through the high windows. We dropped to the floor and threw on clothes. It was probably the cops, thinking our ute looked suspicious. That'd be the ultimate stupidity, getting picked up for something idiotic like this, having our driver's licences checked and...

We stared at each other in dismay. The headlights went out, plunging us into darkness. A car door slammed. Someone coughed. We didn't dare breathe. At least I'd locked the ute.

'Peter? Jon? You in there?'

We collapsed in relief. Of course! We'd told Rory to meet us here. Affecting nonchalance we sauntered out, congratulated them on finding the place in the dark, and told them to follow us.

The road in front of the old house was deserted and all the businesses except the service station were closed, so we drove up to the house along the overgrown, but firm driveway. As soon as the gear was unloaded, Rory and I drove out and parked the utes a block away.

In the large, dry and relatively warm room, we assembled a three-metre diameter cylindrical cage of two-metre high, diamond-mesh fencing. Rings screwed into the high wooden ceiling held it up, black polythene tubing, split along its length, accommodated the bottom and insulated it from the floor. Large staples hammered into the floor over the tubing prevented lateral movement. A metre at the join was left unfastened for entry.

A heavy-duty cable, its phase wire securely fixed to the cage, the earth and neutral wires taped back, was fed through a hole in the floor and under the house to the switchboard, just outside the back door. Rory turned off the main switch, replaced the wire leading to the electric range with the phase wire of the lead from our cage, and switched on. Nothing happened. He let out a sigh and mopped his forehead. 'Thank Christ for that!'

'Why?'

'Because, Lida my love, it means the cage is properly insulated.'

'What would have happened if it wasn't?'

'The fuse would've blown.' He pulled the fuse and quadrupled the thickness of the wire. 'That'll cope with a short-circuit. Now, let's see if it works.'

He fetched a blade of grass and held the tip against the cage, sliding it up until his fingers touched the wire, repeating the process in bare feet. 'Barely a tingle. The hardwood floor's an insulator.'

'It's not going to keep anyone in for long then.'

'Patience, Jon.' Outside again, Rory crawled beneath the house, screwed one end of a heavy wire into the floorboards, the other to the earth rod below the meter box.

My turn - but I felt only a tingle.

Rory nodded knowledgably and scrubbed soapy water over the floor inside the cage until it was darkly moist.

Jon's turn. Even with his shoes on, the first touch of the grass on the wire gave him such a fright he dropped it. 'Hell, that's a bugger! Will it kill him?'

'If he hangs on to it. If he tests it with the back of his hand it'll throw him away. The voltage isn't much, only two-forty, but it's alternating and there's a fair current. I'll pull the fuse in case a rat wanders through and electrocutes himself.'

'Now all we have to do is get MacFife into it.' Lida was looking apprehensive. 'The receptionist at the gallery wouldn't tell us where he lives, but said he comes in every morning for a few hours.'

'Excellent. Let's see you in your new clothes.'

They changed quickly and stood shyly. I was glad we'd dropped the idea of dressing them up as wealthy criminals. Rory would always look like a peasant, and new clothes could never conceal Lida's spiritual wounds. Some refugees seem to emerge virtually unscathed; Lida was a living memorial to man's inhumanity. Haunted eyes gazed like timid animals from their burrows. A gangster's moll she wasn't.

'I... I don't think I'll be able to act the part you suggested, Peter.'

Rory wrapped a muscled arm around her waist.

'You could,' I said, 'but there's been a change of plan.'

By the time I'd related our abortive attempt to case the hotel, they were laughing, relaxed and relieved. 'What's the new scheme?'

'The other day Peter reckoned there'd be no flak over Cherie Culworth's murder because no one would mourn her. But what if there is a mourner?' Jon gazed expectantly at Lida. 'You, Lida, are CC's illegitimate daughter adopted out at birth. Recently, you decided to find your birth mother. She was overjoyed and you met for the first time on Sunday the eighteenth of August - that date being forever emblazoned on your soul - and you got on like a house on fire, or however women get on. She asked you to keep it a secret from her employer for a while.'

'You arranged to meet again the following Sunday, the twenty-fifth, with your husband, but she didn't turn up. You've been hoping she would contact you, but after four days with no news you're

worried something may have happened. Before going to the police, you thought it best to disobey her and ask her boss. How am I going?’

Lida’s mouth was open; Rory frowned. ‘MacFife’ll just say the lovely lady never turned up for work and he was going to contact the cops himself.’

‘Right, so then you’ll ask to see her things, because she told you she was living upstairs in the gallery flat, and had an heirloom brooch she wanted you to have – you can describe anything you like, he won’t know. Hysterical crying and sobs should get you shoved upstairs if there are any patrons. If there aren’t, have a fainting spell, get MacFife into the office, immobilise him, shove him into a large sack, chuck him into the back of the ute, and bring him back here.’

‘On my own?’

‘Rory will be with you.’

‘What say they won’t let Rory upstairs?’

‘We’ll be there.’

‘How?’

‘Peter has a key to the back door. We’ll make sure we’re ensconced before you beard the lion in his den.’

‘What?’

‘We’ll be hidden upstairs before you go into the gallery to see him.’

‘And how would you suggest we immobilise the lion, once we’ve bearded him?’ Rory was sceptical.

Jon looked at me, I shrugged.

‘Chloroform,’ said Lida simply. ‘That’s how everyone does it.’

‘If you’re strong enough to hold him for half a minute until it works.’ Rory was less than impressed. ‘What if he has a body-guard?’

‘Pull a stiletto from your garter and threaten to pick out his eyes while Rory ties him in knots.’

Lida whitened. ‘How did you know?’ She turned to Rory. He shook his head.

‘I didn’t know. I was just raving.’

Lida sat motionless. Rory wrapped her in his arms and comforted the silent weeping.

I felt rotten.

Jon busied himself cleaning up.

Lida shook herself free and apologised.

‘Sorry. I’m fine now. She swallowed. ‘But what about my accent?’

‘If he mentions it, your foster parents were immigrants and you picked it up. It’s only noticeable when you’re nervous or excited.’

They sat in silence.

‘Well, what do you think?’

Rory sighed. ‘I learned from the last show that nothing’s predictable. At the worst, I take Lida home, still an unhappy orphan.’

‘No! At the worst he kills us both to keep us quiet!’

That shocked the complacency out of me. I had to keep reminding myself that it wasn’t a game. Human memory is stupid. Somehow all the horrors of the last month had been converted into a type of Bugs Bunny cartoon where I’d been run over by a train and blown up by a bomb, but magically reassembled myself. I’d imagined I was indestructible.

‘Let’s forget it,’ I said, suddenly worried at having involved them ‘It’s Jon’s and my problem and we’re rushing things. You’ve already done more than enough and, as you know, I don’t like other people getting involved in my affairs. With four people things get too complicated and... I don’t want responsibility for you both.’ I stood up to forestall argument and began gathering their things together.

Silence. Lida sniffed and said, ‘But I want to help you. Deep inside me is someone who wants to punish those who hurt other people. It will take some of the hurt from my heart if I do.’ Her eyes

were wet. 'Peter, it shames me to say so, but you are our only real friend in this country. Before you came to live next door we hid away on our block like frightened animals, and I wouldn't let Rory invite people home.

You changed that. You burst into our lives like a beautiful spring flower. That first day when you brought over that dreadful chocolate cheesecake that gave us all diarrhoea, I thought, here is someone I can trust. Then, a few days later I forced myself to accept your invitation and go visit if we felt like it, and you were naked but acted as though it was normal, and I felt so liberated... so...so... I don't know what I felt, but suddenly I knew I was allowed to be different. It was no longer such a big problem that I wasn't the same as everyone else. You've spent hours talking with me, improving my English, making me proud to be me.' She stopped, embarrassed.

I blushed.

'St Peter!' Jon intoned. 'Bless us, thy humble vassals.'

I shoved him away and Rory exploded with laughter.

Lida frowned. 'I know what I said sounded sentimental, Jon, but it's true.'

'It doesn't sound sentimental, Lida. He did the same for me.'

'Shut it!' I snapped, angry at praise I didn't deserve. 'I'm just like every other human - selfish. I simply didn't want to get offside with the neighbours. Rory knows that. And as for you,' I turned to Jon, 'I needed someone to help at the gallery and you looked as though you'd be cheap!'

Rory grinned. 'Yes, you're a selfish prick, Corringe. Now, can we concentrate on the kidnapping?'

It was too late to think clearly, so we retired to the canopied backs of our respective utility trucks, where I, at least, lay sleepless.

Breakfast was sombre, befitting the hours before battle. No sane person willingly risks life, limb and liberty. Without the lies of patriotic propaganda, no army general would find soldiers willing to die in foreign lands. Without nonsensical cant about school and team spirit, family and national pride, few young sportsmen and women would destroy their bodies for public amusement.

No one offered any improvements to Jon's plan, so we stuck with the basic strategy, made a list of possible weapons, possible variations in tactics, and escape plans if we had to abort. After freezing showers that should have put sense into our heads, Lida changed into her new dress, Rory into his new suit, Jon and I back into jeans and T-shirts.

At nine o'clock the gallery looked deserted. The rear car park hosted only a white panel-van and a late model, metallic grey Commodore. Rory and Lida parked their ute a couple of blocks away, then wandered along to the gallery, intending to act like tourists until the place opened and they could ask to speak to MacFife. If he didn't turn up they'd make an appointment.

Jon and I drove a kilometre north, parked, and hiked back along the deserted shoreline. The river no longer lapped against the rocks below the gallery; a five-metre-wide strip of hard-packed sand and rubble had been deposited at the base of the cliffs. We had at least four hours till high tide, so Jon raced back, drove down the nearest beach access ramp and backed up, hugging the cliffs till the little truck was directly below the gallery, out of sight.

