

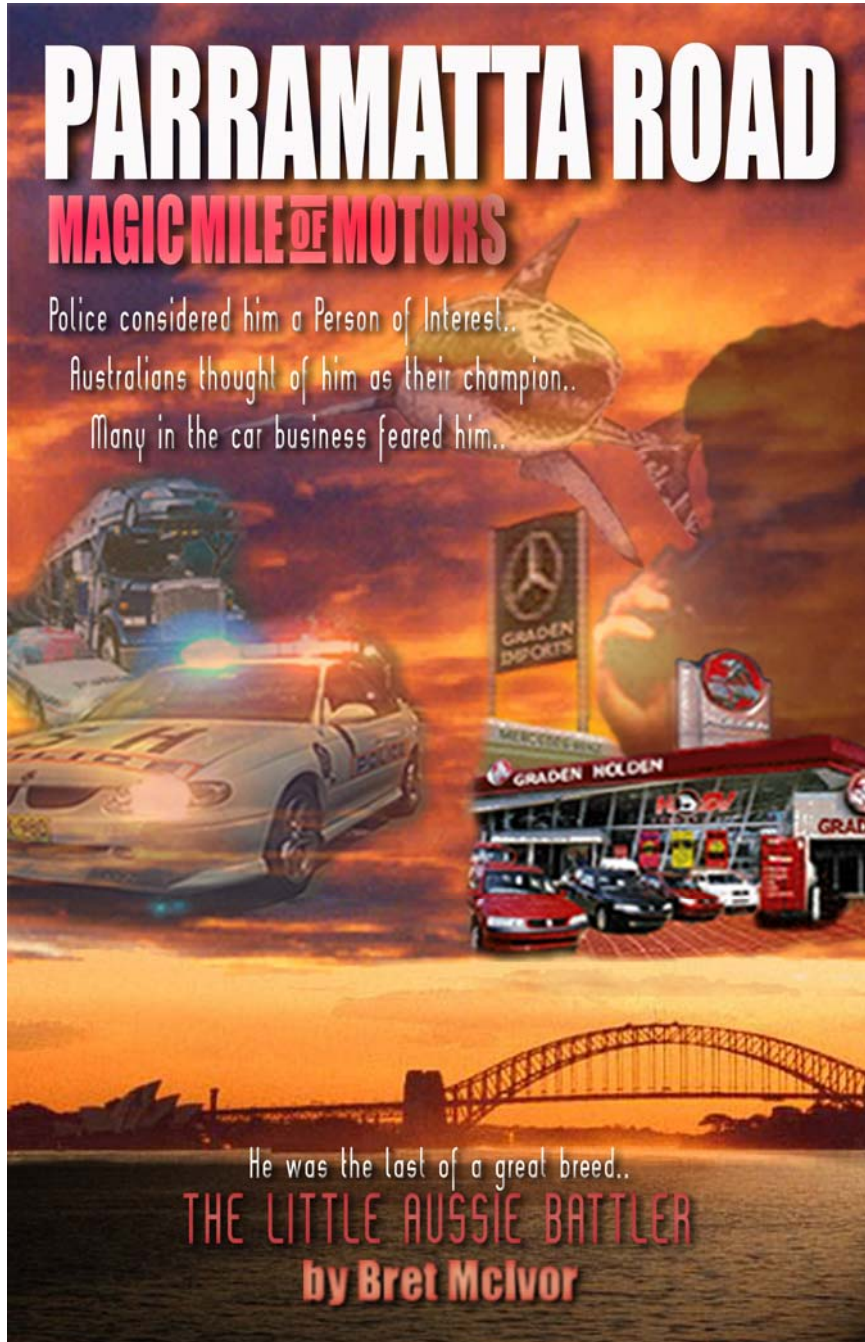
PARRAMATTA ROAD

MAGIC MILE OF MOTORS

Police considered him a Person of Interest..

Australians thought of him as their champion..

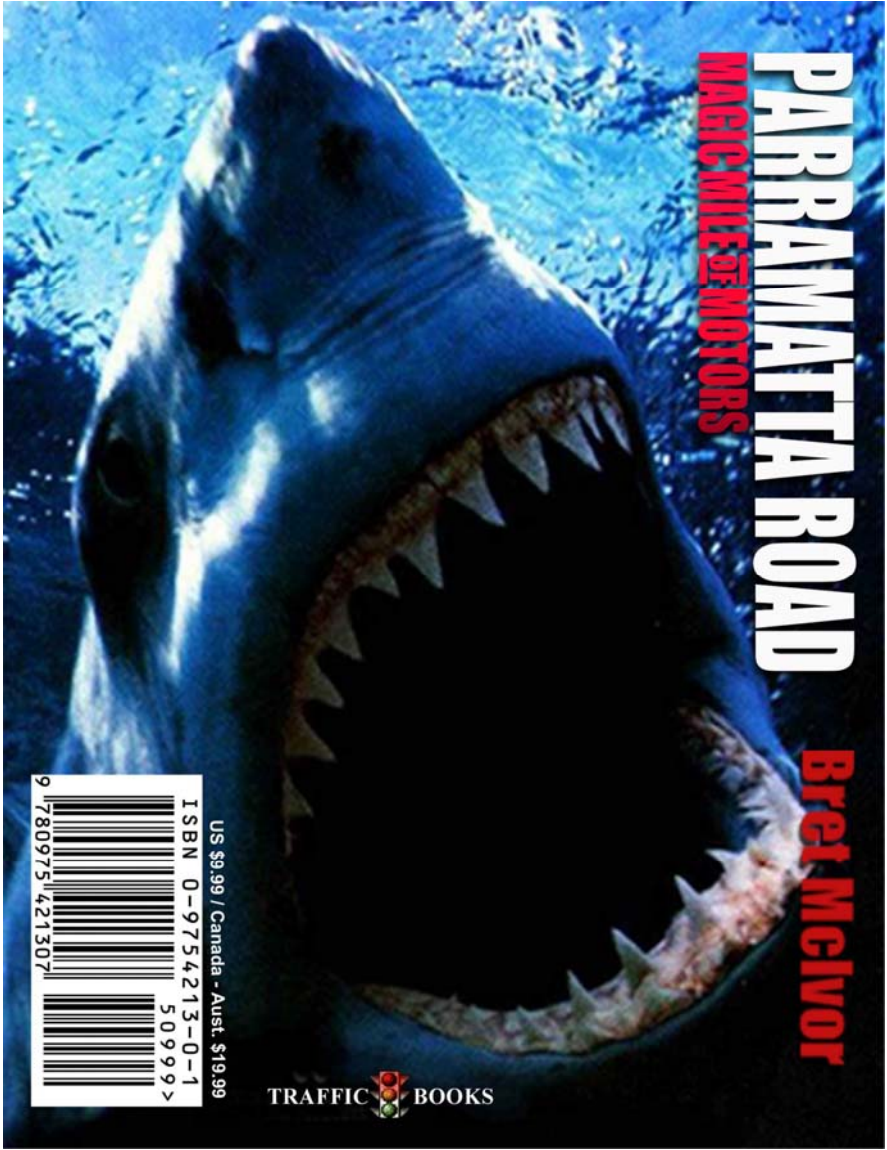
Many in the car business feared him..



He was the last of a great breed..

THE LITTLE AUSSIE BATTLER

by Bret McIvor



MAGIC MILE OF MOTORS
PARRAMATTA ROAD

Bret McIvor

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PROLOGUE

OUTSIDE SYDNEY HEADS, THE arching jaw of a huge breaker enveloped a trawler trying to make headway in an angry sea. As her steel bow dug into the wall of a monster, lightning bolts, brilliant and growling, ripped through the night sky, and the furious winter storm increased its tempo.

On the aft deck, three men, struggling to maintain their balance, kicked a large burlap sack overboard. Big enough to hold a calf, it hit the churning water with an almighty splash. It disappeared, swallowed by the propeller wash. Mission over, ship and crew powered away. Its running lights vanished into a fog bank. Just as quickly as it appeared, the storm diminished. The sea became more manageable.

The sack insolently broke back to the surface. It bobbed in a calmer swell and drifted towards shore.

Below towering cliffs, a bell clanged from a navigational buoy anchored off the rocks. Its green nav lights revealed twine about the neck of the sack had unravelled. A vague tubular shape poked through the opening. High atop South Head, an old lighthouse surveyed the darkness. The first time its brilliant beam strafed the sack, the shape was recognised. Denim ran the length of a human leg, and a soiled running shoe covered the foot. It began to wiggle about. Whoever the sack held captive was alive!

An angelic voice proclaimed:

You don't appear in court, scumbag!

*Fatty says so. Guess it's not your
lucky day, eh cobber.*

A gunshot rang out — a clue.

Evil lurked under the waves. A giant shadow brushed past the sack and retreated. Calm and still. Abruptly, the sack was gone, snatched in a savage churn. It crashed back to the surface, a gaping hole ripped from its side. The beam from the lighthouse again swept. The sack had printed markings “GRA.. HOL..” stencilled on the side. The rest of the markings disappeared into the bite marks.

A muffled moan, a man's, carried from the confines. He hallucinated and spluttered half-coherent gibberish. Gasping with convulsive, choking sobs, he was not going to last much longer.

A devilish shape, the dorsal fin of a shark, sliced through the chop. The man-eater exhibited a sharp, rounded snout, shiny black hide flecked with grey, and great girth. A Bronze Whaler, its scarred and pitted dorsal marked it a mature murderer. Master of its domain, it sensed an easy kill and honed in on the electrical discharges. Hunter bonded to hunted. The beast circled and studied the defences of its prey. Swimming in close, it jolted the sack with its 800-pound weight. With a thrash of its tail, it disappeared with lightning speed.

Thunder boomed on the horizon as the fading storm cleared its throat. Its farewell gifted the reef with an uneasy still. The moon, enshrined in the cloudless sky, emitted a frozen luminescence. In its steely glow, peace prevailed.

The Whaler resurfaced. It motored through the wash, determined to feed. Its tail pumped harder and harder, and the gap closed. Its gigantic head rose up out of the water, and dark, soulless eyes rolled back into their cranial sockets. The imminent taste of human blood provoked its 15-foot mass to twitch and tremble in a rush of nervous energy. Its mighty jaws slammed shut. *WA-BOOSH!* A blood-curdling scream cut the solitude. The predator swam off with a prize, an arm protruding from its jaw.

The man flopped into open water. What little remained of the burlap sheathed his lower torso and legs. His heart laboured lethargically. Screams faded into pantomime as he lapsed into unconsciousness, presaging the fatal effects of exposure and mutilation.

Charging up from the deep, the killer breached the surface and rammed home, launching the man high into the air. Its cold, black eye watched the bundle ascend, then splash down. In it went. Its hooked teeth tore cleanly and shredded the man's body apart.

Lured by the smell of blood, the fin of another shark, a female Mako, broke the water. A deceptively beautiful creature with large, devilishly dark eyes and slender form, she had a pointed, almost conical snout, long gill slits, and dagger-like teeth. Her ghostly indigo blue back bore deep abrasions from years of fighting.

The water churned from their feeding frenzy. All traces of flesh devoured, they turned on each other in a macabre territorial dispute. The match proved even, and they swam off through shreds of clothing and burlap. A freak wave engulfed their dorsals and crashed down. The bubbling white surf obliterated cleanly all trace of the violent encounter.

ONE [AUCTION DAY]

“WHAT AM I BID on this bewdy?”

Amplified over the noisy crowd, the auctioneer's deep baritone reverberated about the walls of the showroom. Amidst hooting and howls, a yellow Ford pick-up with a suspect engine and a decided sag about the axles rolled into the spotlight. Some of the hundreds of sweaty wholesalers in this fiercely male bastion took notice, but most ignored it.

Jim Graden, the auctioneer, took homage. From his lofty perch, he snarled contempt at the sea of beer bellies, sun-leathered faces, and broken noses.

“You blokes are just shittin' me to tears. What a pack of bloody tire kickers. C'mon, ya cheap bunch'a mongrels. Ava go!”

He shook his head, frustrated that the third vehicle in as many minutes chanced to pass without an opening bid.

“Hey! Ten grand’s the reserve here, fellas. I gotta make that at least, or I’m goin’ ta the next one. Check out the bloody mags. Real chrome they are. Only hauled sheep on Sundays, I swear! Owned by an ol’ farmer mate o’ mine up at Ulladulla, God rest his soul. So, who’s gonna step up on this ute then, aye?”

Graden was a tall and rugged man, with neatly cropped blond hair and a distinctive mole on his cheek. He lived life to the fullest. Some called him “Fatty.” His nickname earned not for his build but his fat cat ways, he customarily spent exorbitant amounts on the finer things. More than just some ‘weekend millionaire,’ no one ever accused him of being cheap.

His father had signed over a failing auction business on his deathbed. As a young man, Fatty became a natural at the game, mastering the fast-paced lingo, a foreign language to the uninitiated. The auction thrived under his leadership. He expanded his enterprise, forcing the owner of a crappy Holden dealership to sell it to him practically at gunpoint. A year later, he cut a shady deal for a parcel of land next door. He built that into an award winning Mercedes store. Today, the 50-something hustler was worth millions.. on paper.

Time was wasting. Fatty teased and cajoled the crowd with a nod here, a flick of the wrist there. He needed to generate interest in the yellow *Ulladulla Sheep Express* idling below him. In reply, the room just stood about and fanned their faces with crumpled programs to move air through a haze of exhaust fumes.

“Are you all daft?” Fatty cried. “That ute down there’s worth twice that much!” He looked to one of his spotters. “Bugger yis, then! Piss the bastard off, Allan,” he demanded, and waved the pickup away.

Three purple taxicabs, fairly new, their stickers removed, took centre stage. The noise became roisterous as voices tried to shout bids out over the other one. Fatty smirked. The tension of joy to the winner and depression to the losers came swiftly, as Fatty slammed down the gavel. Next, a fire red Mustang classic idled up. Fatty called for opening bids. There wasn’t any interest. He was livid.

“Right, youse blokes! I’m pullin’ it. Hell, I’d rather give it to some leper down at the shelter than sell it to you lot.”

The Mustang rolled around the corner.