We'd just locked it and were preparing to climb the rocks when voices stopped us. A vision of Glaze standing in that exact spot only eleven days before put me in a sweat. A growling whisper from above.

'You're being watched.' Rory and Lida were sitting on the edge of the cliff, gazing out to sea. My heart slowed to a canter.

'Trying to frighten me to death?'

'The gallery isn't open yet, so we decided to hang out with the gay crowd. You never told us how beautiful it is, Peter. Like a temple of purity.'

Lida was facing north so she could watch the gallery.

‘Oh! a young woman’s come out the back door, and a middle-aged man. He’s trying to kiss her. She’s pushing him away. He’s getting into the panel van... starting up... driving away. She’s taking boxes out of the car boot ... empty cartons like you use when you’re moving house. She’s going inside. Your turn, Rory, I’m getting a stiff neck and it’ll seem suspicious if I stare too long.’ She turned, stretched and relaxed back on her elbows.

Rory stood, swung his arms as if to improve circulation and then squatted down, apparently facing up the coast, shading his eyes against the glare off the sea. ‘She’s coming out again with something in her arms. Must be rubbish because she’s stuffing it in the wheelie bin. She’s not looking at me. She’s going back in and closing the door. I reckon she’s alone and the bloke was her boyfriend. She’s a bloody good-looker.’

‘A bloody good hooker more likely.’

‘You reckon he was a client?’

‘Who knows? MacFife has a stable of beautiful girls, apparently.’

‘Wouldn’t mind an hour alone with her.’

‘You couldn’t afford her,’ Lida said rather too sweetly, turning to face her husband. ‘Ooh look! A little car came in the drive. I can’t see it now.’

‘Did you get the make, Rory?’

‘I think it was a Porsche.’

‘That’s our man. Was he alone?’

‘I think so. It was all too quick.’

‘What’s the time?’

‘Ten o’clock. Just after.’

‘Give him a few minutes, and we’re away.’ I hoped I sounded more optimistic than I felt.

Chapter Twenty-two

Seven minutes later, Rory and Lida wandered around the left of the building to the main entrance. We walked as apparently aimlessly around the other end of the building to the door of the upstairs flat, and tried our key. It jammed. The locks had been changed and we had to get upstairs before Lida and MacFife! We raced round to the back and tried the key there. No go! Disaster already!

Jon turned the handle and the door opened. We peered cautiously along the passageway to the gallery. How could we get upstairs without being seen? The girl was shoving things around in the office, so we slipped into the workroom - a large space used for packing and preparing works for exhibition. I closed the door and turned on the lights. The room was bare of everything except a pile of sacks and a few large boards. Whatever MacFife intended to do with Max’s gallery it wasn’t exhibiting paintings.

‘Look at this!’ Jon had turned over a board. ‘The bastard’s selling! This valuable property to be auctioned...’

I turned off the light and inched open the door. Voices – male and female - arguing. We had to get upstairs, but how? We crept along the passageway, nearly crapping ourselves when Lida let go with an hysterical shriek. ‘But I know he is there! I saw him arrive! I must see him! It could be a matter of life and death! It is about Mrs Culworth!’

The young woman’s heels clunked up the stairs. Lida continued loud sobbing. MacFife’s irritable descent was followed by the young woman’s clattering heels.

‘I’ll take it from here, Mary-Louise,’ he snapped. His tone wasn’t any friendlier when he addressed Lida. ‘Now, madam. What’s the trouble?’

By now genuinely hysterical, Lida blurted her story. As Rory had predicted, MacFife said he too was worried and had already contacted the police. He was sympathetic, offered to ring for a taxi, and promised to contact Lida as soon as he heard anything. Rory made noises to the effect that it

was good enough for him and he was happy to leave it to MacFife. Lida broke down, sobbing that she desperately wanted to see her mother's flat. If she didn't see proof of her existence, she would go mad! She might find some clue MacFife had missed, and she wanted to see if the brooch she had been promised was there, or if her mother had taken it with her. Perhaps she had told someone of its value and had been robbed and left for dead! She became incoherent. MacFife made increasingly impatient noises.

Eventually, supported by rumbles from Rory, Lida pleaded that if she could just see the flat, she would be satisfied and trust Mr MacFife with all further inquiries about the disappearance. Rory muttered belligerently about seeing no reason for not showing his wife her mother's flat.

MacFife was silent for several seconds, then said, 'Very well. But your husband stays here.' He called Marie-Louise, who clattered across from the other end of the gallery. 'Show this gentleman the view from the roof.' He then ushered Lida upstairs.

We crept into the gallery as they exited, and followed Lida's hysterical wailing to my old bedroom. McFife stood with his back to us just inside the door. Lida was facing us, thrusting a suitcase at McFife; insisting he force it open. Cursing all stupid, interfering, illegitimate women, he bent over it.

Jon slugged him on the back of the skull with a sandbag. I caught him. Jon wound packing tape around his head and over his mouth; I taped his arms to his body and immobilised his legs. After removing his wallet and key ring, we slid a sack over his head and shoulders, and another over feet and legs, wrapped him in CC's floral bedspread and wrapped the whole thing in metres more tape. Then Lida scouted ahead as we manhandled him down the stairs to the back door.

Rory's voice boomed from the roof. I shot back to the office, grabbed a piece of gallery notepaper and scribbled; Something urgent with estate agents... He'll be away for a few days. The young lady to lock the gallery and take the rest of the week off. I handed it to Lida together with six fifty-dollar notes from MacFife's wallet.

She was watching me, eyes wide, face a blank mask of panic. 'I can't! I can't do any more. I'll never remember what you tell me!'

'Lida, sweetheart. You've been wonderful. Go halfway up the stairs and call Rory, keep them standing on the stairs out of sight of the front car park for as long as possible, and tell the girl that MacFife had to leave suddenly. You wrote down his message so you wouldn't forget it, and he asked you to give her the money. When you hear MacFife's car drive away, but not before, walk calmly out of this place and take Rory home.'

She stared at me, uncomprehending. Jon slipped an arm round her waist, plonked a kiss on her cheek and patted her bottom. 'Off you go, Lida the Wonder Woman. See you soon.'

That seemed to wake her. With a shake of shoulders and head, she stepped back into the gallery, climbed to the bend in the stairs and called. As soon as we heard Rory and the high heels begin their descent we raced with our burden across to the cliffs. There was no one around so we rolled him over the edge; too bad if he bruised. I clambered down after him while Jon raced for MacFife's car and drove away.

Things were going too well. Probably the ute's wheels would have sunk into the sand and I'd be stuck. They hadn't. MacFife was solid, but not as heavy as Scumble to heave into the back, and although it had seemed like hours, it was only sixteen minutes since we first entered the gallery. Ten minutes later I pulled up beside Jon on the almost empty top floor of the car-park building.

Jon checked our prisoner. 'I suppose we'd better let him breathe.' He cut a slit through the bedspread at the head end, exposed the sack, felt for the nose, slit the fabric open, and left it at that. McFife was breathing, making angry noises and wriggling. Good. I wanted him to be aware of what was happening.

'What now?'

'We wait until dark.'

'Here?'

‘Somewhere a small truck won’t look suspicious parked for nine hours.’

‘I slept under a bridge not far from here for a few days. Noisy as hell, but invisible from the road.’

‘Sounds perfect.’

After piling our luggage around and over MacFife in the back of the ute, we left the Porsche in the car park and drove to Jon’s spot, locked up, then wandered around, marvelling at the speed of clean up and the financial acumen of souvenir shop and fast-food outlet entrepreneurs taking advantage of the boom in macabre tourism.

The evil smell was abating, dead bodies were no longer left behind by the tide, and a warm northerly wind and brilliant sunshine lent an almost festive air. We bought new jeans and T-shirts at a street market, then took a room in a motel where we showered, changed, rested and telephoned Mad, who was pleased to hear we were safe and all was going according to plan. She had recovered somewhat from the house search, but was still nervous. I also rang Hank. He and Celia were refreshed and ready to return.

To celebrate our successful abduction, we ordered very tough steaks, soggy chips and limp greens at an expensive restaurant. The chef redeemed himself, however, with the best whipped-cream-encased chocolate confection I had ever tasted.

By seven o’clock we were parked opposite the house. A late worker pulled out of the handyman’s yard, locked the gates and drove away. The garden centre was dark and empty. A couple of cars sped past. We drove without lights down to the cottage, killed the engine and waited. Something moved on the verandah. We froze. A figure came down the steps and strolled over to my window. I wound it down, brain empty. White teeth grinned.

‘Lida thought you might need a hand.’

‘You beaut! But that’s the third time in as many days you’ve nearly given us heart attacks.’

‘Just keeping you on your toes. And I’ve thought of a modification.’

‘To?’

‘The cage.’

Jon drove the ute away while Rory and I lugged McFife into the house and dumped him in the cage. Rory cut the electricity cable between the cage and the hole in the floor and inserted a circuit breaker while I removed the bedspread and sacks. MacFife lay still, eyes following us. Rory then held McFife in a headlock while I cut the tape from his wrists and ankles, and told him to undress. He’d shat and pissed himself, seemed exhausted, and put up no resistance. Rory stood guard while I gathered up his soiled clothes, closed the cage and circuit breaker, then went out and turned on the power.

Jon had been away for a long time and I was just getting worried when he arrived, out of breath from running. He’d picked up something for supper on the way. He stared expressionlessly at MacFife. ‘Fuck he stinks.’ He went out, returned with a bucket and hurled water through the cage. MacFife gasped with shock, struggled to his feet and hurled himself at the wire. Rory opened the circuit breaker and lashed out with his boot. MacFife sagged to the floor, whimpering.

‘You’re a lucky man. If I hadn’t turned the power off you’d be cooked meat. I’m turning it on now. If you touch the cage you’ll receive two hundred and forty volts, AC, right through your body. Whatever part of you is touching the floor will cook. Your heart will jump around a fair bit, and you might suffer a seizure. Do you understand?’

MacFife didn’t respond.

‘Your guest is recalcitrant, Peter. Another bucket of water?’

I fetched one and threw it over him. He was shivering violently, but caught some on his hands, rubbed them over his face and tore at his gag.

‘Thirsty, eh?’ Jon fetched another bucketful. ‘But... how do we...?’

‘This is my second excellent idea.’ Rory produced a metal pipe with a thick rubber handle. A three-metre, insulated wire had been soldered to the pipe near the handle. An insulated ‘alligator’ clip at the end of the wire was clipped on to the cage and the handle passed to Jon. From his pocket,

Rory drew a pair of heavy-duty rubber gloves and gave them to me. ‘Peter, open the flap. Jon, If MacFife comes near, prick him with the end of the pipe.’

‘Hang on, we’d better tie a string to the bucket so we can get it back – plastic’s an insulator.’ I knotted a length of cord to the handle, opened the flap, placed the bucket inside and closed it again. MacFife fell on his knees, still tearing at his gag. The tape was tough, but he managed to tear a small hole. He bent over and sucked noisily. When he’d finished he splashed water over his loins and between his legs in an effort to clean himself. He wasn’t about to drop dead. We let him finish, then removed the bucket.

‘Well, lads, I’ll leave you to it.’ Rory grinned, tapped us both lightly on the shoulders and was gone.

Suddenly I felt insecure. It wouldn’t be long before land agents or someone else reported MacFife’s absence; and we wouldn’t be able to remain at the cottage forever.

‘Hungry?’ Jon rummaged in his bag and brought out the best fish and chips I have ever smelled and a large bottle of cola.

‘My favourite food. How’d you guess?’

‘Didn’t. It’s mine too.’

‘Another proof, if one were needed, of the cosmic rightness of our alliance.’

‘Whatever you say, boss. Does he get any?’ A flick of the head towards MacFife.

‘It’d be a waste. He’ll only shit himself again.’

After our meal I tossed MacFife one of the serrated plastic knives that had come with the fish. He was getting very cold and finding it difficult to move. It took a while before he could pick it up and start sawing at the tape round his head. When it began to fray, he clawed at it, tearing off pieces of lip. Blood streamed over his chin.

‘Lick it up, MacFife. It’s the only food you’ll be getting,’ Jon had a callous side to his nature.

He licked, then held the knife between his toes and tried to saw at the ropes round his wrists. The flimsy thing snapped. So far he hadn’t spoken. We’d decided to soften him up before explaining his position, so told him to pop the pieces of knife through the diamond netting. It took several tries, he was frightened of electrocuting himself. After one last check that everything was functioning properly, we switched off the light, rolled out our sleeping bags in the kitchen to avoid McFife’s stink, and settled down to fitful sleep.

A scream, followed by full-throated howling set us racing into the larger room, electric prod at the ready. McFife was kneeling, nursing his penis between his hands and moaning as though it’d been cut off.

Jon laughed. ‘Know what he’s done? He’s pissed and hit the wire. I did it once on an electric fence. Gives a hell of a jolt. Feels as though someone’s ripped the thing out by its roots. Race out to the road and see if you can hear him. It’s as quiet as it’s going to get so if you can’t hear him now there’ll be no worry in daytime. And the longer he raves the hoarser he’ll be tomorrow.’

It was very cold outside after the warmth of the sleeping bag and I wished I’d put on some clothes. But you take greater care not to be seen if you’re naked. A car sped past, followed by a motorbike. From the city I could hear the thump of a rock beat. The fish processing plant up the road emitted a persistent hum from its refrigeration plant. Behind the timber yard a loose bit of metal flapped in the wind. The grasses on the drive rustled as a startled bandicoot shot through; an owl hooted and that was about it.

Then I heard it. A wail - soft but chilling. I had to listen carefully. The boarded-up windows and hundred-metre drive had done the trick. No one would pay the slightest attention in daytime. They’d just think it was a miserable dog. Which in a way it was. With road noise, radios and the business of life, even if he screamed his lungs to shreds no one would hear. When I got back I was so cold I squeezed into Jon’s bag.

‘I’ve been wondering,’ he said quietly, ‘why we’re keeping him in that cage. It’d be a hell of a lot easier to simply lock him in a cupboard like he did with Patrick.’

‘He didn’t care if Patrick lived or died. I’ve no intention of becoming a murderer. This way we can leave him all day and not worry about his circulation.’

‘We could have found a large cupboard.’

‘Not easy to interrogate someone from outside a cupboard.’

‘Mmm.’

‘And think of the psychology.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘MacFife, the supreme example of manhood, naked like an animal in a cage. Think what that’s doing to his self-esteem.’

‘I don’t care what it does as long as he confesses.’

‘He will, and he’s inaudible from the road.’

‘That’s a relief.’

‘And it satisfies some deep-seated need of my own.’

‘Mmm, kinky.’

I don’t know when MacFife gave up howling, but when we looked in at six-thirty he was huddled in the middle of his cage, shivering so much the windows rattled.

‘Do some push-ups and squats, stupid,’ I said, ‘unless you want to catch pneumonia.’

He rolled over like an obedient puppy and did a few push-ups before collapsing. We ignored him and ate a hearty breakfast of bread, salami and tomatoes, washed down with warm coffee from the thermos. MacFife did squats with his back to us. We threw another bucket of water over him and the floor, then passed another full one through the flap. The stink was horrible. He’d pissed and defecated again during the night. He drank, then washed himself carefully. After breakfast we stood on either side of his cage and watched in silence. It didn’t take long.

‘What do you want?’ His voice was hoarse.

‘Where’s Glaze?’

He was clearly astonished. ‘Glaze? What do you want him for?’

‘That’s our business.’

‘But...’ He checked himself and changed tack. ‘How’d you escape?’

‘From where?’

‘After... after that night upstairs in the gallery.’

‘What the fuck are you on about? I didn’t escape from anywhere.’

‘But... those two were going to...’

‘What? Get rid of me?’

He nodded.

‘Jeeze MacFife, you’re as green as you look. When I promised them a truckload of high quality grass, they let me go.’

‘You mean...?’

‘They did the dirty on you, old man.’

‘Then... why do you want him?’

‘Because he pinched my Mercedes, and was unnecessarily diligent with the whip. The cuts turned septic and it was touch and go for a while!’

‘But... you took him to hospital...’

‘And told the cops he’d murdered Scumble! That was going to be my payback. I wanted him to suffer, not die. You ruined my revenge by taking him away.’

‘But...’

‘You’re all fucking butts, like a dirty ashtray. Just tell us where you’re hiding Glaze and we’ll let you go.’

‘But... I thought he and Scumble tried to kill... him?’ He nodded towards Jon.

I pulled a face of total incomprehension. ‘Get real, McFife. After having their fun with Frances, Scumble and Glaze drove me up to my place to pick up the stuff, but that fat idiot arrived on blazing saddles and threatened to shoot me. So they did me a favour and got rid of him. If you’re into mad and dangerous bastards, that’s one!’ I turned to Jon. ‘They didn’t do you any damage, did they?’ Jon shook his head and shrugged. I turned back to MacFife with a grin. ‘Those two have been conning you. Poor Gregor! You thought you had a couple of trustworthy heavies to do your dirty work!’

He growled something incomprehensible.

‘The only clever thing you did was get Glaze to shoot Scumble. But you were a bit late. He’d already spilled the beans about your dirty tricks onto videotape. So unless you tell us where we can find your remaining unreliable henchman, we’ll take the tape to the cops.’

MacFife tried to look cunning but he was fraying at the edges. ‘If I tell you, you’ll let me go?’

‘Didn’t I say so?’

‘And give me the tape?’

‘Why not?’

‘But... I thought you’d be out to get me.’

‘You? What the fuck for? You’re nothing. Your two dumb heavies have more charm.’

‘But... I thought you were upset about Max and Frances?’

‘Get real! Max was totally up his own arse. He had it coming, trying to mix it with the big boys; and as for Frances! That two-bit trollop had lived about thirty years too long already. You did the world a favour with those two. Like you did with that maggoty old baggage, CC.’

‘So that woman wasn’t her daughter?’

‘What do you reckon?’

‘And she hadn’t been blabbing?’

‘Nope.’

‘And you aren’t after me?’

‘You deaf or something? I want my Mercedes back, and revenge for an unnecessarily vicious whipping. You might have intended harm, Gregor, but you haven’t done me any – except for pinning Frances’s murder on us. But I’m sure you’ll discover you made a mistake about that.’

MacFife’s face cleared. This was something he could understand. He could buy his release. ‘Yeah, yeah. Sure thing. I’ll tell the cops I made a mistake. I’ll tell them it was Glaze.’ His voice was hoarse and the shivers made him difficult to understand, but one thing was clear, he was desperate to believe. ‘So it wasn’t you who let that fat guy go?’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’

Cold, hunger and fear conspired to anaesthetise common sense, or perhaps for too long he’d been able to make things happen simply by wishing. Whatever, he believed my story and couldn’t wait to dob in his no longer faithful hound.