Fatty ushered the next car up, a 1960 Thunderbird coupe, baby blue in colour. It stalled as it approached the stage. Behind it, two long, bedraggled lines of cars stretched under roller doors and out to the back parking lot. Faced with yet another delay, Fatty let out a groan. Blood vessels at his temple pulsed, and his face grew beet red.

“C’mon, Tavish! You’re slowin’ me down, mate. Bring that bloody yank tank up here.”

“Dinnae gie yer knickers in a knot, yoong Sairr Roderick,” the old yardman muttered in a strong Gaelic accent. In the refuge of the T-Bird’s cab, the wily Scot could afford to be a little impudent, as he played with the bum starter.

Finally, the T-Bird turned over. Tavish revved the engine. A smile broke over his profoundly wrinkled face.

“Aye, Robert tha Bruce cooldnae huv dain be-eter.”

Sooty smoke billowed from the classic’s exhaust pipe. The Scotsman, poor with the clutch, kangarooed the car into the spotlight. Brakes ground to a halt below the podium,

and Fatty resumed his chant. The noise of the crowd grew louder. A handful of wholesalers gathered about. The competition was on, and bids mounted rapidly.

Nearby, Gunna Kilbright, a portly man in a blue suit, engorged himself on an oversized hotdog as though it was his last meal. It wasn't the best tasting dog he'd ever had. Lumps of pig fat gristle lodged in his teeth. But it was, at least, a stomach-filler. Anything really to kill the nicotine taste in his saliva. An old-timer in the business, he had seen plenty of days like this, full of crazies stupidly pushing prices up. The commotion around the classic coupe paled in comparison to the attention his eyes gave a woman beside him.

Marilynn Mayberry was the only female in attendance. Long brown hair fell attractively around her pretty face. Her wide-set green eyes were captivating, and full, sensual lips prettily lipsticked. Her figure maintained sleek proportions from her college days as a state champion sprinter almost two decades earlier. The top demurely vee'd down between full, round breasts. A fuchsia Versace short-skirted couture skirt hugged her trim, athletic body. Her inviting cleavage trapped Gunna's gaze.

"So cutie, wha'cha doin' here?"

Gunna's loutish smile revealed teeth caked with chewed food. A yellowish-green goo covered his face and podgy fingers.

Marilynn gave no more heed to a person she considered a glutinous pig than what the walls around Dealz Auto Auctions displayed, "Dealers Only. No Public Allowed. *That means Women!*"

Her eyes remained fixed on Fatty, ignoring the occasional wolf whistle from some leach behind her.

"I am here to redeem him."

Gunna's mouth fell open. "Who? Graden? You're kiddin' me, right?"

Marilynn gave him a stone-faced stare. "No, not at all," she said in an intriguing, private school manner. She detected a smell of body odour mixed with tobacco. It sickened her. "He just doesn't know it yet."

She resumed her gaze on Fatty, watching him rattle off bids on the T-Bird. To her, he exuded a most magnetic air of confidence and authority. She considered him, in his trademark black Brioni double-breast, to be of her class. An attractive equal. That suit alone would have cost most men in the room two month's earnings. He was a man, she knew, any woman wanted, even without the money.

With a gruff chortle, Gunna took a final bite of his hotdog and sucked his fingers clean. He turned his head away and shot a sliver of snot from a nostril. It splashed by the shoe of another wholesaler.

"Hey," the older narler barked. "Steady on, ya filthy bastard!"

Gunna snorted deeply, coughed, wiped his nose, and ignored him.

"Listen hon, Graden's no pushover. And he wouldn't take too lightly to yer comments. So, I'd keep 'em to yerself 'round here."

Marilynn ignored his stare. She tapped her manicured nails on the silk sleeve of her suit. With resilience, she replied evenly, "We shall see. We shall see."

A call for last bids blared over the speakers.

"Damn it!" cried Gunna. "Better put a bid on that yank tank."

“Going twice,” Fatty yelled into his mike.

“Forty-five even, Jimbo,” shouted Gunna, his placard held high.

Fatty spotted the tubby man. “Thanks, Gunna. Anyone got balls fer fifty?”

The room went quiet.

“Last call. Once... Twice...” He slammed down the gavel.

“Sold! Lot 430 goes to bidder number 43. Goodonya, Gunna.”

In back of the room, a stubbly-faced geezer tended to a hotdog stand. Shoulders stooped, cheeks cratered around missing teeth, a half-spent cigarette dangled from his sun-cracked lips. Watching the dogs boil, occasionally he stirred them, mindless that ash dropped into the bubbling water. With a jittery clang, he returned the lid to the pot. No one on the showroom floor noticed, noisy and crowded as it was. Bored to death, he leaned his skeletal frame against the wall. He wore the cap of the Scottish Fusiliers, old man Graden’s unit. A collection of dingy war medals dangled from a moth-eaten cardigan. Like Tavish, he, too, was indebted to Fatty. For, without the Graden family goodness, he would be living under a bridge somewhere fighting rats for bunk space.

From the street, a squeal of brakes demanded his attention. He poked his head through the door, just as a squad of uniformed officers swept past. They bowled him over in their haste. He picked himself up off the floor and curtly guffawed at the sight of two officers dressed like spacemen in bomb-blast suits.

A senior constable, tall and commanding, led the charge through the crowd. A no-nonsense type, he forced his way past Gunna.

“Hey, ya poofta! Watch it, or I’ll have yer badge,” yelled Gunna, his beer spilled to the floor.

The constable stopped and sneered dangerously at him. His manner as short as the clipped grey hair under his shiny cap, he fondled his holstered weapon. For a moment, he surmised Gunna would make good target practice. He had more pressing matters to attend to, and slithered off between cars. With a long stride, he leapt up on the podium and took charge.

“Mr. Graden, I got knowledge there’s a bomb here. The tip is that it’s been placed in an old yank tank. Where’s that car?”

Fatty stared in disbelief. “Yeah, I just sold a T-Bird. My bloke just drove it around back.”

The cop looked at his watch. “Report says its timer’s set to explode in...er, well, I guess a few minutes ago.” He reached for the mike. “I need this. Sorry, son.”

Fatty blocked the copper’s hand. “Listen, mate, I’m not your son, and you’re sure as shit not my father. So, go screw yerself ten ways to Sunday and back! Now get on with it Harry, or get outta my place and outta my face.”

There was heavy silence.

Until a few years ago, Harry Edwards had maintained a high profile as a big wig in the consorting squad. When a case against Fatty turned sour, a man he hoped to put away, Edwards was busted down to a uniform. Fatty knew the cop, a pure crazy, still carried a grudge sufficient to warrant reprisal.

“We’ve had the *evil* on you for a while, Graden. You’re one of the people we watch. *Carefully.*” He paused and challenged Fatty with his eyes. “Now, let me do my bloody job, mate!”

Suddenly, from outside, there was a hellacious explosion. A shockwave broke windows and rocked the building.

Fatty’s eyes bulged. “What the HELL was that?”

A cloud of smoke drifted in through the open roller doors. Fatty’s drivers jumped from the vehicles waiting in the lineup and scattered. It was a footrace to the exits.

Fatty’s jaw dropped.

“Strewth! Ol’ Tavish was drivin’ it.”

Before he could close his mouth, Tavish raced past. Under his kilt, his bony old legs carried him to safety as fast as they could quiver.

“Sairr Roderick, aam afraid ‘at motur back thaur is stuffed!”

“No shit,” Fatty replied, relieved. “And quit callin’ me Roderick. You *know* I hate that name.”

Fatty marched outside with Edwards in tow. The T-Bird, parked against the wall, was a burned out hulk. His men finished up with the extinguishers just as the fire engines arrived. Fatty ambled over and ignored the heat coming from the roadster. He had taken it on consignment for a mate. He could care less about its lineage. Or, the long voyage it had taken from America. Even its value, for that matter. He just wanted to make a buck off another damned car! He pulled out a knife and wedged the blade behind the prized Phoenix emblem. Prying it from the hood, he slipped it into his pocket and mentally counted his adversaries.

“Who hates me the most?”

He pondered a cohort of foes who wanted him gone. Looking up at overcast skies, he shifted his gaze to Edwards. The cop leaned against the building, stroking his holstered weapon, assessing the situation from a safe vantage.

“What an egotistic, self-important prick,” Fatty muttered, and rightly so.

For years, the police had tried to finger him on a slew of capers. Everything from murder and robbery, to racehorse doping and running prostitution rings. All without success, thanks to his capable legal staff. Fatty had no time for the bastards. He had to work out who was gunning for him. The cops weren’t going to help. Hell no! They were out to get him. They considered him a *Person-of-Interest*, a cheap thug, and an underworld figure without any measure of scruple. But, to most Australians, he was seen as an incredibly likeable and charming underdog. To them, the blue collar worker, he was the last of a great breed, the little Aussie battler.

Fatty strode back inside.

“Harry, let’s get on with this bloody auction. I got a business to run here.”

There was money to be made, and he wanted much more than his share.

TWO
[A VISIT]

FATTY LEANED BACK IN his leather chair and unbuttoned his jacket. Relieved that the sale was over, he opened the blinds. From his second floor office atop the auction, he gazed out the window through tired slits. Below, he noticed two fire trucks exit a laneway beside his property. The car fire under control, they bullied their way into traffic and were swept inexorably east, through leafy suburbs and into the dust and stone of the city. For a Wednesday morning, everything seemed back to normal, including Parramatta Road, as frantic as usual, with noisy, arrogant morning commuters.

He cringed. "Hey, steady on! Too much teeth."

"Sorry, Jim," a young female said from under the desk.

Over his shoulder, a monstrous fish tank gurgled peaceably. The sound, a mesmerizing harmony, took control. He rolled his eyes back, moaned in relief, and came.

Glad I keep her around, he thought with a satisfied look.

A knuckle tapped at the door.

Startled but amused that the knock hadn't come a moment sooner, he pushed her off and away, then stood to zip his pants.

"Be right there."

With a wave of his hand, he dismissed the naked girl, motioning her to grab her clothes and get the hell out.

Worried that it might be her father, a wholesaler she knew was downstairs, she ran over to the sofa and scooped up her jeans and halter-top.

"Thanks, Jim," she said, wiping her mouth. "Enjoyed it."

Five-hundred dollars richer, she disappeared through a private exit. Fatty looked about, concluded everything was in order, and opened the door.

"Well, well! Marilyn Mayberry," he said, pleasantly surprised, and kissed her on the cheek. "Ain't seen you in years. Saw you down at the auction, but you disappeared. Still as gorgeous as ever."

"Thanks, Jim."

He chuckled. "Oh, I saw you met Gunna. Remind me to put a leash on that bastard. He can be a handful. Hope he didn't perve on you too bad."

"Oh, he was a pussy cat, Jim."

The phone rang.

"Baby, I gotta get that," he said, and looked at his watch. "Eleven-fifteen. I know who it is. Make yerself comfy."

"Nice digs," she said with an approving nod.

Comfortably elegant, the regal décor was reminiscent of a swank gentleman's club. Dimly lit, it cried 'man's domain.' The charm and grace of old Chesterfield burgundy leather furnishings, expensive cabinetry, and rich walnut-panelled walls augmented the tasteful masculine palette. A large Persian rug worth a good fifty-grand covered the floor.

Fatty listened on the phone and lit up a Cohiba. The effects of the bomb blast still lingered, and he felt the beginnings of a migraine. He chomped down on the thick, long cigar while Johnny Millhouse, his lieutenant of four years, spoke on the other end. The smoke he expelled in slow, artful spurts formed large rings in the air. His eyes followed them. They froze suddenly at the ceiling. His brows snapped together, forming a scary, implacable line.

“I don’t care, Johnny! Tell that prick Rowan if he don’t have my money here by four o’clock tomorrow, he’s gonna end up shark bait. Bloody tired of this, YOU HEAR ME! I want my two hundred-grand on my desk by four. That’s four o’clock, and tomorrow’s Thursday. I won’t spell it out, ‘cause you’re not stupid, but ‘four,’ ‘tomorrow.’ Tell that little bastard it’s his last chance.”

He slammed the receiver down. Rowan Braddock, an arch nemesis of his for almost a decade, owed him a large sum. Disgusted with the delay in getting his loan shark money repaid, he thought about cruel ways he’d like to torture him: perhaps, ripping out his fingernails, or a chopstick up his penis.

Marilynn walked over and sat on the corner of his desk. She crossed her long, slender legs.

“Wanna ciggie?” Fatty said, and opened a hand-carved box.

She looked at the assortment. “My, you’re quite the host, aren’t you?” She tapped her chin. “Hmm, let’s see. Don’t mind if I do.” She chose one, lit up, and puffed. “Oh, the name’s not Mayberry anymore, Jim. It’s Vance now.”

“Victim number five.” He didn’t seem the least bit surprised. She professionally married money. “Vance, aye? Not Rod Vance, the Benz dealer up in Brisbane?”

“One and the same, Jim,” she said, and flicked her ten-carat prize with her thumbnail. “But, I’m not here to talk about me, sweetie.”

Fatty’s brow furrowed. “Oh, oh, here we go. You sound like my bloody guardian angel.” He caressed the milky skin of her leg through silken hose. He wanted to get into her pants. Always had. Still did.

“No,” she demanded, and pulled her leg back. “Let’s not get started down that road again. As I recall, your wife wasn’t too happy when she caught us in the garage that night. Still hate myself for that little episode.”

Fatty leaned back in his chair. “Little? Wadd’ya mean little? Hell, I ain’t never had no complaints. And ‘Boobs’ was one of yer best mates.”

“I wish you’d quit calling her that! Your ex is a good person. Yes, she was my friend. I screwed it up for the both of you. You made a great couple.”

“Why do you still take it personally?” he asked. “She’s got a beaut set! Think that’s why I married her in the first place. Best rack I ever squeezed.” He ogled Marilyn’s impressive cleavage. “Well, next to those bewdies.”

Marilynn frowned. She wasn’t getting through. “You always did have a way with words. Wish it wasn’t always sex with you.”

Fatty smiled lecherously. “Why? Wouldn’t be much to life without a good ol’ punch in the pants, aye.”

She picked up his manicured though scarred hand. That chiselled chin, those enigmatic blue eyes of his drew her in. Under that suit beat such an intense spiritual force and sex appeal. She had, even today, found it difficult to control her emotions around him. Two

years ago was the last time she had laid her head against his strongly muscled chest. Husband number four, back then, thought more about his gas exploration businesses than her. Those were lonely nights. Jim Graden made her feel like a woman again.