‘If I tell you where Glaze is, and accuse him of Frances’s murder, you’ll let me go?’

‘Didn’t I say so?’

Shuddering with relief, he gave us an address. We thanked him, tossed the remains of our breakfast and half a loaf of bread onto the floor, removed the bucket, reminded him of the dangers of coming too close to the cage, stuffed his filthy clothes in a plastic rubbish bag, and turned to go.

‘Let me out!’

‘When we’ve got Glaze.’

‘People will be looking for me.’

‘Who would look for an unlovely, unshaven, stinking scumbag like you?’

His hoarse screams didn’t travel beyond the side fence. We slithered under and crawled on our bellies through long grass until we were far enough away from the cottage not to attract attention.

Chapter Twenty-three

The lock on the wood-panelled door of apartment 3B opened silently with the bronze master key on MacFife's key ring. We entered, closed the door quietly and walked softly through to the main room. Glaze was dozing on a divan in front of a large window with a view up the coast to Fraser Island. Each breath was accompanied by a slight whimper, and a trickle of saliva ran from the corner of his mouth. Despite a thick shirt and tracksuit trousers he was shivering, and pain-lines creased a face that looked much sicker than it should have, considering it was over six days since Jon had blown a hole through his shoulder. Obviously, whatever treatment he was receiving for his wound wasn't working. A handgun lay on a low table within easy reach. Jon pocketed the weapon and I tapped Bob where it would hurt.

His shriek was gratifying. 'What're you doing here?'

'We were worried about you.'

'What do you want?'

'To help you escape.'

'From what?'

'MacFife wants you dead.'

'Why?'

'He's seen the tapes and knows you double-crossed him.'

'Where is he?'

'I've no idea.'

'Then how do you know what he thinks?'

'Intelligent guessing.'

'How'd you find me?'

'Rang the gallery and asked. Marie-Louise is such a helpful young woman. Who else lives here?'

Silence.

Jon placed a thumb over the wounded shoulder. 'Answer the nice young man.'

'His girls. They've all got separate units, so it's not a brothel.'

'Where's my car?'

'In the basement car park.'

'Keys?'

He nodded towards the kitchen. We left him and made a quick tour of the unit, gun at the ready, not that either of us had a clue how to use it. The keys were on the bench. Jon was looking at the pistol.

'This is the twin of the one that nicked you. Let's disable it before someone else gets hurt.'

'How?'

In a drawer under the sink bench he found a set of round-handled wooden spoons. Snapping off a handle with a diameter slightly larger than the gun barrel, he tapered one end, removed the silencer, shoved the handle into the barrel and tapped it against the floor to ram it home. After snapping off the excess, he replaced the silencer. 'That'll give someone a fright.'

We left the weapon on the dining room table and returned to our host.

'Where does MacFife live?'

Silence.

Jon's thumb pressed down.

Glaze screamed and sweat ran. 'He's got a place up the hill.'

'Walking distance?'

'Yes.'

'Lead the way.'

He staggered to his feet, turned pale green and sagged back onto the divan. I put his shoes on while Jon fetched a jacket, and we supported him between us as we slowly walked a couple of

hundred metres further up the hill to a high, white-stuccoed wall. To confuse curious neighbours I pressed the buzzer and pretended to speak into the security microphone while slipping the nickel-plated key from McFife's ring into the lock of the heavy wooden door.

Terracotta paving led through a low-maintenance garden of native plants to the front door of a two-storeyed concrete box stuccoed to match the enclosing walls. The path continued around the house to a star-shaped swimming pool, a Jacuzzi and a pergola with an even better north-facing view than the one from Glaze's apartment. The same key gave entry to the back door. A smaller, iridescent blue key disconnected the alarm.

The lounge, which occupied the entire rear of the house, was blessed with six-metre high windows offering a view across Laguna Bay. Impossible to heat in winter and a hot-house in summer. Bright yellow walls bore two ridiculously large, psychedelic abstractions. Scattered, brightly patterned rugs supported gleaming chrome and leather armchairs and matching coffee tables. Kitchen and dining areas continued the extravagance. A chrome-plated staircase with transparent steps, probably made from the same stuff as Max's dome, led to a mezzanine gallery containing doors to three bedrooms and bathrooms all designed to impress. Despite myself, I was impressed.

Jon's face crinkled into a question. 'Why would anyone live in a warehouse like this? With all his money, why didn't he build something like your place? The man's mad.'

If I had ever wondered what I saw in the guy, I wondered no more. 'I suppose everyone tells you you've excellent taste?'

He was genuinely perplexed. 'No. I want my home to be cosy. This is as bad as the tent place.' He shook his head and turned to a sweating, mumbling, yellow-tinged Glaze. 'What's the matter?'

'If MacFife finds us here he'll kill us.'

'I know.'

'Then why...?'

'Where's the safe?'

'In his office, but I don't know the combination – I swear I don't.'

The office adjoined the second bedroom. On Glaze's instructions we rolled back the leather armchair and lifted the carpet to expose a circular metal lid about forty centimetres in diameter, containing a digital combination lock. I checked the desk drawers, cupboards, bookshelf - nothing useful. Jon flicked through MacFife's wallet and spread the contents over the floor.

'I went through this yesterday and noticed something that made no sense, but now I wonder. What d'you reckon?' He opened the wallet wide and placed it beside the collection of cards and cash.

'Can't see anything.'

'Look carefully.'

I picked it up and couldn't resist stroking the soft, hand-tooled leather, embossed with tiny gold fleur-de-lis. Inside was the conventional layout, a zipped pocket for notes, another open pocket, and two smaller pockets each side of the fold for credit cards. Jon pointed to a spot, and then I realised what he meant. Small dots had been marked with ballpoint on the edges of all six pockets. Seven on the zip pocket, one on the next, three on the outer left, eight on the inner left, five on the inner right and two on the outer right pocket. I punched seven, one, three, eight, five, and two, on the combination.

'That's not it.'

'Reverse order?'

'Nope.'

'Alternate.'

'No go.'

'Write the numbers down in the same order as you tried first, that's the most logical.'

I did, and stared at them without any blinding light of comprehension. It was Glaze who suggested first letters. S for seven. S is the nineteenth letter of the alphabet, so nineteen, O is the fifteenth

giving us fifteen, then twenty, five, six, and another twenty. That made ten numbers. No response from the lock.

‘Does MacFife have his fortune told?’ Jon asked.

Glaze’s mouth dropped open. ‘How’d you know? He goes to a tarot woman once a month.’

‘It figures. Overconfident bastards like him usually imagine they’ve got the protection of supernatural forces. He’s probably used cabbalistic numbers.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Add numbers greater than nine together until you get a single digit. Take the first number. Nineteen. One and nine makes ten, one plus zero is one, so the combination’s, one, six, two, five, six, two. Try it.’

I did, and nothing happened.

‘It’s probably his pin number and nothing to do with this thing.’ Jon looked deflated. ‘Anyone got a stick of dynamite? A pneumatic drill?’

I kept staring at our calculations. The idea of letters as numbers seemed right; but what letters? Then it struck me. ‘What’s your code with MacFife?’ I snapped at Glaze.

He stared blankly.

‘When you phone him, what do you say?’

‘Oh that. How’s your mother.’

‘And he answers?’

‘Mother’s well.’

‘Yeah, I thought so. Let’s take a look at mother. M’s thirteen, O’s fifteen, T’s twenty, H is eight, E’s five and R’s eighteen. Convert to single digits and what do we have?’

‘Four, Six, two, eight, five, nine. Here, let me.’ Jon squatted over the lock and pressed the numbers. ‘Bingo!’ The lid opened easily. Inside was a wire mesh cylinder jammed with what looked like school exercise books. He dumped the contents on the floor. Under the books, a wad of used hundred-dollar notes, passport, and eleven small packets of white powder. Cocaine, according to Glaze.

He wanted to snort a line, reckoned he needed it. Perhaps he did but he wasn’t getting any. His promises that we’d discover heaven if we joined him, had as little effect on Jon as on me. I’ve a horror of drugs, all drugs. I need to be fully in control of my wits at all times. I don’t even like drinking a beer if strangers are present.

Ignoring Glaze’s whimpers we flicked through the eighteen soft-covered ledger books, the sort you can buy at any stationers. Notes, letters, newspaper clippings and memos were stapled to a few pages, but mostly it was simply neat, double-entry accounting with occasional hand-written notes. It meant nothing to us, so I shoved everything in my pack, replaced the empty cylinder, closed the safe and put back carpet and chair.

Glaze was slumped against the desk, eyes closed, saliva trickling from the corner of his mouth. We slipped his shirt from his shoulder and took off the blood-soaked bandage. I nearly chundered. Just below the collarbone, a dark purple hole, ragged at the edges, was leaking pus. I turned him over. The exit hole was in similar condition but larger and weeping blood. All the surrounding tissue was aflame and swollen.

‘Had any treatment?’

‘The boss said he’d get someone, but no one’s come yet.’

‘What’ve you put on it?’

‘I’ve bathed it in hot salty water. There’s nothing else and I can’t go out because the cops are looking for me.’

‘Why?’

‘Because I shot Ian and escaped from hospital.’

‘How’d you manage that?’

‘When MacFife took off he waited a couple of blocks away, then followed you to the hospital. It was so busy in Emergency no one noticed him take me out.’

‘You’re gullible, Glaze.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Your charming boss wasn’t hanging around to rescue you, he wanted to make sure you were dead. You weren’t, so he brought you here. He has no more intention of repairing your shoulder than he has of making you his heir.’

‘You’re lying!’

‘And when you die, he’ll dump you beside the river.’

‘He wouldn’t.’

‘Why?’

‘That’d be murder. Gregor keeps his hands clean’

‘You escaped from hospital alone, and died alone while hiding from the law. I’ll bet he’s told the cops he doesn’t know where you are.’

‘Yeah. He rang from here. I thought he was doing it to protect me.’

‘Poor old Bob.’

‘What’s going to happen to me?’

‘You’re going to die.’

‘I know. I can feel it.’ He was crying.

‘What’s your life worth?’

‘Anything – I’ll do anything to stop the pain and get back at that bastard.’

‘A proper confession?’

‘You’ve already got one.’

‘In front of the cops.’

That stopped him. He grew paler, if that was possible. Jon placed his hand at the edge of the swelling and squeezed lightly.

Glaze screamed, then whimpered, ‘Anything! Just stop the pain!’

It was nine-thirty. I called Matthew. He was cagey. When he’d told his wife about the shoot-out, she’d told him to have nothing more to do with us. However, he didn’t hang up so I explained we’d be going to a police station this time, and offered him thrice his usual hourly rate. He hesitated, as would any sensible young man with a mortgage, three kids under five, a ridiculously expensive car, and a non-working wife.

‘OK,’ he muttered nervously, ‘I’ll make the appointment and call you back... but I wouldn’t do it for anyone else.’

I told him I loved him and blew a kiss down the line.

He giggled.

Jon had carried Glaze downstairs. ‘He weighs nothing. I reckon he’s done for.’

The phone rang. Matthew had arranged for the police to interview Glaze at eleven o’clock, so we had to get our skates on! Lugging a half-dead body out the gate and hoisting him into the back of the ute might have raised a few local eyebrows, so I changed into a pair of MacFife’s trousers and a blazer, wandered down the hill to Glaze’s place, drove the ute back to the car park and swapped it for the Porsche, which carried me rather more firmly than I’d expected, back to MacFife’s villa.

The remote door-control in the glove box opened the garage doors. Glaze was comfortable enough in the front, but it was a bit of a squeeze for Jon in the back. I dropped him in town to wait for Matthew, then drove till I found a chemist’s for painkillers, disinfectant and dressings.

Glaze’s voice was faint. ‘Am I going to die?’

‘Of course! We all are. Now, be brave.’

He swallowed three tablets and was brave while I disinfected his wounds, scraped away rot and applied a dressing.

Jon and Matthew were composing Glaze's confession when I pulled up. Glaze took Jon's place beside Matthew, Jon and I squeezed in the back.

'How long have we got?'

'Five minutes.'

'Will Glaze speak?'

'No. I'll read it to them, they'll type it out, ask Glaze if he agrees, he'll sign it, and that's it. ' He passed the statement across. 'Have we left anything out?'

It was beautifully simple. After declaring he had been abducted by MacFife from hospital, held prisoner and denied medical treatment, Glaze admitted to being present on the roof of the gallery when, acting on MacFife's instructions, Scumble had pushed Max to his death. He also expressed regret at not stopping Scumble from snapping Frances's neck and throwing her down the stairs – again on MacFife's instructions. Concerning his own injuries and the death of Scumble, he stated that MacFife had had an argument with Scumble, who drew his gun. Glaze stepped in front of MacFife, copping the bullet in his shoulder, but managed to drop Scumble - in self-defence.

There was no mention of CC, Patrick, Jon or me. Patrick wouldn't want his adventure known, and if anyone asked questions about CC, the cops could mount their own investigation. All we wanted was to prove our innocence of Frances' murder. This would do it. The police didn't want us on any other counts - we hoped.

'Excellent.'

Matthew grinned proudly and Jon produced takeaway sandwiches and coffees. Glaze managed a few mouthfuls. Sweat was dripping from him as Matthew helped him from the car and across the road to the Police Station. After what seemed like years, but was about three-quarters of an hour, Matthew came out, got into his car and drove away. We caught up with him at the old show-grounds.

The cops had been totally professional, ready with tape recorder and video in an interview room. Matthew had read out the statement and, while it was being typed, arrangements were made for hospitalisation. As soon as the statements were ready Glaze had signed them and was whisked away.

'They asked how I'd become involved, and Glaze mumbled something about being sick of running away, and using the yellow pages to find a JP. Then they asked him where MacFife was.'

'And?'

'He had no idea.'

'Excellent. Do you think they believed him?'

'No idea. You know the cops. Never give anything away. With those faces they should all be poker champs.'

I handed Matthew ten of MacFife's hundred-dollar notes, and the eighteen ledger books. 'For your next thousand dollars, see if you can make sense of these. They were locked in his safe. We're looking for proof of illegal activities, drug dealing, prostitution rackets – that sort of thing. We must have it sorted before letting him go.'

Matthew grinned. 'I'll start immediately.'

'And when will you know if they're any use?'

'I'll ring you.' He waved and drove away.

Anticlimax. We were almost there. All we had to do now was make sure MacFife wasn't in a position to convince the cops that Glaze had been lying. That depended on Matthew and the ledgers. There was nothing to do but wait, and I've never been good at that. As long as I'm doing something – anything, I can function. But waiting, depending on someone else – I'm always sure they don't care enough to do their best. Half the things I buy have something missing, fall to bits, or don't work. I twice used tradesmen when building my cottage. The bloke who poured the concrete slab put the shower next to the bed and forgot to put in drains for the sink. The electrician forgot to

earth the place. I was lucky the inspector checked. And how about the planet? As that funny guy said on TV the other night, if Earth was a rental property we'd never get our bond back.

It was too early to go back to the old house, but even if it wasn't, I couldn't bear the sight of MacFife. We'd dumped his soiled clothes, so we had to get replacements for when we let him loose, and as Jon pointed out, if his car was seen driving into his garage and the lights came on at night, he'd have a tough time convincing anyone he'd been held prisoner. I looked nothing like him, but the car windows were tinted and I wore his driving cap that I'd found on the back seat. With Jon concealed under the dash, I drove noisily up to his house, the way he used to arrive to pick up Frances, lifted a polite finger to an elderly man who nodded vaguely at the car, opened the garage doors and drove in, gunning the engine before killing it.

I appreciated the house more the second time round. The pool was deep and clear, the spa hot, and the view across Laguna Bay and up the Cooloola coast, stunning. We stripped and soaked in the spa, moaning at the luxury of slow immersion into hot water. It was the first time I'd relaxed for what seemed like a lifetime. After a dip in the cold pool we warmed ourselves again in the spa before letting ourselves into the house.

The interior, although as hugely ostentatious as before, began to suggest ways in which it could be rendered less impersonal. We trailed water up the stairs in search of towels, then, warm and dry, checked out MacFife's boudoir. His bed was unmade and smelled unclean, so we settled for the equally comfortable guestroom and relieved all the tensions the spa hadn't reached. Afterwards, for the first time since the nightmare began, we speculated seriously about our future. It became dark. We turned on plenty of lights, made ourselves a snack from the pathetic contents of the kitchen, selected a change of clothes from our host's elegant wardrobe, and reluctantly prepared to leave.

'Imagine living here alone. It'd be bloody depressing.'

'He must have friends who ring him - and visit.'

'You're a genius.'

'What do you mean?'

'Check the answering machine.'

There were three messages from a pleasant-sounding woman who called herself Ishbel, asking Gregor to telephone. She sounded worried by the third call, made that afternoon. Half a dozen other people had called, but none had left messages.

'It's not all over,' Jon muttered, 'the cops'll want to see us.'

'True.'

'We'll have to go to court.'

'We'll need a lawyer.'

'Unless they drop the charges.'

'Mmm.'

'How long since you rang Hank and Celia?'

'A couple of days.'

'Give them a ring.'

'But...'

'Do it.'

Celia answered. Hank was out. They were happy, bored and ready to return. Her squeal of delight at our progress was gratifying. 'You might need a lawyer. If so, Hank wants to act for you until it gets difficult, then he'll appoint someone top notch. Our shout.'

'What can I say?'

'You can say yes. And now things are settled we'll come home. Call the minute you need us.'

'Yes, ma'am!'

'Oh dear. Am I sounding officious?'

'You, Celia? Heaven forbid.'

Loaded with soap, towels, blankets and replacement clothes for our prisoner, we drove down the hill to Glaze's apartment. Jon waited until I appeared in the Mercedes, and I trailed him back to the car park, where he swapped the Porsche for the ute. I parked and deadlocked my precious wagon on a lighted street several blocks from the old house, then, as there was no moon, walked ahead to guide Jon as he backed the hundred metres without lights up to the house. Inside it was so quiet I was sure MacFife had escaped. I turned on the light. Blue with cold, our prisoner huddled, whimpering in the middle of the cage. I opened the flap and pushed in a bucket of water, a couple of hamburgers and a plastic cup of coffee. He didn't move.

'Come on, Gregor. Supper time.'

Still no movement.

'He's not dead – he's shivering.'

'Stroke? Heart attack?'

'I'm going in. Hold the flap for me.'

Jon squatted beside the shivering bundle of flesh, held the coffee under his nose and said, with more sympathy that I'd have managed, 'Come on, drink this. It'll do you good.'

With a howl, MacFife flung the coffee in Jon's face, leaped to his feet, grasped his persecutor round the throat and thrust him against the cage. I saw the spark leap across to Jon's bare arm before I could throw the switch. MacFife leaped into the air with a howl of anguish, hair, arms, legs rigid with shock, before collapsing in a heap. A faint smell of burning on the air.