“I worry about you.. that car bomb earlier. Am I paranoid, or is someone after you?”

His eyes rested on the aquarium, Fatty interlocked his fingers over his chest.

“Yeah, so it would seem.”

“Do you know who?”

“Probably the bloody coppers. Hell, I don’t know! I got Mitch on it right now.”

“Who? Rylander? He wouldn’t know his bum from a hole in the ground.”

Fatty swivelled around. “Well, he is my bloody bodyguard. I trust him with my life.”

She stared at him. The guilt she felt for having broken up his marriage ate away at her conscience. Yet, she could not deny the magnetism that unfailingly drew her thoughts of him almost daily. Nor, the tender feelings she constantly struggled with and guarded against revealing. Her supreme desire, ancient and contemporary, was to participate in his safety and happiness.

“Jim, honey, I know that even after two years, you’re still raw over losing Dillon. He was such a sweetheart of a lad. I’m so very, very sorry that you lost him. I still cry about that because I loved him as well. Is there anything in the world I can do to help you?”

His spirits lifted. “Yeah, lay me! Then, find the bastard who bombed my joint. You got as many connections as I got.” He reached out and pulled her onto his lap. “Now come on, fer old time’s sake.”

THREE [END OF THE ROAD]

THE GIGANTIC CLIFFS OF South Head guarded the shores of Sydney. The Gap, a lookout for tourists, was an extremely sheer sea wall and centrepiece of a great sandstone shelf. Formed 220 million years ago, it dropped to huge breakers crashing into jagged rocks four hundred feet below. A social history of the locale sadly overshadowed its great and impressive geological history. Every year, upwards of thirty suicides occurred there since the days of the early colonists.

Behind the cliffs, down in the valley, the quaint village of Watsons Bay melted into a colourful ocean of purples, pinks, and greys as the sun dropped behind the horizon. Dozens of streetlights flickered on and illuminated the shimmering streets, evidence of an earlier rain. With downtown Sydney imposing only negligible light pollution, zillions of stars twinkled brightly in random, unfamiliar patterns.

Cafe owners along the quiet curve of Old South Head Road placed chalkboards advertising nightly specials on the sidewalks, enticing those that strolled past to stay for dinner.

As the midnight hour approached, a new storm was brewing far out at sea. Ominous grey clouds began to gather and, high atop the mighty bluffs, an oceanic breeze gusted through the trees and bush land. On the rocky outcrop far below, strong southerly winds drove a mighty surge of sea into jagged boulders without compassion.

Behind the cliffs, brilliant halogen beams lit up the night at the entrance to Gap Park. One of Fatty's contemporaries and owner of many car dealerships, Rod Holton hunched despondently over the wheel. Though manly in build, no longer did his masculinity serve him. A good-looking man in his late forties, he felt insignificant, wasted, useless, and hopeless.

The car he drove, a late model Jaguar XJ-8, became stuck in a large puddle of mud. The sedan's low profiles spun furiously as he transmission-rocked the car back and forth. Finally, the car wrested free, and he accelerated up the grassy embankment.

Behind breath-fogged glass, he weaved through a scattering of boulders and trees, ignoring a sign warning heavy fines and jail time for trespassers. Well educated and wealthy, he was a sought after figure with both men and women. One of Fatty's close mates, both men were at opposite ends of the spectrum: Holton, the gentleman breed of the car business; Fatty, the uneducated, street-wise Aussie battler. Tonight, the effects of heavy financial losses within his empire and disillusionment with those he had trusted pressed upon him, leaving his sensibilities bereft of reasoning and logic. Yet, one thing remained in his grasp. A wise manipulator to the end, he reserved the Joker. Shrewd enough to know the highest trump in the deck of life harboured malevolent villainy, he trusted its insolent and cunning tricks to serve his purpose. Here, to complete his final mission, he was ready to play the card.

Approaching the edge of the cliff, Holton floored it. His car barrelled towards a tall chain link fence. Beyond, at the nothing boundary of a dark void where his headlamps could illuminate more, he kept his date with destiny...*ten feet...five feet...CRASH!* His car shredded the meshing. Holton's loud cry resounded from the cliff walls as the car shot into the stark loneliness. Locked in high gear, the Jaguar soared and wheels spun. Engine over-revving, it began its death spiral and plummeted down into the abyss. For an eternity, the car fell through the darkness at the speed of light. An almighty explosion rang out. A powerful fireball blasted up the cliffs, lighting every nook and cranny. Huge waves crashed upon the wreckage and doused the flames. On the rocks, only a faint afterglow remained.

One of the biggest old time dealers was dead. The beleaguered man had simply run out of road. When he came to the end, he quit life the way that he lived it. Spectacularly!

FOUR [RESCUE]

DAWN BROKE OVER WATSONS Bay. The sea cliffs were awash in an orange and gold crepuscular glow. Behind them, down in the valley, emergency workers swarmed the reserve. Off-road trucks were parked everywhere, all the way down to Cliff Street. Gap Park was officially a crime scene.

Onlookers gathered and took photographs, puzzled why there was all this activity in a place normally quite tranquil. An elderly gent reached across the tape and tapped a policeman on the shoulder.

“Officer, what’s the problem?”

A tall, authoritative man, a smile played on his lips.

“Just another suicide, sir. Nothing to worry about. Now, back behind the tape, please.”

A loud whooshing noise startled him. He looked up and tipped back his cap, surprised by the odd-looking helicopter touch down. A heady aroma of avgas mixed with the salt air. Buffeted by the rotor wash, rescue workers rushed over and opened large clamshell doors between the split tailplanes. A paramedic emerged gripping a rescue cradle.

Far below the bluff, waves slammed into the rocks where the charred Jaguar lay broken. Three police launches, each over 40 feet, anchored off shore. Rocking in the shallows, *Vigilant*, *Vanguard*, and *Intrepid* hovered over the sunken wreck of *Dunbar*, an old merchant sailing ship from a century ago. From *Vanguard’s* deck, frogmen entered the turquoise water and rode a brisk tide to the rocks.

The four officers emerged from the surf, stowed their equipment behind rocks, and scampered up on a slippery ledge. Stepping cautiously around the mangled car, a terrific roar came. They turned and saw a geyser shoot up after a wave crashed nearby. They dove for cover. Two unluckily slipped and fell hard on their backs. The backwash tried to wrest them out to sea; sucking, whirling, testing their survival instincts. They dug their fingers into cracks and held on, while their mates, from the protection of rocks, helplessly looked on. The surge retreated and they scurried over. The injured sat up under their own power and coughed salt water from their lungs. One man nursed a bruised ankle and sore ribs: the other, a gash under his hairline. They stood, and everyone scampered up the rise.

At the wreckage, their eyes boggled at a grim discovery. Glass pockmarked the driver’s crushed face. It looked horribly drained of blood. The mouth just a hole, his ears were cauliflowered and hairline torched, the colour and texture of a dead mouse’s hide. One of his eyes dangled from a socket. It dripped rivulets of crimson blood and dangled like a ping-pong ball on a weak band. A swarm of robber crabs feasted on the sinew.

“Bloody hell, this geezer’s got no arm!”

“Yeah, you’re right,” his mate replied. “Where is it, do ya think?”

They searched the vehicle but found nothing. The bloodied seatbelt confessed its deed: it tore the limb cleanly after it had unravelled from the pillar on impact.

“Maybe his arm floated out there and a bloody great shark swallowed it.”

The rescue cradle descended the cliff by rope.

“Right’o, let’s pull him out through the front.”

When they tried to drag the body out through where the windshield used to be, it became stuck, wedged under the dash. With tremendous effort, they jerked it free. The left foot, pinned under the brake pedal, remained. They rushed the body over to the base of the cliff, reeled in the cradle, loaded it in, stood back, and watched the ascent. The cradle bashed into the charred rock face, buffeted by winds.

“Look at those bloody buzzards up there.”

He pointed directly above. At five hundred feet, just above the bluff, news helicopters circled the destruction.

Her frogmen retrieved, *Vanguard* and her sister ships reversed out, their transoms assaulted by a barrage of waves. The collective hum of their powerful diesels resonated up the cliffs, and bows spiralled responsively to meet the waves.

Inside *Vanguard’s* galley, one of the frogmen draped a towel over his head and laid it his towel-draped head down on the table. He resented his boss, an elderly sergeant, debrief him *by the book*. All he wanted was to forget the horror back on the rocks. He stared at the television. His attention pricked to a broadcast.

“Rod Holton, prominent Sydney car dealer, has died,” the announcer began. “Officers of Sydney’s Water Police found the wreckage of his Jaguar early this morning at the bottom of The Gap. The cause of the crash is under investigation. Police are considering it an apparent suicide, but haven’t ruled out foul play. More at six.”

FIVE [THE MILE]

A GIGANTIC WAVE CRASHED over the Jaguar’s remains, pulling its broken hulk out to sea in one ravenous bite. A split second later, another monster smashed into the rocks and hungrily claimed what few morsels remained — a chrome wheel and a host of car parts littered about the shore. Free, the floating car rode the surface of the sea.

Fatty stood at the top of the cliff. Mourning the loss of his friend, he gazed, stricken, at the carnage below.

“Christ, who would have thought such a good man would go out this way,” he asked himself. “Bloody knighted by the Queen for his achievements. Too good a man.” A tear rolled down his cheek. “Wonder what bastards laid the pressure on him?”

Nearby, emergency workers in orange overalls and helmets retrieved the cradle, then hurried it over to the rescue chopper, secured it inside, and closed the clamshell doors. The pilot hit the ignition switch, just as the medic climbed aboard. He found only the whine of the engine comforting. He wanted out of there.

The snub-nosed Eurocopter, with the call sign *Lifesaver 3*, lifted off. The pilot glanced out his window and gave a hearty thumb's up to the men on the ground. The machine hovered nicely. As it climbed, an unexpected crosswind broadsided it. The tail began to twitch dangerously and the chopper veered sharply. Stabilization and the ability to rise vertically were lost. It crabbed out of control towards the edge where the cliff met the aqua ocean. A strange vibration ground through the fuselage, and the warning panel lit up. Nosing down, the chopper dropped sharply. Workers on the ground scattered as the blades clipped the tops of trees. The aircraft gyrated wildly then plunged over the side. The orange helicopter was gone. The muted clipping of its engines faded, then nothing. The earth was silent and still.

Lifesaver 3 fell towards the rocks. Each computerised flight control competed for the pilot's attention. He was busy trying everything that his memory about flying could regurgitate. It was as though he rode a bicycle while trying to bounce a basketball with one hand and stir paint with the other. Finally, he felt some feedback in the cyclic. He pulled back and felt the craft begin to flair. Sweat poured from his brow as he manipulated the pedals. With the collective in his left hand, he started to gain altitude. His turn at the controls wasn't easy or pretty, but at least he was climbing up the wall of the cliff. And the warning panel lights had extinguished. That's all that mattered.

"Bugger me blind, Cecil. That was bloody close."

The medic soiled himself, and the cockpit reeked.

The Westpac chopper poked its nose over the top to the cheer of everyone there. In level flight, the pilot rocked his craft to send an "all okay," then shot off for the harbour. He screamed over a squadron of colourful racing skiffs in competition near the shore and made speed for a hospital located at the base of the Blue Mountains, a half-hour's flight away.

Floating just off the rocks, the Jag took its last dying breath. A surge of seawater rushed into the cabin. Quickly, it disappeared under the white-bubbled surf and joined the sunken wreck of *Dunbar*. The sea claimed another prize.

Fatty's words served as a eulogy:

*"The car business... there's a sinister side
and a good side. For the hard workers,
it brings great wealth." He sighed with
regret. "But for most, it's just a life
of stinkin' misery."*

Tracing the picturesque shoreline of Sydney's eastern suburbs, *Lifesaver 3* sprinted towards the city. Its Lycoming engines hummed perfectly as though the occurrence eight miles behind it was nothing more than a hiccup.

It crossed over Nielsen Park, skimming the tops of trees. A group of picnickers, enjoying a barbeque under the canopy of a shady Moreton tree, became startled. They jumped to their feet and tossed their cans of beer high to protest the scare. The chopper was already long gone, its pilot keeping low as a precaution. He might have to set it down in a hurry.

The Eurocopter skirted the rich, trendy waterfront of Double Bay. Port Jackson, vast and blue, was magnificent from high up. Long considered the city's jewel, the harbour's multiple sandstone headlands, dramatic cliffs, waterside parks, and stunning bays and beaches made it one of the most beautiful stretches of water in the world. Across nakedly beautiful turquoise waters, green-and-yellow ferries plied the harbour, more like wind-up toys as they trundled off to suburbs far and wide. Sharing the water lanes were private yachts, water taxis, container vessels and a few tall ships rigged with sails. It was a busy morning on the water.

Fatty continued:

"Ol' Holt-zie was one of the good ones. I shall miss him."

A few miles across the harbour, on the northern side, *Vanguard* glided past the old whaling station at Chowder Head, headed at three-quarter speed back to her home base at Pymont.

"I'm Jim Graden. A few know me as Fatty. I fit somewhere in the middle. I'm just like ol' Holtzie. A car dealer. Police consider me a person of interest... Hmm," he pondered, denying any justification for their perception of him. "A 'Person of Interest'..."

Vanguard neared the naval yards at Garden Island. A fleet of 18-foot skiffs duelled in the height of competition. The police launch strayed unwittingly into their path. Adjusting course, it attempted to exit but it was already too late. The fragile craft porpoised in the powerful wake. Spinnakers blew out. Angry jeers of the young sailors faded as *Vanguard* cruised on, making quarter up the harbour. A pod of dolphins surfaced ahead of her bow. Playful and frolicky, these grey torpedoes of the sea jumped in and out, providing escort for the cruiser on its journey.

"In my life, I've done some good... but a lot bad," he said with a heavy sigh. "Tried to help where I could... Some think I'm loaded. For a man who came from the gutter, yeah I live well. I got no education, but that's okay. Don't need it when you're making the connections, puttin' together deals and knocking heads. Those that don't know me think I'm a gangster, a bad guy. Pisses me off!"

The island of Fort Denison, with its tiny sandstone castle that had housed the worst convicts in the colony's early life, loomed off *Vanguard's* starboard side. The constable

at the helm slowed to half speed, respecting the posted speed limit. A powerful backwash slammed into the cruiser's transom.

Fatty's musings continued:

"But they all fear me! Hell, I don't blame 'em. Can't tolerate mugs. If I can't get 'em to thinking my way, I'll bribe 'em. Everyone's got a price. Everyone! It's all just a matter of how much to pay."

Just ahead was the Harbour Bridge, extending across the mile-wide waterway. Nicknamed "Old Coathanger," dozens of recreational climbers in safety equipment braved the morning ascent to experience an eagle vista of Sydney.

Vanguard slipped under its superstructure, and her skipper opened the throttles wide. Her powerful diesels made a high whine as she passed by Blues Point at a healthy clip, spreading enormous chimes behind her. Home was minutes away.

A distance behind, two super maxis, both ninety footers, vied in a tacking duel. Locked neck and neck, they were heavy favourites in the Sydney-Hobart Yacht Race, due up in three months. Rounding the windward marker off Cremourne Point, the crew of *Excalibur* unfurled her massive sail, adorned with a huge knight's sword, and she began her spinnaker run. A moderate nor-easterly blew through her rigging and picked up the fibreglass giant. Her hull silver and black, she was magnificent in her charge, as she widened the gap on her opponent.

"So, I'm just a dumb mutt with a fourth grade education who's landed on his feet pretty well. I'm just an average Joe, trying to earn a living the best way he knows how. It's a pity. The little Aussie Battler is a dying breed."

To the west, miles past the city, morning traffic along Parramatta Road finally broke free. Weaving in all directions, cars roared down the highway, past a plethora of car dealers in Ashfield. Cross-traffic squirted through intersections, and big trucks carried on their commerce. The largest store on the strip, Graden Holden/Mercedes was a sprawl of buildings and cars, busy with buyers looking for a deal.

"The Magic Mile of Motors. This is where I make my money. Some think I do it dishonestly...I think of it as just doing business."

SIX [DAY AT THE RACES]

HIGH OVER THE POSH suburb of Kensington, white puffy clouds dawdled across a pastel blue sky. With casual elegance, nature proudly staged a show resembling a flotilla of ships, pristine and graceful, on a calm and clear sea. Surrounded by magnificent residences and tree-lined avenues, nearby Centennial Park contained a collection of lush parklands and windswept lakes. A picturesque pond shot a dazzling plume into the air. Riding a stiff breeze, the fine mist drifted across manicured beds of flowers, feeding petals crystalline drops. Blooming in horticultural elegance, flowers in vivid reds, azure and royal blues, deep greens and stark yellows pampered the senses. A heavy fragrance of honeysuckle, jasmine, and gardenia wafted across a network of trails, as cyclists and runners took advantage of the beautiful day.

Beyond the greenbelt and stately homes stood beautiful Royal Randwick. The racetrack combined *Old World* charm with modern architecture in a setting of cultivated grounds and palatial grandstands. One journalist described it, “A playground for the privileged, office to the disciplined, and graveyard to the horseracing addicts and crazies.”

Outside its towering brick walls, race-goers made for the turnstiles, filling the sidewalks of Alison Road to capacity. Policemen with white gloves waved along kids hauling coolers and blankets, teenyboppers in tight pink shorts, and the gentry in conservative suits and brightly coloured sundresses. On the road, traffic was at a standstill.

— “The good old days were when there was a surge of people walking up Doncaster Avenue to Randwick Races, and it was like a lifeline. You see them walk up full of the anticipation of victory, of success. There was a sparkle about them, and they’d walk up this street in droves.” - *Max Presnell* —

Today, Randwick was the place to be. For the next few hours, all eyes would be riveted on it, playing host to one of the greatest two-and-a-half minutes in sports. In its eighth running, the Sturgess Stakes was a 2,400-metre test of endurance for some of the best stayers. The biggest, most elite stables the world over had representation. The richest stakes race for three-year-old colts and geldings, the race was the jewel in Sydney’s Spring Carnival crown. Named after its wealthy car dealer founder, long since retired, the event was a turnstile magnet for the snob hierarchy of the Australian Jockey Club. It attracted tens of thousands of fans and hundreds of millions in revenue. For the winner, there was much more at stake than just the trivial spoils of victory. Coming in first guaranteed immortality! Bigger than the Doncaster and AJC Derby races combined, over four million in prize money and a guaranteed start in Australia’s greatest race of all, the Melbourne Cup, due up in a month, was up for grabs.

Today, the condition of the course proper was officially rated good, the weather fine. The track — four rectangular stretches; two short, two long, connected by four curves — looked in fine shape.

In the backfield, an 1,800-metre race for no names was in the closing stages. Nine horses ran the clockwise flat. Rounding the final turn, three horses shared the lead. Bunched up, their jockeys fought hard up the home stretch, caught in a duel of tactics. Responding to the whip, two of the mares sprinted clear. The earth rumbled as they dashed across the finish line, locked in a dead heat. A shower of confetti blew across the track, torn up betting tickets from those who had backed the favourite, seen hobbling across, broken down, in last place. The guilty rose from their seats, dropped their heads, and trudged back to the *bastards* in the bookie ring for another try.

The racetrack epitomised the story of Australia. No other single enterprise captured the social, cultural and political life like horseracing. To Aussies all over, racing was about champions — greats like Bernborough, arguably Queensland's greatest horse, who'd won fifteen successive events with huge weights, all with Mulley in the saddle. Or the mighty stayer, Gunsynd, the 'Goondiwindi Grey', who, purchased for £1,300 quid at the sales, ended his career as the biggest stakes-winner of all and became immortalised in song by Slim Dusty. Whether the mug punter followed legendary gallopers like Reckless, Carbine, Dulcify or the legendary Phar Lap, racing could literally change people's lives overnight. Just before the 1930 Melbourne Cup, with Phar Lap carrying massive win and doubles money, Pike, its jockey, was 'made' an offer to pull up the horse, which many would not have been able to refuse.

— “A group of Melbourne bookmakers went to Pike and offered him ten thousand pounds in November 1930, when ten thousand pounds would have bought a block of flats at St. Kilda or Bondi Beach. And Pike, Pike, he rejected it. He said no. ‘I couldn't possibly do it to the owner, the trainer, or the punters across the river up at Scotchman's Hill.’ So, that's the sort of man that Jim Pike was.”

- *Bill Whittaker*

“Everyone's eyes were glued to the one horse. And, when they turned for home, he just rode up to them, shot to the front, and won literally in a canter.” - *Tony McSweeney* —

Two years later in America, *Phar Lap*, the great stayer, haemorrhaged to death, a suspected target of poisoning.

— “I don't think Tommy Woodcock was ever the same after it. He died in his arms. He had his head cradled in his lap. But I think that all of Australia wept when Phar Lap died.” - *Scobie Breasley* —

SEVEN

[A 'CHANCE' ENCOUNTER]

ACROSS FROM THE WINNING post stood three impressive grandstands, each unique in their own way. The first, the Paddock Grandstand, a two-story Federation building erected at the turn of the century, offered sweeping views of the home straight, which fell away to the south. A concrete breezeway ran underneath like a moat, splitting it from the next grandstand, the Queen Elizabeth.

The Elizabeth, a five-story cultural structure, catered to Sydney's more traditional money. From private boxes, they *ruled* much like royalty over the mounting enclosure below, and had the best view of the racecourse generally.

Next door, the Officials Stand, smaller in size, was a two-story, grandiose construct that had it all: a private lawn for members, fashionable bars, and fine restaurants where new money elitists gathered *to be seen*. Freelance photographers scurried about and snapped Sydney's rich and beautiful for fashion magazines. A heavy turnout of police dawdled about, twirling their nightsticks, on the watch for purse-snatchers, pickpockets, or just a good old rough-up. Up on the observation deck, their brethren raised binoculars to mirrored shades, ready at a whim to pounce and negotiate their point with billy clubs.

Up on the first floor of the Officials Stand, an impeccably dressed patronage stood about the par elegance of the Champagne Bar. Tightly packed, their voices carried a unique lilt and cadence, testing the social norm of shunning physical contact with strangers. At one end of the bar, a group of handsome men, dressed in grey tails, leaned on the counter. They trained lustful stares on a trio of beautiful women up the bar. Dressed in skimpy floral sundresses, the tall, leggy models sipped their flutes of Moet and directed coy looks back at them.

Across the room, by the plate glass windows that overlooked the track, Julie Moss conversed with her girlfriend at a table. The two could have passed for fashion magazine cover girls, dressed in sheer, revealing Armani sundresses and Aldo rimmed hats.

Julie was a slim and petite brunette in her early thirties who lived off men. Stunningly beautiful with luscious red lips and seductive eyes, she wore her lustrous brunette hair lightly curled. It complimented a deep bronzy tan that jumped from her skin. The thin spaghetti straps of her mulberry dress seductively skimmed her shoulders. To her advantage, the garment revealed her full cleavage which, of itself, attracted plenty of attention from male passers-by. She kept her stare fixed on one of the men in tails at the bar. Every so often, she whispered a comment about him into her friend's ear. Her ploy to get his attention worked, and their gazes locked. She batted her eyes and smiled impishly, then coquettishly dropped her head in a modest, unassuming way. He was being set up.

Johnny Millhouse excused himself from his mates and made his way across the room. He was a former model and washed up supercar driver with a win at Bathurst, Australia's premier car race for V8 tourers. His photogenic face boasted high cheekbones, a sharp cleft on his chin, and a thin, slightly crooked mouth. He nervously straightened his jacket and ran fingers through his jet-black hair. Somewhat shy, he hid his character flaw, if it

were one, quite well as he waltzed up to the table. He hovered over an empty chair and coughed.

“Hello girls, mind if I join you?”

For a long moment, the two women stared up at him without a word, just ogling his well-muscled, slender form. Finally, Julie broke the silence. She leaned her trim body against the table and gazed deeply into his eyes. Her power over men became evident with that action. Her movement tugged the top of her dress enough to expose her parted cleavage almost to the nipples.

“Only if you’ve got a tip, handsome.”

Her girlfriend, a high class stripper, disapproved of her sluttish tactic and slapped Julie on the arm. She smiled at Johnny, then laid her hands in her lap under the tablecloth and continued to chew her gum.

To Johnny, she appeared decidedly more reserved, but equally playful and luscious. Her Irish heritage blessed her with elevated cheekbones, long, raven-black hair, and milky skin. The hue of her light blue frock complimented her almond-shaped, jade green eyes.

Julie rubbed the pain from her arm and pouted like a scorned child, first at her girlfriend, then at the man. She wanted pity from someone. Anyone. Johnny gave her a fleeting look, but felt more attracted to her girlfriend and concentrated his stare on ‘Little Miss Emerald Isles.’ Her strikingly natural beauty and bigger, more voluptuous cleavage intrigued him. He could think of several *useful* things he might do with those. As she sat there, his gaze ogled the slinky fabric of her dress pulled ever so slightly up her thigh. His eyes caressed her shapely rotund calves and long bare legs just begging to be stroked.

She looked up and smiled.

Hmm, now there’s a looker, she thought, her mouth curved up on one side in a half-hearted smile. She turned away to explore the room for familiar faces and fantasised about Johnny. The way he moves his head and runs his fingers through that fine hair of his... the slant of that chin... his closely trimmed goatee. Mom, and those eyes when he looked at me. Oh yes, those eyes.

Johnny returned his attention on the girls. He remembered that he owed Julie an answer to her question.

“Funny you should mention that. I have... ah, Jim has a horse running in the Sturgess Stakes today. It’s a cert! Do you ladies gamble?”

Like magic, Julie forgot about her throbbing arm. With haughty curiosity, her eyes bore into him and she smiled in a persuasive, calculating way.

“Well handsome, that depends on who Jim is.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Jim Graden’s my boss,” he said, and extended his hand. “G’day, I’m Johnny Millhouse. What’s yours?”

Julie leaned forward in her chair. Her sundress rose to reveal equally shapely legs to her competition. She reached across her girlfriend and gripped his hand strongly. Cheerleading and distance running had sculpted her physique very well.

“Hello Johnny, nice to meet you. I’m Julie Moss.”

Two businessmen walked by the table. Julie’s girlfriend couldn’t get enough of them. Men were on her brain. Always. Julie grinned mischievously and slapped her on the back, getting welcome revenge.

“Oh, and this is my good friend Rachel Sage.”

Caught off guard, Rachel swallowed her gum and gasped for breath. She whipped around and her brow puckered angrily. After several coughs, she breathed easier and wiped her mouth. Julie thought it great fun and refocused her attention on Johnny. He drew up a chair between them and sat down. With a bright smile, Rachel shook his hand aggressively. The entire length of her cleavage now showed, surpassing Julie's earlier exhibition. Above the neckline of her dress, her breasts swung freely with a life of their own, and she giggled, aroused as much by the movement of her fleshy orbs against the fabric of her dress as by Johnny ogling them.

"Nice earring," she commented, and flicked the diamond stud piercing in play.

"Thanks," he replied and covered his left ear, a signal for her to stop. "I've had it a while."

Julie interrupted her playfulness. "So Johnny, I'm interested in this horse of... hmm, Jim's, did you say? What makes you think it'll win the big race today?"

"Let's just say the race tip I got is pretty good mail. You know, straight from the horse's mouth."

Quietness fell.

"Tell you what," he said, "I'm so bloody convinced the nag will win, I'll even fork out five grand just to spot you and Rachel for a bet. Okay? Then, when it wins, you get to keep, say, a thousand each. Fair enough?"

Delighted at the prospect of easy money, the girls cuddled into their newfound friend. Johnny felt like the Duke of Bedford with pretty girls draped on each arm.

"Right, well," he said, and frowned. "But there's a little trick here. Truth is, I'm not allowed in the betting ring these days. I made a ton of dough a few years back on a shady plunge here. Well, er, you know how it goes, I'm sure. So, you'll have to place the bet for—"

A huge hand slapped Johnny on the back. He coughed harshly and felt the magnetism of a powerful presence immediately assault his senses. He reeled around. A wave of adrenaline raced through his veins. Big as life, there stood Fatty, grinning as though he had just won the lottery. Suave and debonair, he looked dapper in a dark three-piece suit, cuffed white shirt, and red striped tie. An imposing figure of a man, he nestled a huge Bolivar Cuban between his fingers.