I raced into the cage. Jon was massaging his neck and breathing raggedly. I felt for MacFife's pulse. Faint. Turned him over. Not breathing. Diaphragm in spasm. I thumped him on the chest, more from anger than hope it would do any good, then shoved my mouth over his and blew. Jon fetched a couple of blankets to wrap around him, then massaged his arms and legs to boost the circulation. It didn't take long. A minute at the most before he was gulping air and crying about pain in his foot. A blackened patch under the ball of his left foot was going to hurt for a while. I hoped it would hurt as much as the cut on my ankle.

Jon's neck looked unpleasant, bruising around three nail punctures oozing droplets of blood. I splashed disinfectant. A reddening spot on his arm showed where the spark had jumped. It was lucky the fuse at the roadside hadn't blown. The escape bid had exhausted MacFife's reserves and he lay onto the floor, sobbing.

He'd only been captive two days and one night, and had had sufficient water and a little food. He was just another pathetic wanker hiding behind a loud mouth. Like a frightened rat, he drank, devoured a hamburger, threw it up again over the floor, drank my coffee, and kept the second hamburger down where it would do some good. After licking the last crumbs from his lips he asked almost politely, 'Did you find Glaze?'

'Sort of.'

'What do you mean?'

'Nice apartment.'

'Yeah. But...'

'Nice girls. How're you managing them without CC?'

'They're nothing to do with me!'

'She asked after you.'

'Who did?'

'A good-looking chick bidding fond farewell to an old bloke. She was suspicious, so I told her you'd sent us to look over the empty flat. She asked if it was true that the old baggage was dead. I told her I was CC's replacement.'

He was silent for a full minute, digesting the indigestible, then asked quietly, 'What did you mean when you said, sort of.'

'Sort of what?'

'You sort of found Glaze.'

‘Oh that. The place stunk as badly as this after you’d shat yourself yesterday. The stupid bugger had slit his wrists. Blood everywhere. You’ll have to get a new carpet. We felt a bit disappointed at missing out on sweet revenge, but that’s life.’

‘And death,’ added Jon morosely.

‘Did you tell anyone?’

‘What?’

‘About the dead body?’ MacFife was sweating visibly.

‘Should we have?’

‘No!’

‘There’s no need to shout. Of course we didn’t tell anyone. We’re wanted for Frances murder, remember? With our luck they’d pin Glaze’s suicide on us as well if we told them. No. That’s your little problem old man.’

‘Are you still...’

‘Still what?’

‘Letting me go?’

‘Don’t know. You see, we reckon it was your fault he topped himself. We looked at his shoulder and it was fucking disgusting. The bugger was rotting away. You didn’t look after your mate very well, did you?’

‘He wasn’t my mate.’

‘No. I doubt you’ve got any. But you can see that this changes things a bit. The cops might think it’s a bit too convenient if we lay the blame for Frances’s murder on a dead man. We’ll sleep on it and let you know tomorrow. By the way, Ishbel rang. I answered the phone and told her you were in an awkward position and unavailable. When she asked who I was, I said I was your lover. She hung up on me.’

It was nine o’clock. Neither of us felt like spending another night there, so we emptied the house of all evidence of our stay, leaving nothing except MacFife in his cage and his clothes in the kitchen. Tomorrow we’d sweep, clean and check again for anything incriminating. We removed his blanket, threw another bucket of water over the floor to ensure its continuing conductivity, turned out the light and left. Jon poked his head back through the doorway.

‘By the way, better not dance around, the cage is only loosely stapled to the ceiling and if it falls you’ll be grilled and it’ll take weeks to get the stink out of the place. G’night.’

By the time we’d packed gear in both the ute and Mercedes, there wasn’t enough room to sleep, so we drove to the parking building, clambered into the Porsche, and ten minutes later strutted in to the reception area of an up-market motel. Jon slung his arm around my neck while I, pretending a sore throat and wearing MacFife’s cap and sunglasses, signed in under his name. I insisted on paying in advance, in case we decided to leave early, added fifty dollars to cover anything we might take from the fridge, told the young man he could keep any change, and offered MacFife’s passport, open at his name, as proof of identity.

He took a quick look, closed it and handed it back. ‘Identification’s not necessary, Mr MacFife. I hope you both have a very pleasant evening.’ His conspiratorial smile included Jon, who winked lewdly.

‘We will,’ I grunted, tipping him another fifty bucks.

And it was a pleasant evening, after which we slept the sleep only granted to pure and innocent souls.

Chapter Twenty-four

Sunlight poured through slatted blinds, slicing Jon into dozens of perfect strips of golden flesh. A rattling trolley was followed by a knock on the door.

‘Cleaner!’

‘Ten minutes,’ I called.

The noise trundled away.

We showered, dressed, and were in the Porsche with thirty seconds to spare. The day was perfect. Clear blue skies, wind-free, warm, sunny and invigorating. The last day of winter had to be spent out of doors. We drove north of the river. A delicatessen provided breakfast and lunch, which we carried wrapped in towels through the dunes to a long strip of deserted beach pounded by tremendous surf.

After ham rolls, tomatoes and papaya, we chased each other in and out of surging water, stomped on stranded bluebottle jellyfish to make them pop, turned cartwheels and behaved like kids. We were the only people on the beach. The only fools hurling themselves against mountainous breakers that dashed us, twisted and bruised onto the sandy bottom. The only people alive on the planet it seemed. Panting, exhilarated, exhausted, we flopped onto our towels and soaked up the sun.

‘Where is everyone?’

‘At work. Shopping. Watching TV.’

‘I don’t believe it! It’s the last day of August, there’s a warm northerly breeze, clear sky. It’s twenty-eight degrees. Perfect! Thousands of people have fled southern winters, sold everything and come to coastal Queensland for sunshine, fresh air and beaches. Where are they?’

‘Seeking happiness in air-conditioned cars; wandering footsore in air-conditioned shopping malls; shoving coins into pokies in RSL gaming rooms; seeking nirvana in the fumes, noise and confusion of civilisation.’

‘When they could be on an uncivilised beach as perfect as heaven.’

We gave up thinking about it and enjoyed the moment - until mid-day. Why no news from Matthew? My stomach began to knot. The cage was, in fact, securely fixed to the ceiling, but could MacFife escape? We were leaving him alone too long without water and food. I started to panic. Where was Matthew? Why didn’t he ring? The phone worked. There was good reception. We decided to wait till one o’clock. At one, we decided to wait until two. At five past two, a trill.

‘Peter?’

‘Mathew?’

‘Where are you?’

I told him.

‘I live a kilometre away. Be with you in five minutes.’

Six minutes later he appeared over the sand hills in baggy knee-length shorts, T-shirt and sandals, dragging a pair of laughing toddlers. A cuddly wife trailed behind carrying a baby. He peeled off his rucksack, removed a blanket, spread it, and introduced his wife as Jackie. She looked embarrassed, didn’t offer her hand, turned away and mumbled she’d take the children down to the water.

‘Don’t go in the water, kids,’ he shouted to their retreating backs, before plonking himself down and bursting into laughter.

Jackie and the children stopped, turned and waved.

We all waved back, Matthew still laughing.

‘Should we have put our clothes on?’

He shook his head, then laughed again.

‘Jackie looked shocked.’

‘Doubt it. She thinks you’re crooks, that’s all. No, that’s not the joke.’

‘What is it then?’

‘Big Mac.’

‘The hamburger?’

‘Almost.’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’ I was getting irritable.

‘When I had my first “Big Mac,”’ Matthew said with a laugh, ‘I felt cheated. It was small! Not big!’

‘So?’

‘The same goes for yours.’

Jon and I stared at each other. Matthew was obviously bonkers.

‘MacFife!’ he shouted. He’s not Mr Big, he’s not even Mr Small. He’s Mr Nothing! Mr Nasty Nothing!’

‘Matthew, we’re a bit slow. Explain in simple English.’

After a couple of deep breaths to quell his laughter, he spelled it out. The ledgers, with their newspaper clippings, notes and additions, were a type of diary, a record of MacFife’s life since his marriage at the age of thirty-three. The first entry read: Married Elizabeth, 10.45. am., and in the column labelled, Credit, was neatly written in black ballpoint: \$500,000.00.

What followed was a detailed account of his personal and financial affairs over the following eighteen years. One ledger per year. Elizabeth’s dowry paid the deposit on a block of flats. Five years later she died and his assets grew to include a house, three blocks of land and a term deposit of three hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars. A year later, after buying, selling, investing, speculating, a great deal of travel, entertaining and living the life of a playboy – affirmed by the occasional newspaper clipping, his fortune at the age of forty-four amounted to five-thousand dollars.

A second marriage, to Brenda, boosted his coffers by eight hundred thousand, seven hundred and eighty dollars. Apparently bow wary of real estate, he used this capital as surety to purchase a fast-food franchise, a car-hire business, the rights to a canal-boat tourist venture, and a block of land in the hills. Brenda didn’t last as long as Elizabeth. Her cremation was at eleven fifteen in the morning, three days before his forty-seventh birthday. It was only just in time. Most of the ventures had either collapsed, or were on the point of doing so.

Brenda’s insurance and a small legacy provided enough capital to tempt him back into the property market. A run of lucky buys and quick sales as the Sunshine Coast continued to boom, brought in more than enough to sustain his preferred life-style for the next three years, until a risky speculation on helicopter tourism crashed, literally, taking most of his profits and a fair bit of capital. After the third accident he couldn’t even give the business away.

On his fiftieth birthday he owned an architect-designed canvas house (newspaper clipping) in the hills, a block of flats in Noosa that were only tenanted half the year, a Porsche, and an unquenched desire for the ‘high life’.