Behind him stood his bodyguard, Mitch Rylander. In a suit, Rylander was a towering no-nonsense brute. His short dark hair combed back, he possessed a pair of the most piercing brown eyes. They could effortlessly stare down a charging bull. The living embodiment of testosterone, he was a veteran of hundreds of club brawls since drinking age. An ex bouncer from the seedy alleys behind Kings Cross, Australia's strip club capital, he was a cynical man. The thug basher found the education he had earned on the street invaluable. He sneered at anything remotely troublesome and greeted each person with eyes full of loathing. Rylander wasn't much into crowds, like today. He got paid well to do what he did best: interrogate people.

"Well Johnny," Fatty said, "be a good lad and introduce me to the lovelies here."

"Sure, Mr. Graden," Johnny replied, and patted the girls on the back like they were his. "This is Julie and Rachel. Girls, this is Jim Graden, horse owner and car dealer extraordinaire."

The girls smiled like cats toying with their prey. Impressed with his polished entrance, Julie's siren eyes were perilous sapphire blue pools, greedy and lustful. Her teeth, perfectly white, were sharpened on those who never saw trouble coming.

True to his nature, Fatty revealed that his interest in the 'fairer' sex limited itself to lascivious desire. He bent over to kiss her hand, not as a gentleman, but rather to take a good peak down her dress.

"Hello, Julie. A pleasure to meet you."

With single-minded concentration, she riveted her gaze seductively upon him as he sat down in the armchair next to her.

He unbuttoned his jacket and gave a curt glance over at the bar. It was full of rowdy people. He crossed his arms.

The usual drivel, he thought, and looked at his lieutenant. "So, Johnny, everything set for the money pick-up tomorrow arvo at four o'clock?"

Johnny forced a smile. "Y-yes, Jim. Everything's set."

Fatty eyed a half-full bottle of Moët in an ice bucket on the table.

"Time for the good stuff then, aye."

He looked around and spied a little old man dawdling about a far off table.

"Waiter," he barked, and lifted his finger, beckoning him over.

Over the crowd noise, the waiter, in a black tuxedo and white apron, heard a familiar voice and turned. When he saw it was Fatty, one of his best customers, he excused himself and rushed over.

"Nice ta see you again, Mr. Graden," he said, a little out of breath. "What can I get for you?"

Fatty raised two fingers. "Hello, Darcy. I'll have the usual."

"Right away, Mr. Graden. Two chilled bottles of Louis Roederer from our private collection coming right up."

Johnny watched the waiter disappear behind a curtain to the service bar, and grinned. He felt proud at having found two such pretty women for their amusement.

"Well Jim, just tellin' the girls here about your horse in the big race today."

Fatty interlaced his fingers over his stomach and stared, unaware that the holster-strap to his nine-millimetre peeked out from his suit lapel.

"You were, were you Johnny? Always had a problem with your big mouth, haven't cha, mate. So, what'd you tell 'em?"

"Oh... n-nothing, Jim," he said, just as the waiter returned with Fatty's order. "Er, just that you had one in it today. Stands a pretty good chance, don't you think?"

Julie leaned over, reached under the table cover, and rested her hand on top of Fatty's. Her nails purposefully grazed his skin while she sipped champagne.

"What's its name?" she asked in a sultry way.

Fatty glanced down at his lap, baffled. "Beg-yours?"

"No, not that, silly," she said. "The horse, what's your horse's name?"

"Oh," he said, somewhat relieved. "Horse's name is Wings of Grace. Sired by the great Pommie champion, Jumpalot. Gotta beaut jock ridin' it. Trainer's a bit of a mug, but he does what he's told."

She listened as Fatty talked, hanging onto *every* word and syllable like it was gospel.

Fatty couldn't seem to take his eyes off the sassy brunette, even as she turned her attention to Rachel. He leaned forward and enjoyed her rich fragrance, that aromatic citrus perfume and expensive bath soap.

"Well, then," he said, and raised his stemmed glass high. "Let's see if we can't punish those bastards down in the ring ta'day and make some folding crispies, eh? Down the hatch with this stuff, then." He chugged the champagne inappropriately, then stared at the girls. He was fascinated by women's quintessential habit of chatting about nothing.

God, these birds don't have a bloody clue 'bout what I got planned, he thought with an arrogant smirk. He eyed a nearby clock.

"Three forty-five," he muttered, and rose. "Still better than an hour to go before the nags jump."

He strolled between empty tables and over to the plate glass of the bar. He pressed his forehead against the pane and felt how cold the subzero air con made the window. Outside, the afternoon sun radiated through a brilliant azure sky, over undulant grasses and beds of blooming rosebushes, one story below.

"Boy! Nice bloody day for a horse race."

He held out his champagne glass and toasted a proud possession of his across the track, behind the winning post.

"There's my baby! Hell, if my horse don't get me any respect 'round here, that thing sure as hell will."

A shiny black executive helicopter occupied a cordoned-off area near infield parking. A Sikorsky S-76 with retractable gear, it had everything to make the likes of Kerry Packer feel right at home. Blades tied down, its pilot stood in the grass, enjoying a cigarette. On one of its doors bore a distinctive marking: a gold set of car keys with the initials 'JG' crested over the words, "Dealz Auto Auctions." This showy ride was something he'd picked up at an all-night poker game. Its owner, a wily magistrate "on the take," panicked when he saw Fatty ogle the last card dealt to him with glee, and folded. It was a bluff on Fatty's part, and he won with a pair of twos. That was a year ago.

Outside, strappers led eight young fillies around the mounting enclosure. Flocks of seagulls defiantly gathered in their way. Not before the last possible instant did they scatter to the air and avoid a quick death under trudging hoofs. The crowd, already fifteen thousand, gathered around the white picket fences and systematically evaluated the horses. Some checked their forms, trying to pick the winner as though they were experts.

Anyone with half a brain knew the fixed beast would *always* win if word came down from the top. It was as natural a rule as Newton's law of gravity. 'Late Mail,' was a tip which, translated, meant "*bet Johannesburg NOW*" while you still could get generous odds.

A punter was a mug at heart who spent formative years gazing out the car window at the bright lights of the gambling Gods, waiting for the opportunity and *right* to enter the great hall of wealth. At any race, or in any of the thousands of TAB agencies around the country, punters would react much the same, watching their horse on television with confused looks while something guttural like "*G'arn! G'arn!*" rolled off their lips, as if

to encourage what they backed. Some suggested it meant, “Go on!” More likely, the apostrophe contained, “*You-rotten-mongrel-of-an-animal-that-I’ve-wasted-my-hard-earned-cash-on, why-on-God’s-green-earth-are-you-looking-like-you’re-about-to-run-out-of-steam-and-go-back-through-the-field?*”

Like some God-gifted sixth sense, the thousands of mug punters out there knew *today* was different. It was *their* day to win. For them, the countdown had begun. The big race was less than an hour away.

EIGHT [THE FIX]

SURFER’S PARADISE, QUEENSLAND’S FAMOUS beach resort, was an unsightly sprawl of amusement parks, shimmering towers of glass and concrete, balconied apartments, and Trump-like hotels. Known as the Gold Coast, this was Australia’s Florida, where listing palms guarded flawless, powdery beaches with barely a curl. Populated throughout the year by con men and ‘weekend millionaires,’ if you didn’t have a Ferrari or Bentley convertible here, you were considered a bum!

At the local racetrack on the edge of town, bookies in the ring yelled their offerings to the masses. It was a bustling community of hard-core gamblers. The place teemed with ear-splitting activity and catered to gambling addicts who had never seen a live race in their lives, but who gladly sat in front of the clubhouse monitors and wagered on a dozen races at once.

Under the shade of a tall fig tree stood Dave Reid. A cell phone planted to his ear, he was a tall, thinnish man with auburn hair. Dressed casually in slacks and a polo shirt, his nickname “Hero,” a handle he had earned after three killing tours with Fatty as an SAS assassin during Vietnam, was apt. He was Fatty’s go-to man whenever people need *managing* or *convincing*.

In his vicinity, an old, scraggly-dressed kook paced back and forth, testing the short-tempered Queenslander’s patience. Hero kept his eye on the man constantly shouting gibberish.

“Hey, bugger off will ya! I’m on the phone. Can’t hear with your bloody racket.”

“Bugger you, mate!” the old narler scoffed, two fingers shoved insultingly up. “I’m still waitin’ for me horse ‘ta come in.”

Hero watched the wrinkled old codger amble off, barking the crudest obscenities at anyone misfortunate enough to come within earshot. Hero shook his head in pity. Some time ago, he met the old idiot over a beer. Then, he was a pretty decent bloke. Soon after, he did his life savings in a single day on a string of losers and went totally bonkers. Broke and destitute, all he did today was hang around the track and dream that his horse was about to win.

He observed the offerings listed on a nearby odds-board. "Yeah, Fearless, I got 8-1 odds for Fatty's horse up here at the coast. Firmed in a point 'bout five minutes ago, but hasn't done much of anything since. Been pretty quiet here if you ask me."

He hung the phone up and pocketed it, then lit up a cigarette. He played with the harsh nicotine in and out of his lungs in a manner he had done ever since a toddler, when he could crawl to his mother's purse and steal cigarettes. He crushed the half-spent fag under his shoe and began a lazy stroll.

At the entrance to the bookie ring, he had only taken a few steps inside when, all of a sudden, a swarm of bettors stampeded past. The throng muscled their way to the bookies, shoving aside anyone who dared stand in their way. Hero picked himself off the concrete and brushed himself off. A little shaken, his eyes darted about, fully expecting another wave to rush him at any moment. The coast clear, he let out a sigh of relief. Over by the fence, he saw a man with palsy stumble about with no set purpose. His nose-buried in a racing form, he, apparently, was having a grand old chat with himself.

Hero gave a hollow laugh. "Tell ya what," he muttered, "this business sure has its share of crazies."

Like the ancient ladies with wrinkled, painted faces that gripped their race programs with gnarled fingers and peered with dim eyes at their horses fade in the stretch, these lost souls, like millions of others, found meaning and importance in the of the *Sport of Kings*. The allure and magic of its events transported them back in time to a noble world where brave knights upon trusty steeds vied in the quest for honour and glory.

Hero approached a squad of bookies fielding local action. His mouth fell open in amazement. Betting activity had tripled in just the past few minutes. The 'bastards in suits' were taken by surprise as impatient punters, fists full of cash, barked their interests in what appeared to be an organised plunge. They were operating on a tip, a bit of 'late mail' from a local trainer. In their own unfettered stride, the bookmakers rose to the challenge and wrote out a slew of betting stubs. Their gamble, Bravefoot, from Fatty's stable, was a heavy favourite in the next race on the Gold Coast card, due up in the next few minutes. Ultimately, it would run dead last, a victim of a doping attack.

Hero stood there and evaluated the situation. He needed entry into the interstate ring to make some bets at Randwick. For the moment, he was stuck behind a human wall. He looked at his watch: 4:10 p.m. An opening finally offered itself, and he slipped through.

Eleven hundred miles south, a brisk oceanic nor' easterly blew through the tiny coastal hamlet of Kiama, stirring the air with a decidedly crisp coolness. Its emerald green pasturelands and golden sand beaches conferred a relaxed, temperate feel on the sleepy retreat full of retirees. The main road from town hugged the rugged cliffs and offered superb views of the sea. The colours of the sandstone cliffs against a bright turquoise Pacific comprised a beautiful afternoon palette.

An old English-Tudor manor stood at the edge of a peninsula. A massive oak tree grew near the bluff and shaded the weatherboard construct. Roots the circumference of an average desk broke ground, and its limbs reached out some fifty feet in every direction. Far below, powerful waves broke on large rocks scattered in the surf.

The foyer of the stately manor opened into a wide reception area bordered by two matched stairwells. They rose in graceful arcs up to a landing on the second floor. A walk-through under the landing led to the living room. The heartbeat of the home, it faced the sea. Modern sofas and wingback chairs upholstered in rich saddle leather graced the back wall. Opposite, a handful of televisions mounted in a mahogany cabinet showed live horse races and real-time odds.

Russell Bolland, an SP bookie and owner of the house, relaxed on one of the sofas. A short, stubby Jewish man in his fifties, his stubble-covered face and unkempt hair indicated he'd just awoken. He was a friend of Fatty's since the seventies. Holding the *Morning Herald* with one hand, he slurped a double-sized can of Fosters with the other. He shuffled his attention between the sports section of the paper, the televisions, and the magnificent view of a calm ocean through a bay window on his left. Decked out in a light blue leisure suit as though transplanted from the disco-driven '70s, his rolled up jacket sleeves exposed hairy, thick arms. His loafers rested on a coffee table where mountains of racing forms and empty beer cans piled high. Every so often, he shifted his sizeable weight. Finally, he pulled his gut free where his belt pinched his skin, and yawned.

An SP, or starting price bookie, paid out according to the prices being quoted on course when the race jumped. This was Bolland. Taking bets away from the track, he knew, was illegal, but he did it anyway.

Punter and bookie, equally, were deemed criminal. Few knew that Robin Askin, a former Premier of New South Wales, had spent time as an SP. Askin's election began an era on the track when greed grew to epidemic proportions. Racing was far from the sole victim. But it was perhaps the most vulnerable. Askin didn't invent corruption; he just made it more efficient.

— “Askin really looked after the SP's. Instead of them paying the local cop, they now had to pay only one man. And, the bagman used to go into City Tattersalls, and I've seen this, and the bag person used to collect the tribute from the SP's once a month.” - *Arthur Harris* —

Up until the day of his death, Bolland's father was a big time racehorse owner, part-time trainer, and heavy punter from Sydney's notorious 'Pony' tracks of the '20s and '30s. Probably his dad's best rort was to book a seemingly no name rider for one of his biggest plunges. After returning to scale, it was later found that the victorious jockey was none other than Jim Cassidy, a hot saddle whipsman of his time who, a week before the race, had changed his name by deed poll. Clever bastard!

Vying to match his old man's notoriety, Bolland was a chip off the old block. Called “Fearless” by his inner circle, he'd earned the distinction from all the big wagers he fielded. Carrying \$300,000 on any given race day was nothing to him. Rarely would he lay off the big bets, choosing to take the risk solo. In poor health, he had survived two heart attacks and a quadruple bypass a few years ago. A tough character who answered to no one, he had a callous streak and was very cool under pressure when it came to taking bets from punters trying to sting him. His motto, “If I can find a leak in their wallet, I own 'em!”

At a large table, two employees fielded calls on black phones from regular punters calling in bets. Constantly they rang. Two red phones, labelled with hand-written stickers, "Whales," sat on a carousel in the centre. One of them rang. Putting a punter on hold, one of the pencillers answered it. On the other end was a big Adelaide banker wanting to punt a cool half million on Peacemaker, an early favourite in the Sturgess Stakes. He recorded the bet in his ledger, then hung up.

Both men were pros but abrasively short as they spoke with customers. They cycled calls methodically, hanging up quickly, answering the next; ever in motion. One of them grew snappy with some clueless broad on the other end, roasting her acrimoniously for the idiotic way in which she tried to place money for her old crippled father. While he ranted, the other penciller tore apart another punter just because the man had screwed up on the racing venue and caused him to mess up his ledger.

Fearless flicked through the newspaper and ignored their shouting. His cell phone rang. Peering at his solid gold Boliva watch, a birthday present from his daughter, he reached for the flip phone on the coffee table and answered it. Recognizing Hero's voice, he listened to a blow-by-blow on the live betting action up at the Coast.

"Okay, Hero, this is what I want you to do." He took a swig of his beer and ripped a burp. Relief from a bout of heartburn came quickly. "Go see Tippy over at the interstate ring to place the bet. We'll use the house account. Start with two hundred thou and move out to a half mil, but go easy. Last thing I need is a steward's inquiry after the race, thinkin' yer action's some bloody 'ring-in.'"

He looked at a TV set and eyed current race odds update from Sydney. Wings of Grace had begun to float out.

"God, I don't believe it. Jim's horse just blew out to nines. Go hit Tippy now."

Up at the Gold Coast, Hero gazed around the bookie ring, busy as it was.

"Okay Fearless, up to a half million it is."

He hung up. Taking one last drag of his fag, he dropped it under his shoe, and trudged off.

Inside the interstate ring, the area in front of Tippy's stand was strangely devoid of punters. An old ethnic punter abruptly shoved Hero out of the way without an apology. The stubby Italian had been shopping odds on a particular horse, some scrubber from Flemington and not much of a chance. He found Tippy's board odds the best. A novice, he wanted to wager a 'big' ten dollar bet. He split his attention between what was quoted on his race program and the 80-1 odds Tippy offered.

Tippy's patience was tested. Hero sensed it and stepped in, shoving the man aside. The old punter bounced off a light pole and thumped to the ground. Bruised and shaken, he rubbed his stinging shoulder and gave Hero a nasty scowl. The man was about to mouth off some choice four-letter words when Tippy angrily intervened.

"Don't even think about it, Mario, you greasy wop!"

Tippy knew the Italian man. He'd been a fixture around the interstate ring for months and a constant source of annoyance just because he was so cautious, hesitant, and slow. And cheap.

“Now go on and piss off. I ain’t got time for you or your piddly little bets, you whiny little bludga,” Tippy spat. He jumped down from his podium and kicked him squarely in the arse.

The old punter scampered to his feet and, with pride hurt, fled to the toilet block for a dump and regroup.

Tippy climbed back up and noticed a familiar face.

“Hero! What’s up?”

“Nuthin’ much, Tip. Need three hundred thou on number four to win the Sturgess Stakes. Fearless said put it on his account.”

Tippy pencilled the betting slip without so much as a flinch. A towering fellow, he was accustomed to handling upwards of a million dollars on any given race day. Conservative by nature and attire, he looked comfortable in a beige linen suit. The air was muggy enough. A private man who kept a low profile, he prided himself on a good reputation. Below, stood his bagman of nineteen years. He had a large, open leather moneybag strapped around his shoulders. Tippy’s name, Todd Frelander, was stencilled on front. Nearby, another man sat at a small school desk and wrote entries into a track ledger.

Tippy handed the betting slip off. “There you go, Hero. Anything else?”

“Nah, Tip. Let’s catch up one of these days fer a beer. Where do I sign?”

“Kenny here will fix you up,” the bookie replied, and pointed down to his penciller.

Hero signed the ledger and disappeared into the crowd, as Tippy went into high gear.

“Straight out or each way, winner or place,” he yelled to the crowd. He eyed a dozen teenagers trudge his way. “Look’s like easy meat. Come to papa.”

NINE

[PUSHING THE MOOLAH AROUND]

JOHNNY SLIPPED SOMETHING WRAPPED in a rubber band into Rachel’s palm.

“Put that five grand straight out on Wings of Grace with one of the books downstairs and bring us back the ticket. Remember our deal, right?” he said, and tapped his nose.

Winking at Julie, Rachel rose from her chair and walked off between the tables. Her sundress fluttered provocatively over her curved, sexy figure and her hips swung subtly, drawing every man’s attention.

Up at Surfers, the sun settled over the track, ending what had been quite a busy day. The card now concluded, the only action left anywhere in Australia was the Sturgess Stakes, due up in a half-hour.

Outside the bustling public bar, an open-aired venue, Hero stood at a table under a beer umbrella. He impatiently scanned the concrete esplanade that connected the bookie ring with the grandstand. His men were nowhere in sight.

“BITCH!” he spat, his patience worn thin.

On the other side of the table, a cute young vixen with long red hair, alone, turned.

“Pardon?”

“Sorry. Didn’t mean you, luv.” Hero’s lust-drugged eyes wandered over her slender, perky frame, which was scantily clad in a pink tank top and the shortest white shorts one could wear without being arrested. “Bett’cha she’d bang like a dunny door in a gale,” he muttered faintly, his eyes glued to her huge double-D cajonga’s. “Yep, I’d lay me life savings she’s had more pricks in her than a competition dartboard.”

“Pardon?” she repeated, luckily unable to read lips.

“Well, hello,” he said, cool as could be. “And what might your name be, pretty thing?”

“Friends call me Jools,” the 19-year-old replied, biting her lip coyly. “What do your friends call you?”

“I can see why they call you that, gorgeous,” he flirted. “You do have marvellous jewels.” Her sensational headlights sidetracked him again. “Oh... Hero’s the name.” He looked beyond her and saw familiar faces approach. “I see my lads walkin’ this way right now. I expect they’ll be makin’ fools of ‘emselves soon enough.”

“Hero, huh?” She eyed his taunted frame. “Mmm, I like heroes.”

“Yeah, well, you’re shoppin’ at David Jones with me, sweetie, not bloody Woolworth’s. This is all me.” He gave her a flex of his arm muscle. “So, wanna kick it later?”

Interrupting their moment, Hero’s crew strolled up. Some gathered about his side of the table, a few on the other side with her. They just gawked, taken by her bust.

She felt crowded. “My. You are a popular one, aren’t you, Hero.”

Sipping on warm schooners with perverted grins, the six men gave her luscious body a good once over. She felt their stare begin to burn a hole into her breasts and turned her back to them. Which is when she noticed her livid boyfriend approach from the toilets. He wore a bad snarl. She looked at Hero with an expression of sheer sobriety in her ambiguous eyes.

“Oh God, here comes Richard,” she mumbled, and grabbed a pen from a gaudy, studded blue purse she’d found at a garage sale. Her hands trembled as she tested the ballpoint on an old matchbox. Her boyfriend was uncontrollable in public and she knew it. “I hate it when he gets jealous. I mean, what does he expect of me? This girl needs more than one guy to make her happy.”

The pen tested fine. “Well, lover,” she commented, “perhaps some other time.” With a subdued smile, she shoved her thumb grudgingly over her shoulder. “Fraid my man is returning. Got a hand I can write on?”

“How ‘bout an arm, luv?” Hero offered.

He sipped on his beer and leered smugly at her while she hastily scribbled down her particulars. She dug the pen in purposely towards the end and drew blood. Seeing him grimace was a treat for her. Her boyfriend, unimpressed with Hero’s date-skating abilities, grabbed her by the arm and wrenched her away.

Hero’s brows furrowed. “Steady on, mate.”

“Get yer own piece of arse,” the boyfriend shouted with fierce intensity in his eyes.

Barely able to retrieve her purse from the table, she turned around with a ‘help me’ look and she was dragged off towards the betting ring.

Hero read what was on his arm. "Julia is it?" he yelled, hoping to coax the strapping brute into a fight. "Thanks, sweetie, I'll call ya' later. Seven o'clock, then. You and me got a date. Oh, and bring Fang along. I'm sure he'd be stimulatn' company. I'll give him a bone to gnaw on," he proffered, and squeezed his package.

Not one to back down, Hero had always been an oddball and a king-size stirrer. He let out a heady sigh that he wasn't in her pants right now, and then turned to his crew. They stood there with debauched glares. He inclined his head a fraction.

"Gawd, stick yer bloody tongues back in your mouths. You're all droolin'."

Their stupid, deprived looks didn't diminish.

"What a bunch'a bloody pervs. You're all hornier than a three-balled tomcat. I ain't done her. Well, not yet anyway."

He refocused his attention on the girl. Across the concrete esplanade, she sat alone on a bench, sulking, while her boyfriend stood at a nearby betting window. She was always in his peripheral. Hero crossed his arms, eyes drugged over in desire.

"Tell you what though, boys. Give me a half-hour with that little bitch and she'll be wantin' to marry ol' Hero. I'll even let you blokes sniff me fingers when I get done. Fair enough?"

The 'trusted six' sculled their beers. Empty glasses were slammed down on the table. All knew their leader was full of himself. A scraggily mob, words could not describe this bunch of lowlives. Most wore shorts, cut off shirts, and thongs on their feet. The faces on a few hadn't seen a razor in a week. They probably didn't know there was such an invention. Five of them had given up their livelihoods as mackerel fishermen a year ago, yearning for bigger and better things. Hero, with his shady connections, was just the man to provide it.

Puffing one last hit of his cig, Hero saw how restless his men had become. He stamped out his smoke and beckoned them closer, keeping an eye on the girl. Still seated alone, occasionally she would look his way and give him a purposeful *come have me* look. He licked his lips, making his intentions outwardly known. She returned the favour.

"Okay boys," he said, and dragged his mind back to business. "Time to stiff the bookies."

Reaching under the table, he pulled out a duffel bag, unzipped it, and pulled out enough brown lunch bags.

"There's eighty-grand in each of these, so be bloody careful," he said, handing them around. "This ain't lunch money. Now take 'em and go do your stuff."

Five of them walked off towards the ring without a word, while a sixth man stayed behind. Ian Hobbs was a man in his mid thirties. He had a broken nose and bad scarring about his cheeks. He looked a scrapper! In a yellow jacket, open neck plaid shirt and black pants, Strappy had acquired his nickname ten years ago, after defending his middleweight title crown as a champion boxer two years straight.

For the past decade, Strappy and Hero had worked together on various stings. In that time, Hero learned, first hand, what a ruthless and cold-hearted man Strappy truly was. The man had no ability to feel any level of caring for humanity. Crueller than Mike

Tyson with a taste for ear flesh, Strappy wasn't someone to anger unnecessarily. Unless, of course, ending up on life support in a hospital was an ambition.

Strappy was an extravert under a veneer of insecurities. Abandoned as a baby, his childhood was characterised by betrayals. He grew up on the streets with a gang of thieves and murderers. Life on the wrong side of the tracks had appropriately hardened his heart. His gang taught him the only way to survive was to steal. Kill if necessary. Strappy's teenage years were different. He quickly mastered the gift of gab, and the ladies had no trouble falling in love with him. But, he felt nothing for any one of them. He was about as stone as they came.

Across the esplanade, a little man sprinted away. A small doctor's case was clutched tightly to his chest. Terrified about something, occasionally he looked over in Hero's direction with stark, cowardly eyes.

Out of the corner of one eye, Hero saw the man disappear up the concrete breezeway that ran underneath the grandstand.

"Why, that little bastard!"

He adjusted his pants and started off after him.

Strappy looked oddly. "Hey, what's up, Hero?"

In mid-flight, Hero looked back at his mate, who hadn't moved. "C'mon Strap," he sneered, "I got a score to settle with that little prick. He's a bloody dooper! Just saw him dart 'round that corner, the filthy maggot."

Strappy cantered after him. "But what about Fearless?"

Hero yelled over his shoulder, "Fearless? Don't you mind, mate. The boys are takin' care of it. We got plenty of time to do Jim's plunge. C'mon, mate. Shake a leg."

TEN [THE HORSE]

UNDER THE SHADE OF the Officials Stand, Fatty stood with Johnny and Julie, engaged in idle conversation out on the member's lawn. Nearby, inside a striped marquee tent, couples danced to the sound of a seven-piece jazz band. They played a nostalgic piece, *In the Mood*.

Fatty sipped on a flute of champagne, keeping a watchful eye on an entrance underneath the grandstand next door. This was where horses appeared from the stables to parade right before a race. A fiery young colt was led out. Fatty recognised the animal's blaze and gleaming black coat immediately.

"The strapper's leadin' my horse out now. Gotta go," he said, and left the empty with Johnny.

He walked the grass, tracking the picket fence. Red rose bushes lined the enclosure: their pungent, perfumed, and fruity fragrance enveloped him. He reached a private

entranceway. An old man in a green uniform and cap guarding the gate had dozed off. Fatty pushed quietly on the latch and walked through.

“Afternoon Mr. Graden,” the man said out of one eye.

Fatty wandered out onto the grounds of the enclosure without responding. The guard’s words finally registered, and he stopped and turned.

“Hello, Billy. Beautiful afternoon, aye.” He peered up at a cloudless sky. “Well, gotta go see me horse. Put a few dollars on it. You’ll be a winner.”

The guard latched the gate shut. “Certainly will, Mr. Graden.”

Fatty walked across the lawn before the crowds. The grassy pile under his lace-up oxford Berlutis felt spongy. Reporters along the fence recognised him and snapped their cameras. The shadow of the Federation style grandstand became awash in a brilliant flashbulb fire. The red clay path, where horses paraded, cut an oval around a circumference of green. Not long ago, big iron rollers had packed its surface. The path looked tight.