The seventeenth ledger becomes more circumspect, less of an occasional diary. Letters rather than names are used to refer to people and things. The eight apartments begin to show a regular return, and then a healthy profit. The tent house begins to show a small regular income. The initials CC, BG and IS, make their appearance. He borrows heavily to buy the house further up Noosa Hill, takes several trips to Thailand and The Philippines, and continues to spend. Red ink reappears.

The eighteenth ledger starts, like the others, on his birthday. Regular payments soon appear to CC, IS and BG. A few weeks later, after yet more red ink, a newspaper clipping about Max’s death. Two and a half weeks before the final entry, he wrote: Married F.

The ledger remains in the red for over a week, until, under a clipping of Frances death, the list of his assets grows by two houses, the gallery, a portfolio of shares, several bonds, debentures and term deposits, and a healthy injection of cash.

I stared at Matthew in disbelief.

‘There has to be a separate set of accounts. For the businesses at least.’

‘And where does he keep his drug money?’ Jon too was incredulous.

‘Each separate business would have had its own, properly kept set of accounts, audited by an accountant, but this is his personal, overall picture.’ Matthew pointed to the first page of the last ledger. ‘See there? That’s a list of his bank accounts together with telephone access codes. I’ve

checked them all. Recorded in these ledgers is the sum total of his assets. There's nothing else, I'm prepared to bet on it.'

'Maybe he had an accountant?'

'I said that.'

'I mean for his drugs.'

'No one hires an accountant to keep records of drug money. And why would he? He's obviously learned bookkeeping. These are textbook perfect. Accurately recorded, totally secure, no copies, not on a computer where they are open to anyone who cares to hack in.'

'But what about that stash of cocaine?'

'Twelve packets?'

'Eleven. But... How'd you know?'

Matthew flicked to an entry seven weeks previously. '12C and that rather large sum of money in expenses. He's bought small quantities like that twice before over the last three years. Doesn't seem to sell any though. At least there's no credit labelled C.'

'He hands it out at parties to impress.'

'Figures.'

'Did he make money from the parties?'

'Not separately listed.'

'Any entries against that place in the hills?'

Matthew flicked through the credit entries against tent. 'A small profit. What was the business?'

'Live, hard-core porn shows – that sort of thing.'

'Then I'd say he was in it more for the thrill than the money.'

'But what was all that fuss about ArtWorks?'

'ArtWorks?' he shook his head. 'There's no mention of any ArtWorks. I'd have noticed.'

I told him about the crappy "original paintings" scheme he had for the gallery.

'Sounds as though he may have intended to get into dealing.'

'Or,' put in Jon thoughtfully, 'It was simply a very clever scam to hook Frances. The thought of getting into the 'big league' would make the greedy bitch agree to the murder of Max and marrying Gregor.'

That thought silenced us.

'So he's not a drug baron?' I asked.

'No. He's just a vicious gigolo who married short-lived rich women to finance his playboy lifestyle.'

'Then,' Jon said thoughtfully. 'He hasn't hordes of heavies waiting in the wings to rescue him. With Glaze and Scumble out of action, he's on his own.'

'Looks like it.'

'Then we can safely let him go.'

They looked at me.

'There's no way I want to be charged with deprivation of liberty. After Glaze's confession, the police will be looking for MacFife. They've no idea we've got him, so if we're careful when we let him go he won't be able to lead the cops to the old house to find evidence to convict us. His car's been seen driving into his garage, and he apparently stayed at a motel last night, so it's going to be difficult to convince the cops he's been held prisoner. Hank will accuse MacFife of the murder of his son and daughter-in-law, produce Glaze's confession and these ledgers as evidence, and...'

'And MacFife will go to jail for a thousand years.'

'And you'll be accused of burglary.'

'What do you mean?'

'Information obtained illegally is not admissible in court.'

'Shit, Matthew. We can't return these, he'll destroy them.'

'So what?'

‘What do you mean?’

‘You don’t need them.’ Matthew sounded certain. ‘You have Glaze’s confession incriminating MacFife.’

‘We’ve used a fair bit of his money.’

‘He’ll be so relieved to have escaped, he won’t notice – for a while.’

‘So, we put it all back?’

‘I would.’ Matthew brought out a thick envelope. ‘But in case you forget any important details, I’ve photocopied the useful bits.’

‘I love you!’ Jon threw Matthew onto his back and kissed him. Mathew pushed him off and sat up, red in the face. ‘Crazy idiot,’ he spluttered, but didn’t wipe his mouth.

I put ten of MacFife’s hundred-dollar notes into his rucksack and offered to kiss him too.

‘He blushed, looked over my shoulder to his approaching wife and whispered, ‘Jackie might misunderstand if she sees me being kissed by a naked man.’

‘Will it be OK if I get dressed?’

He grinned and busied himself putting his papers away.

The northerly breeze had become a cool westerly wind. There would be a frost that night away from the coast. Jackie arrived and the kids were starting to whine.

‘Gotta go.’ Matthew jumped up.

He shook both our hands. ‘The most interesting week of my life. Call me whenever you need me.’ He turned, plucked the baby from Jackie’s arms, kissed it and wrapped an arm around his wife, who stared at us nervously.

‘Why haven’t you got any clothes on?’ demanded the eldest child, a boy of about four.

‘It’s more comfortable like this.’

He nodded sagely.

‘Would you like to come for a meal?’ Jackie blurted, face dissolving into a raspberry-coloured blush.

‘This evening?’

‘Yes.’

‘Excellent. We just have to shoot up to Noosa to deliver these things first.’

‘That’ll give me time to feed the children.’ She blushed again, glanced almost cheekily at my groin, and I discovered I liked her. ‘It won’t be anything special, not what you’re used to.’

‘We’re used to bread, cheese, pies and chips - so I hope it’s not what we’re used to.’

Matthew grinned and gave directions.

A certainty that we’d overlooked something niggled all the way back, but it wasn’t until the bottom of MacFife’s street that I realised what it was. ‘Stop!’ I yelled. ‘Turn and drive quietly away.’

‘We’re getting careless.’ Jon said quietly.

I was sweating. MacFife’s place was certainly being watched. I kept checking behind. We were driving his car! There’d be a call out for it. Side roads, back streets and sudden dashes got us to the car park where we swapped the Porsche for the ute, leaving MacFife’s ledgers, cocaine, passport and, after removing a generous allowance for our own expenses, a still fairly substantial amount of cash in the envelope under the seat.

Jittery with relief we drove back over the river to Matthew’s tidy little brick and tile, three-bedroom home in a neat subdivision inhabited by hundreds of other neat little families with their two and a half children, dog, and mortgage.

Cold meat with hot potatoes, and commercial mayonnaise dolloped over three-day old lettuce and cold canned peas and beetroot was better, slightly, than our recent fare, however, Jackie did make a mean, Cointreau-fortified chocolate mousse with lashings of whipped cream. We promised to invite them to our place - when and if everything got sorted.

After excusing ourselves somewhat earlier than she expected, we arrived back at the old house at eight o'clock. MacFife was bluey cold, ferret eyes red with fever. I turned off the power and placed a blanket and a bucket of water in front of him. He fell forward, grabbed it to him and drank thirstily, then cocooned himself and shivered. Nearly twenty-four hours without water had been cruel. He nibbled at the pie we'd bought on the way home, but wasn't really interested.

We placed his shoes, trousers, shirt and jacket on a clean, dry bit of floor and told him to come out and dress. He stared at us vaguely. I went in and lifted him to his feet. He sank back as though his legs wouldn't hold him. Jon helped carry him out of the cage and rub the blood back into his legs. He whimpered at the pins and needles, and his heel looked sore.

Leaving him to dress himself, we dismantled the cage, stowed it in the ute, returned the meter board to it's original condition, unscrewed the front door, unscrewed the blackouts over the windows, dumped them on top of everything else in the ute, swept up, and were ready to go. Once the floor had dried and become covered in dust and rat shit, no one would guess the old house had had visitors. MacFife was watching vacantly. There wasn't much left of the arrogant bastard.

'Where are we?' His voice a whisper.

'Caloundra.' It was about the same distance as we were from the car park, but in the opposite direction. 'Want a lift? Or would you prefer to walk?'

He stared in incomprehension.

After one last check that we'd left nothing behind, I blindfolded him, tied his arms behind him and led him to the ute. He sat docilely between us. Jon drove, and on the way we explained that Scumble had told us the combination of his safe. We'd looked through it and helped ourselves to a bit of cash, but everything else was in the envelope under the seat of his car. He didn't react. Jon stopped a block away from the car park. The Porsche may have been found by the cops.

I untied his arms and blindfold. 'What did I just tell you, Gregor?' I was sounding like an infant teacher.

He stared at me, frowning. Slowly his face cleared and sharpened as he sensed freedom. 'How did Scumble know the combination?'

'No idea.'

'And you took nothing but cash?'

'And the clothes we're wearing.'

'And everything's under the seat?'

'Right.'

'If it's not, you'll pay.'

'Right. But first you'll tell the cops it was Scumble and Glaze who killed Frances?'

'He stared as though he'd forgotten who Frances was, then nodded impatiently. 'Sure. Sure.' Clearly, he had no intention of keeping his promise.

'Your car's on the top floor of the car park along there. Here are the keys.'

He accepted them silently.

'Can you drive?'

He nodded.

'Can you find your way home?'

He nodded again.

'Right then. It's been fun. Must do it again some time.'

We let him out and drove quietly away to pick up the Mercedes.

'Do you know the way to Hank and Celia's, or do you want to follow me?'

'Up to the Bruce Highway, and then north?'

'Right.'

'That is north.'

'I know. I meant that's right – correct.'

'Right.'