On the other side of the enclosure, Fatty walked up to his horse. When he attempted to pat its blaze, it reared up in fright. The young strapper pulled tight on the reins. After considerable exertion, the colt eventually settled back on all fours. The hostility startled Fatty. Wrestling command of the reins, he pulled the colt’s head closer and fearlessly showed his clenched fist as though he wanted to clock it between the eyes. Strangely, the animal calmed. Fatty calmed and patted the horse on its neck. He stared coldly at the teenager.

“Hope you didn’t feed him.”

The pimply boy shook his head nervously. From Toby Smirt’s stables, he was a last minute stand-in for Fatty’s usual hand, who was laid up in hospital after being thrown on an early morning tryout three days ago. Fatty mellowed.

“So, think he’s up to going the extra distance today, sport?”

“Not a problem, Mr. Graden,” the boy replied in a squeaky voice. “The boys had him run a couple of twelve hundred-metre sprints the last few weeks. Then we spelled him. A few days ago, they ran him lightly fer a bit of a refresher. This mornin’ we found him asleep in his stall, so he’s pretty relaxed. Don’t know why he reared like that. But he’s good to go.”

Fatty handed back the reins. “Good’o. Now where’s Roddy?”

“Oh, Mr. Climpton, your jockey,” the teenager said. “He’ll be along shortly. The stewards wanted a quick word. He told me to tell you not to worry.”

Fatty rolled his eyes, then dismissed the strapper. He watched as the colt was led out into the waiting eye of the public to join the other horses. Why Climpton had been detained puzzled him, and he couldn’t dismiss his concern. He shook his head, chuckled a little, and considered, “Maybe he didn’t pay his parkin’ fines.”

Fatty returned to the gate, presently unattended, and slipped through.

A shot of wind spirited about the taped legs of Wings of Grace. Startled, the colt broke from a walking gait to a jog-walk gait then turned side-on, rubbing up against his strapper. The horse soon dawdled back to a slow, lazy stride, and fell in behind the others. Staring alertly up the track, somehow the horse knew what was expected of him

today, as before. Born of a regal bloodline, the thoroughbred looked well conditioned and ready to win.

A year earlier, Wings of Grace had exploded on the racing scene as a two-year-old and bolted away to win its first race, the AJC Canonbury Stakes. A few months later, as an outsider, he took care of a pair of two-year-old handicap races over 1,100 metres, then went on to win the STC Golden Slipper Stakes, the world's richest race for two-year-olds. The colt later blitzed the field in the AJC Sires Produce Stakes, pulling away at the close by a respectable two lengths, and was similarly untouched in the AJC Champagne Stakes. He had completed a juvenile 'Triple Crown' of sorts. A subsequent veterinary inspection found internal bleeding, forcing a long spell at "Buya Lyars," Fatty's farm on the outskirts of Sandown in Victoria. He had won ten majors out of twelve starts, with earnings close to \$3.2 million.

After the eight-month spell, the *experts*, today, raised questions. How well had he recovered from his injuries? Could he win, carrying such an unfair 58 kilo weight? And, if he did, would he be able to top what many experts already considered a very successful juvenile season?

Fatty stood on the members lawn with the others. He lit up a thick Bolivar torpedo and puffed clouds of smoke, proud at the way his horse paraded. His eyes pricked to an unusual phenomenon of human curiosity. Thousands of spectators, trying to get a look at the early race favourite, Peacemaker, rushed the fence line along the Shannon side.

Walking the enclosure, Wings of Grace let out a proud whinny and reared up. Thinking all the attention was directed at him, he waved his front legs while his strapper held firm the reins. The horse dropped back on all fours, and he resumed a relaxed stroll.

Intelligent in their own way, racehorses, though highly strung creatures, basked incredibly well in the glory that the Sturgess Stakes provided. Like hams, a few curtsied in a manner only horses could, while others made loud teeth grinding noises as they walked by the crowds. One of them, a gelding, looked unhappy with the bit and leaned into his attendant to let him know. Then, projected his head as far forward as possible, lowered it, and made rapid nibbling attempts. Another horse, following behind, stopped for a dump, often a negative indicator. A horse, further down the line, pulled his attendant along, hoping to make him walk at a livelier pace.

As gentle and calm as horses appeared on the outside, they could lose it as well; in the paddock, or walking around the ring, even at the starting gate. Unpredictable as they were, they could do anything, from kicking up dirt on spectators, to rearing up and tossing their jockeys, and pulling free from their strappers to run wild across the track. Even up and down the starting chute, or running around the walking ring by themselves. And the first ones to bail out of the enclosure when a horse went nuts were usually the jockeys. Speaking of highly-strung creatures, watch a couple of jockeys get into a fistfight after a race. Now that's entertainment!

Horses knew what racing meant. Most loved it. All knew no other life. Whether they raced out of pure joy or sheer terror, they all raced. For their lives, for the attention, or for the rubdown after the game, they all raced.

Fatty smirked. He estimated the growing crowd to be thirty thousand, a course record for a mid week event. The noise and chatter of the spectators intensified suddenly as thousands more filled the fence line. Many were wising up to Fatty's sharp looking colt.

Rachel returned from the betting ring and walked up behind Johnny. She tapped him on the shoulder in such a way as to startle him and, when he flinched, handed him the betting ticket from her purse.

"I got eights," she smiled. "Is that good?"

Johnny scanned the ticket and grinned. Posted on the Totaliser Board in the centre of the track, course odds had just firmed into fives. "As good as it's gonna get if I'm any judge of greed, Rachel." He kissed the ticket for good luck and handed it to her. Rachel pushed it back, but Johnny was insistent.

"No, Irish. You hold it. For good luck."

She shrugged her shoulders, snatched the ticket back, and stuffed it in her purse. Bored, she didn't have a drink and peered about. She saw a bartender mix drinks at a portable bar beside the marquee. She craved another refreshing Bellini. A fat old lady with bad taste in clothes and a blue rinse through her hair stood in front of her. Rachel began gossiping with Julie about how tawdry looking the old battle-axe's hat was. Listening to Rachel's riotous candour, Julie bawled with laughter, tickled absolutely rotten!

The portly woman sensed she was the butt of someone's joke and turned to see the girls bent over in stitches, laughing so hard that tears rolled from their eyes. She snarled at them, then huffily put her back on them and rejoined her husband, a retired AJC President. She muttered to him, "Have those women removed." But, he was more interested in getting drunk. The girls poked out their tongues at the old cow's huge backside, satisfied that they had managed to screw up 'Ali Fat One's' day.

ELEVEN

[TROUBLE UP AT SURFERS]

IN FULL FLIGHT ALONG the concrete breezeway, Hero reached out and grabbed his adversary's neck. The little man shrieked with an inhuman sound as his head snapped back. Manhandled to the grass, he struggled to break the straight-armed grip. But it was a losing battle as a very angry Hero climbed aboard.

"Charlie. Got a tip you'd be here."

Charlie's face turned beet red. "W-what?"

Hero wrenched free the little black case and popped it open. The grubby, shifty man with a Woodbine and a syringe was the classic stereotype of a horse doper.

"And don't say 'WHAT' like I don't have a brain, mate." Hero squirted liquid from a huge syringe found inside the case. "S'pose this medicine is to treat yer bloody epilepsy? BULLSHIT! You been dopin' horses, ain't cha, Charlie." Hero held the needle to Charlie's eye. "Saw a coupla certainties pull up ta'day. One of 'em was the boss's. Smelt

like your work. Fatty don't take too kindly to yer art, 'specially when it costs him money and a bloody trophy."

Scared to death, Charlie searched the ground as if the words he needed could be found there, between the blades of grass. There was no denying the evidence. Identified in a television documentary as The Milkman because he always delivered, the 'needle man' was a master at doping horses for ten grand a fix. When punters backed horses like the Graden-owned Bravefoot, which ran last of eight at 11-8 favourite in today's coveted Champagne Stakes, Charlie and his syringe full of fast-acting sedative had already ensured that it could not win. A regular sight at the races until he was 'warned off' by the club's disciplinary committee, the former jockey admitted to doping twenty-three horses in the space of a few weeks back in his heyday.

"Aren't you s'posed to be banned for life from the Coast?"

"N-no Hero," Charlie stammered. "T-the officials, th-they lifted me suspension."

Strappy caught up, a little out of breath. He saw them in the grass and backed up against the toilet block wall. Arms crossed, grinning, he enjoyed his ringside seat. The breezeway devoid of foot traffic, he knew Hero was almost as good as him at the art of *persuasion*. He watched Hero yell his indifferences, and Charlie respond with shallow apologies. Wasted seconds ticked by. Not a patient person, Strappy lost it.

"Bugger this!" Strappy marched into the foray, dropped to his knees, and gunned a few good punches into the Armenian's midsection.

Intimidated by the snarl on Strappy's maddened face, Charlie shrieked, "Hero, get your dog off me." Charlie licked his lips with a bitten tongue to erase the blood at the corner of his mouth. He grabbed his side and tried to muster sympathy. "C'mon, Hero, please don't hurt me. It's me back."

Hero eased off, but only marginally. "So, did you take care of the boss's little problem?"

"S-sure, Hero. Me brutha down in Sydney gave that horse a taste of the needle this mornin'."

Hero released pressure on his windpipe and helped him up. "Good, Charlie." Hero looked over at Strappy, who didn't look too happy that Hero hadn't already knocked the crap out of him. "Well then, I think our business is concluded here, don't you think, partner?"

Strappy pushed Hero out of the way. "Bull-bloody-shit!" he declared, and gunned another rip snorter into the trembling man's kidneys. "I dropped five grand on Bravefoot!"

Charlie held his ribs in awful pain.

Hero grinned. "Charlie, you know Strappy's claim to fame?"

Charlie gasped for breath and shook his head.

"He *owned* the Australian Boxing title for welterweight class two years runnin'. Think he'd like his money back, sport."

"B-but Hero, I don't have it. Me mother has Alzheimer's—"

"Spare me the fuckin' excuses, Charlie!" Hero simmered. "Tell you what. If that horse down in Sydney drops like we expect him to, then you're in the clear. Jim will take care of what Strappy lost ta'day and you can go on with your *art*. But you'd better pray yer

brother gave that nag enough ACP, or Strappy here'll be payin' you and yer missus a visit. And I won't be there ta pull 'im off."

"Yeah, yeah, Hero," said a greatly relieved Charlie. "He gave him plenty of tranquillizer."

Hero strutted off up the breezeway, headed for the bookie ring. Back on the grass, Strappy slapped Charlie on the arm with a sneer, a sure sign that he wasn't done with him, and chased after his mate.

TWELVE [THE MAGIC HOUR LOOMS]

THE WANING AFTERNOON LIGHT at AJC Headquarters heralded the long anticipated countdown to zero-hour. The great race was twenty minutes away. All eyes around Randwick and much of the Southern Hemisphere were riveted on the twelve thoroughbreds parading about the enclosure.

Fatty stood on the lawn with Johnny and the girls. A joke that Johnny had just cracked sounded dry to him and lacked the necessary humour to keep his attention. He sipped on a double shot of his favourite relaxer, Glenfiddich, and stared at a wall of spectators choke the fence line. A hungry mob, they wanted final looks before last minute bets.

Of epidemic proportions, gambling was a deadly disease. Since the days of the early colonists, it had taken over the lives of even the most intelligent Australians. Who'd be right? The mug punter, a lowly, uninformed type who would gladly wager his unborn child on a knackered mule without a second thought, just because he swore it winked at him from the parade ring? If not, who then? Those suited bastards, whose men toted leather bags full of money, rigging the odds in their favour? Time would tell.

Wings of Grace flicked his ears as he ambled along the red clay path. A pesky minor bird had taken roost in his mane. He dropped his head, six inches off the ground, and walked around the ring, as relaxed as you like. Lifting it on occasion, he stared out at the barriers, being readied over by the winning post, a short distance away.

Beyond the winning post, the Totalizator flashed race odds of the field. Fatty's horse had firmed to fours, while Peacemaker, which had drawn the coveted number one stall against the rail, was still race favourite at 7-2.

The field paraded the oval path one last time. The call to saddle up was made over the course speakers. One of the horses, Grady's Charm, one of the favourites and tipped by many to carry the distance, flipped out without warning and reared back. The gelding had a terrified look in its stark black eyes. Standing tall on its hind legs, it whinnied incessantly and struggled with the strapper for control of the reins. The horse dropped

back down on its hoofs. Moving aggressively about in tight circles, it seemed horribly drained of energy. The animal was suffering.

A quieter, more sullen audience watched as it stopped and coughed up sticky red bile, a sort of white goopy chunder ridden with blood. Shaking profusely, it collapsed to the ground; first to its knees, then hard on its side. Its back to the crowd, the horse lay in the grass, incapacitated and shivering, expelling short bursts of air through its nostrils. It was a pathetic sight, a fully grown horse lying prostrate, trembling and sweating like the worst coward, urinating all over its own legs. Life began to drain as trapped air escaped from its oven-sized lungs. It gave a long raspy grunt, closed its eyelids, and fell finally into an unconscious state.

The rest of the horses scattered about the yard, terrified by a smell that only they could detect. The strappers rushed in and bravely took control of animals galloping and pig-rooting about, a dangerous situation. The attendance backed away from the fences. On order of the stewards, the field was led out onto the course proper while officials focused on the cataleptic animal. Those who began to gather around the horse determined little could be done. The crowd feared the worst. A phone call was made to the Chief Stipe. The horse had to be put down.

In America, the experimental drug T-61, delivered intravenously, had replaced gunshot to the head, which usually only ended up blowing the horse's face open, missing the brain entirely. With T-61, even though horses would suffer a few moments longer, it was actually faster working and more reliable. It hit the brain within a very short space of time and the horse would be dead quickly, even though the heart might beat an extra minute or two. Its use was restricted outside the U.S. and was on trial here in Australia.

Breakdowns at a racetrack were neither new nor a curious phenomena. They were authentic events, not staged for dramatic effect. Since the dawn of horseracing, even before competing under human control, racing against themselves, against predators, horses would sometimes breakdown. It was a part of racing.

A white Nissan 4-wheel drive with orange flashing lights drew up in the grass. A strapping older gent, the Chief Stipe stepped from the driver's side. In course uniform, he strode through the gate of the mounting enclosure. There was an eerie still, the eyes of the crowd and millions in the pubs and at home riveted on him as he buttoned his white jacket and approached the mobbed animal. The course vet, stood over his equine patient with a monster needle at the ready.