‘Idiot. Get in behind.’

I telephoned ahead and Hank had the gate open, the outside light on and the garage doors up. It was nearly eleven o'clock. We hugged Hank, kissed Celia, shared a hot shower and sipped hot chocolate, wrapped in the warmth of the house and their affection. It was an odd sensation; no longer on the run. None of us felt like talking. Mainly smiles and little questions about whether the chocolate was too hot, if we'd need an extra blanket because it was already freezing outside, how many pillows we wanted and what we'd like for breakfast. Tomorrow there'd be time and clearer heads.

My sleep was dreamless, but Jon tossed around and woke, sweating and crying. I stroked him and he calmed but had no idea what he'd been dreaming.

Sunday the first of September dawned cold and clear. By eight o'clock we were pushing chairs back from the breakfast table on the verandah and removing our shirts. We'd finished dramatising an expurgated version of the events of the last two weeks, and already it was sounding like fantasy. Abductions, rescues, murder, shootings, kidnapping – more like a crime thriller than real life.

‘We told Maureen everything, and that you're sure Max and Frances were murdered.’

‘And?’

‘She refused to believe it. Said you were simply trying to worm your way out of it. Then, as we were driving out the gate two days ago, she stopped us and said, “I was wrong. Max should have stayed with Peter and not gone off with that dreadful woman. Wish him all the best, please.” She'd been discussing it with her husband, a remarkably sensible, if somewhat boring man.’

‘Good for her. And Patrick?’

‘Patrick still blames you for everything,’ Celia said wryly.

‘How is he?’

‘Recovered from the physical trauma, but I doubt he'll get over the psychological.’

‘Does he know about Max's death?’

‘We thought he had enough to worry about,’ Hank said quietly. ‘When he's ready, we'll tell him. It'll make what they did to him more comprehensible.’

Celia sighed softly and asked, ‘What happens now, Hank?’

‘We keep things simple. As the boys' lawyer, I'll telephone the police and ask if there are any charges outstanding against them. If there are I'll get the best barrister I can find to defend you both. Then I'll accuse MacFife and Glaze of the murders. If, as I suspect, you two are no longer wanted, then I suggest you make yourselves scarce until nearer the trial – if there is one.’

‘Let's ring now.’

‘It's Sunday, but... why not?’ He looked up a number, telephoned, asked the question, was transferred, asked again, made an appointment for the following morning and switched off with a frown. ‘No one seems to know anything. Because of the floods and associated disaster, most of the hundred and fifty-seven suspicious and unexplained deaths that have been reported since the deluge have been transferred to Brisbane.’

Jon draped an arm across Hank's shoulders. ‘Hank, you're the greatest.’

The old man smiled, pleased at the easy familiarity.

I tried to feel happy, and did feel a relief – of sorts – but not the release I'd hoped for.

‘Well, if the cops aren't after us, we'll shoot up to Rory's and unload his gear. Your ute's been fantastic. The ideal gangster's vehicle and excellent for abductions.’

The laughter was forced.

‘Then we'll call in and check my place before returning.’

‘In time for dinner?’

‘Of course.’

‘And you'll stay tonight?’

‘Thanks.’

It was only a slight deviation to call on the Alconas. I needed to see them. Jeff was outside the gate talking animatedly to a young fellow astride a pushbike. His face lit up when I said casually, 'Everything's cleared up. Parents in?'

'Yeah, they're inside.' He looked from friend to house and back, unwilling to leave his friend. 'Peter, Jon, this is Evan.'

We shook Evan's thin, hard hand.

'Are you staying?'

'No, we've borrowed Hank Fierney's ute to take this junk home.'

That gave me a tickle in the chest, Jon calling my place home. Brian answered the door in a pair of shorts, and dragged us through to the living room where there were hugs all round at our good news and I began to unwind. It was over. There'd be no more life and death situations. We could get back to living.

Everyone threw on shirts and shorts and came outside to see us off.

'Can we come up with you?' Jeff was nervous.

'Pile on in,' laughed Jon, 'The more the merrier.'

Half an hour later, somewhat crumpled, we bounced down Rory's drive. After unloading and accepting a celebratory coffee and cake, we drove back over the rise and down my drive. The air was still warm, humid and heavy.

'Can we swim in the dam?' Evan was excited.

'Race you,' Jon shouted, throwing off everything and racing down. Evan glanced at us to check our reaction, then followed suit, white buttocks glowing in contrast to brown legs and back.

'Evan's nice.'

'Yes.'

'Better than the South American.'

'Much. Peter...?'

'Yes, of course you can.'

'What?'

'Take Evan and a rug down through the trees to the left of the dam where there is a totally private spot where you will never be disturbed.'

He blushed.

'He's good looking.'

'Yeah.' Jeff's hands were shaking. 'What if he doesn't want to...?'

'He does.'

'How do you know?'

'I've a third eye.'

I took a blanket from the ute and thrust it at him. 'Now get your gear off, have a splash in the dam and lead Evan down the garden path.'

I let myself into the cottage and stopped in awe. My last view of the place had been of a stinking, water-sodden, burned out interior, and my brain was expecting it to be the same. Instead, the place was clean and dry, the roof repaired, rafters painted, and it smelled clean, fresh and ready to be lived in. I turned in time to hug a dripping Jon.

'Thanks.'

'It was a pleasure.'

I toured the room admiring all he'd done, ending up at the unmade bed. He pressed me onto it. After weeks of thinking, planning and treading carefully, it was a relief to feel an uncomplicated surge of lust.

Primal passions were about to peak when the door flew open and a hoarse voice shouted, 'You utter bastards! You filthy fucking faggot bastards. He isn't dead! You said he was dead and all I had to do was blame him! But he's not dead and he's put me in the shit with the cops and it's all your fault! You... You...' incoherent with rage, MacFife pointed a handgun at us. I froze.

Jon raised himself on one elbow, stared at MacFife and said calmly. 'Don't be ridiculous, Gregor. If the cops were after you, they'd have got you by now. You're imagining things.'

'Like fuck! I went to Glaze's place and he wasn't there! None of the girls have seen you! I phoned a mate in the force and he warned me not to go home!' MacFife was hysterical with fury. 'You've set me up! Well it's the last bloody thing you two are ever going to do!' His finger tightened on the trigger.

'I'd be careful if I were you, Gregor MacFife. Things have a way of backfiring on you lately.' Jon's voice was deadly calm.

'Not this time they won't. Dead men can't testify in court and you're both dead!' He pulled the trigger.

A muffled pop and puff of smoke. His eyes grew wider than I'd ever have thought possible and he flung the pistol from him, screaming in pain. The explosion, instead of being converted into motion, had turned into enough heat to cook his hand. A bit of flesh had been flung away with the gun.

Jon heaved a sigh. 'Sorry mate, you got the wooden spoon.'

We extricated ourselves from each other and threw a blanket over the stricken MacFife, immobilised him with twine, gagged his screams, and for the second time in four days bundled him into the back of the ute, tossing his still hot gun in with him. We were getting disturbingly good at that sort of thing.

'Where's his car? We should have heard him drive up.'

'Probably left it out at the road so he could sneak up.'

I stared in disbelief at Jon. 'Look at you! Fear must be a turn on.'

'Who's frightened? It's success that's exciting. Now, where were we before that runt interrupted us?'

We raced back to the cottage.

Jeff and Evan plonked themselves on the bed, waking us from a doze. Jeff was nervous, Evan frowning.

'Evan doesn't believe you're gay.'

It was too absurd. We were entwined, naked on the bed. 'Why not, Evan?'

'You're so... so normal.'

'So are you.'

'Yeah... but...'

'Gay is normal,' Jon said airily, 'for some of us. Forget the propaganda; be honest with those who matter to you, and life can be fun. Right, Peter?'

I suppressed a laugh. 'Right.'

Evan frowned and stared at me. 'You two are lovers?'

'Yes.'

'And you've just been having sex?'

'Yes.'

'And you don't feel guilty?'

'For what?'

'And you don't think Jeff and I are disgusting for doing... you know?'

'If you didn't enjoy it, it was disgusting. If you did, it wasn't. As simple as that. Was it fun?'

Jeff grinned. 'Yeah! I didn't even notice the mossies.'

A slow grin split Evan's face. He grabbed Jeff and kissed him roughly before turning back to us. 'Did you see that? I kissed a man!' He raced outside, turned a couple of cartwheels, raced back in, kissed Jon, me, Jeff again, then threw himself onto the chair, grinning.

We grinned back.

'Can we come again?'

'As often as you like.'

‘Thanks.’

Jeff was standing completely still, eyes closed.

‘You OK, Jeff?’

‘Don’t dare move in case I wake up.’

‘Pity, because we’ve got to go.’

‘We can sit in the back on the way home, give you guys more room.’

‘There’s still some shitty junk in there. The front’s fine.’

As we drove out the gate Evan pointed to the right. ‘There’s a car over there - a Porsche.’

‘Probably bush-walkers. It’s State forest on that side of the road.’

‘Next time we come, we’ll explore. What do you reckon, Jeff?’

Jeff grinned.

After dropping the boys off, we headed for town.

‘I’m nervous.’

‘Me too.’

The officer in charge looked up wearily.

‘A man tried to shoot us, but the gun blew up in his hand.’

She raised her eyes in disbelief.

‘His name is Gregor MacFife.’

The young woman frowned, trying to place the name.

‘We overpowered him, and shoved him in the back of the ute. He’s in need of medical attention.’

That made her sit up. She pressed a buzzer, two constables checked, and in a small interview room we answered three thousand questions, signed statements, and were only a few minutes late for dinner.