The boss walked up and tipped his cap with a strange look. A most extraordinary event happened. Grady's Charm, with blinked pasty eyes, lifted his massive head and came alive with a look as if to say, 'Where the hell am I?' The horse glanced incoherently at those gathered about him, shook his head and mane, and stood up on all fours. A jubilant crowd let out a cheer as the horse pranced and danced about. A female pony-tailed strapper ran over and grabbed the dangling reins. A tear in her eye, she patted her charge's neck and walked him around. Not far away, in the enclosure, a small, tubby man stood. The horse's trainer, he wore a cheap grey suit and plaid felt hat. Too upset to say anything, he kept his eyes on the Chief Stipe, who was seen whispering something in the ear of the vet. He, then, nodded to the announcer high up in the booth. The trainer's heart sank. He'd been around racing too long not to know that his horse was history.

The public address broadcasted an announcement: “Ladies and Gentlemen, a late scratching at three minutes past five on the advice of the course veterinarian. Number six, Grady’s Charm ridden by Jeff Knight. Bookmakers, rule a line. An announcement regarding deductions will be made immediately after the conclusion of the race. Starting time for the Sturgess Stakes has been officially amended to five-fifteen.”

Grady’s Charm had dodged a bullet. He was led off to the stalls amid loud applause. Upon examination, it was initially determined the horse had experienced mild heart palpitations. A few days later, it would collapse in its stall and die, falling victim to a dooper.

The remaining horses were led back into the enclosure. The clerk on horseback made the call, “Riders up!” The jockeys strutted into the yard like tough guys, a comical lot in their colourful racing silks and caps. These proud little men of the turf looked like children ridiculously overdressed for a school play. But, once lifted up into the saddle, they became Gods. Though pint-sized, each of them exuded huge personalities. Marching towards their mounts, every so often, to the dismay of the stewards, they posed for the cameras like celebrities. Several stopped from a safe vantage and watched with a wary eye as their mounts sidestepped nervously. A fever of anticipation spread. The rest of the field pranced, danced, curtsied, and cantered, gazing in a heightened state at the thousands that lined the fences. What thoughts went through their equine heads? Perhaps, “*You bloody idiots! Haven’t you blokes got anything better to do than watch us?*” or, “*Hey watch me, I’m a fast bugger!*”

Striding towards his mount with an air of importance, Peacemaker’s jockey Malcolm Jonestown was someone other jockeys aspired to. Controversial but very popular with the racing public, his veteran career was littered with accusations and run-ins with the authorities. But, he was good at what he did, which was winning. Walking with him, Garth Stimmings gave Jonestown last-minute tips. The champion stayer’s trainer, this would be Stimmings’ third win in successive starts of the prestigious race if his young colt, fresh off a special charter jet from New Zealand, could pull off what the betting public expected of it today.

In the centre of the yard, Fatty stood by his horse and trainer, giving *him* last minute tips. He impatiently awaited the arrival of his jockey. He felt an unexpected tap on his shoulder and turned. Big as life, there stood Rod Climpton with the mocking grin of a Cheshire cat.

“Christ, you scared the shit out of me, Roddy. So, are you ready for the ride of yer life?”

Climpton nodded and lifted his leg as if to say, “*Give us a toss up, doggie.*”

Fatty lifted the black-silked jockey up into the saddle. His cell phone rang. Fatty pulled it from his coat and answered it. He listened to Hero tell him all his bets had been made. There was also the matter of his little run-in with Charlie, which he mentioned also. An air of confidence consumed Fatty. Hanging up, he stared up at Climpton, who acted restless, trying to find comfort in a new leather saddle he wasn’t told he’d be getting.

“Roddy, bring her home, son,” Fatty said in a stern and unwavering tone. “I want that bloody trophy, mate. Remember. Go light on the whip. The horse don’t like it. And I want to see three lengths at the finish. Think you can handle that, cobber?”

Climpton leaned forward in the saddle. “Yeah, Mr. Graden, no wucka’s!”

Fatty shook his head. “Overconfident prick.”

Pulling hard on the reins, Climpton tapped his whip against his helmet in salute and swivelled his mount about. With a swish of the horse’s tail, the legendary jock was gone, cantering out onto the course proper. Johnny walked up.

“Well then, that’s that, mate. If you got a prayer Johnny, say it now.”

Eyes closed, Johnny mumbled something inaudible. Fatty was more interested in watching Wings of Grace in a full gallop to warm up.

“Think we’d best choof off before they kick us outta the enclosure. Go rustle up the girls. I’ll see you upstairs in the Champagne Bar. I got a table reserved next to the big screen TV.” He looked up at the sky. A light plane cruised overhead pulling a banner promoting beer. “Got a little business I gotta take care of first.” With that, he walked away.

THIRTEEN [THE FIELD IS TENSE]

FEELINGS OF ANXIETY RAN high among the crowd as their saddled heroes paraded behind the starting gates. The race already ten minutes late, the horses were nervous and struggled for control of the reins. Over the public address, course trumpeters sounded a saucy *Fugue for Tinhorns*, calling the horses in. The starting crew led in ten of the horses, one after the other. Locked inside the barrier, edgy jockeys exchanged impatient glances at one another. Their disobedient mounts shifted nervously in the claustrophobic space, awaiting the final horse, November Rule, to load.

Inside the barrier was a scary place for most horses. Its stalls were insidiously narrow, barely enough room for a tall sixteen hand horse to clear its hips. When loaded, the eleven-ton starting gate became a shifting mass of horses, jockeys and starting crew. Tense riders, anxious to go, would exchange terse words with the starter, which increased a horse’s fear, especially if it hadn’t spent sufficient time there during morning workouts.

From private boxes atop the grandstands, their trainers and owners hoped like crazy the problem horse would load. Late scratchings were damning.

A promising jet-black gelding, November Rule, at 12-1, had experienced only a handful of starts. Its ears pinned defiantly back, it looked fiercely stubborn, refusing to help the starting crews that tried to load him.

Troublemakers within the crowd were frustrated with more delays. They yelled obscenities at the starter, trying to start pandemonium. They succeeded. A loud chant

erupted, "Scratch him! Scratch him!"

The starter stood to the side of the gates. His thumb poised on the button, he heard the protests and sighed. He gave the villainous sign, a dandy flicker of his finger to the crews, and got on his walkie-talkie. The siren sounded. The horse was scratched. One of the stewards on horseback rode up, snatched the reins, and led the horse back to the yard. The starter made a notation in his book. November Rule was now on his 'list' and wouldn't be allowed to race until it proved the unlikelihood of such a future disturbance.

From his box, the horse's trainer, Des DeWitt stood up in embarrassment upon hearing the announcement. He excused himself from his distinguished guests, visiting dignitaries from Spain, and slunk his way up the stairs. Disappearing into the air-conditioned foyer, he headed for the stables.

At a nearby bar, the news came hard to the horse's owner. Utterly disgusted, Burt De'lano, a dapper little man and petty crim, shook his head in a mood, and blasted expletives his wife hadn't heard in a very long time. He followed after the trainer, who was already at the bottom of the escalators. De'Lano wished he'd never bought the ill-tempered nag at Newmarket.

Up on the Gold Coast, Hero and his band of ruffians lazed about the open-aired public bar. Their day over, they drowned themselves in beer and nibbled on a plate of spring rolls and skewered Cheerio sausages, compliments of a bookie Strappy knew. All that was on their minds now was to get drunk and watch it all on the television. And, perhaps, get laid afterwards.

Far to the south, the Champagne Bar at Randwick was crowded and lively. Fatty walked over to the table where Johnny and the girls chatted and sat down. The telephone call he had just made in private was an unsettling affair. Speaking with Rod Holton's widow, hearing her cry over the phone, expressing his sorrow at his friend's tragic death earlier in the day, brought a tear. He sniffed it back, unbuttoned his jacket, and stretched out, buggered. Drowning out the noise over at the bar, he lounged in his armchair and looked at the big screen television nearby. He stared at the pixels with intense focus, obliterating the still picture of the starting gates.

Julie and Rachel sipped their wine and chatted about a shortage of good men in Sydney while, at the other end to Fatty, Johnny foraged nervously through his wallet.

"What are you lookin' for?" Fatty asked.

Johnny pulled something from his jacket pocket and sighed a huge relief.

"Boy, thought I'd lost this." He held up a business card.

Fatty showed moderate interest. "Yeah, what's that?"

Johnny smiled exuberantly. "It's our passport to a private party after the race, Jim. A mate of mine is openin' a new club in Darlinghurst. S'posed to be a swank joint."

In the TV, the warning light flashed atop the starting gates, catching Fatty's eye.

"Okay people, horses are about to jump."

Behind the winning post, the Tote board flashed Wings of Grace as the new race favourite. Late money had firmed the fiery chestnut into 5-2, the shortest priced play in the history of the great race. Peacemaker, second favourite, had floated out to 9-2.

At the starting gates, the eleven contenders were locked in. An eerie silence fell with pulsing anticipation as the starter, watching the gates for any breach, lifted the corded remote. Poised squarely and standing well, the horses stared straight ahead. Their hoofs tapped the ground impatiently.

FOURTEEN [AND THEY'RE OFF]

THE ELECTRIC BELL SOUNDED. A shock wave rumbled through the heavy metal stalls as the gates sprung open. Runaway Train, the longest priced horse in the field, galloped to the front. Passing by the winning post the first time, the pack approached the sweeping Alison Road turn. Joe Newell, the leader's jockey from Newcastle, knew that to control the pace early was his only chance of winning. Closing in on the rail, he set himself up for the sweeping right-hander. The tightly bunched field trailed a good three lengths behind. But, Wings of Grace was nowhere to be seen.

Back at the starting gates, the colt jumped awkwardly from the stall and caught a loose saddle strap on the barrier door. Climpton wrenched hard on the reins and struggled to keep his badly stumbling mount on its legs. Horse and jockey danced tight circles in the grass.

Up in the stands and along the fence, the thousands, whose bets rode with him, groaned in misery, sickened at the prospect of yet another loss on the day. For many, it had been a difficult program, full of useless, no-name stragglers defeating poorly ridden favourites.

Johnny looked as though he could spit bullets. "Bloody great! Well, there goes the show, Jim. That frickin' Rod Climpton. Told ya he was a washed up sod."

"Pipe down, oh ye of little faith," Fatty said, and stared resolutely at the screen. "You're liable to spook the pretties here." He settled into his armchair and interlaced his fingers over his chest. He knew only too well that his jockey thrived in situations like this. "Old Climpton ain't done yet."

Settling his ride at the gates, Climpton pointed the frisky colt up the track and kicked it hard in the ribs. From a standing start, the horse shot off like a top fuel dragster on a season winning run. He coaxed his mount down into an easy, well-oiled stride, entering the first corner. Out of the turn, he rode the horse a little harder, borrowing from his sixteen years in the saddle to make up what looked to be an insurmountable mission.

Sprinting past the 1,800-metre post, a distance up, jockey and horse quickly narrowed the gap between them and the field to a respectable half-furlong. A good way ahead, the leaders had already clocked a blistering :36 opening quarter. Any win from this far back would certainly be memorable. In fact, historic!

Out of the second turn, Wings of Grace charged along the back straightaway at Wansey Road. It closed in on the ambulance trailing the race's stragglers. Climpton gave the medics in the front seat a brusque wave with his whip, then kicked it. Horse and rider glided past the last-placed horse, Buckle Down Ben, and startled the rider, a female from the Perth tracks.

Entering the third sweep at the 1,400-metre chute, the race was already half over. Climpton steered his mount in towards the rail and closed again on a few loafers. Moving smartly past, he slid into eighth spot. Through an opening, he eyed the leaders a good way up and tucked his head down. A few lengths ahead, the riders of Point Taken and another horse sensed a threat from the rear and looked over their shoulders. They spotted Climpton's approach. They glared at each other, smirked, and rode closer together, a ploy to block.

Climpton recognised their cheap tactic and knew he had to get around, somehow. And yet, along the rail, every square foot of grass was already claimed. He jerked on the reins and pulled the colt's head outward. Strung out four wide, it was a treacherous configuration and Climpton knew it. But he had no choice. The leaders had already set up for the final turn. Climpton slapped his mount's neck with the reins. Wings of Grace burst forward around the outside with unbelievable alacrity. Blood pumped through a heart the size of a microwave. He tossed the guilty riders the bird as he passed by, and moved into fifth spot.

A good distance ahead, the Abu Dhabi-trained Sultan's Pride raced up to the front runner, Runaway Train, which had, to this point, led throughout. Sprinting hard, the 50-1 scrubber found daylight and kicked away with searing speed. Out by eight lengths, its Saudi rider, Nawaf Alhazmi, smiled at the chance of an upset. At this stage of the race, the field had no other choice than play catch-up. The tempo of the race moved into high gear.

Down at Kiama, Fearless sat on the sofa, riveted to his televisions. He hadn't moved his fat bulk, not a stitch. His stocky arm remained draped over the back of the couch. Living up to his nickname, he sipped on his fortieth can of beer, calm as could be. The phones were quiet. His pencillers, still at the table, watched silently from wooden kitchen chairs; arms crossed, tense.

Up at the Gold Coast, dark clouds gathered, threatening rain. Mindless of the change in weather as the sun dropped to the mountains, Hero and his men stood under the same beer umbrella and dropped dark tap ales aplenty, watching the latter stages of the race unfold on an overhead television.

At Randwick, Fatty and Johnny glued their attention to their private television without exchanging so much as a look or word. In contrast, the girls were animated. They jumped up and down like nervous nellys. Annoyed by their distraction, Fatty kept the large

screen in his peripheral vision while he gave them each a cool stare. It was adequately sufficient to command their silence, and the girls sat back down.

In the final turn, to the south of the grandstands, Sultan's Pride enjoyed a handy lead. With a little more than 600 metres left, already three-quarters of the race was in the books. Predictably, the gelding's stamina began to run out. The horse wasn't responding at all to the whip from its inexperienced rider, a late substitution after a bad car accident injured the booked jockey on his way to the track. Horses in second and third places were forced to fall back with him or risk a severe check.

Some lengths behind, a group of horses led by Peacemaker were bunched up on the rail. Their hoofs dug out large clumps of grass. Two from the group floated out wide, soundly defeated.

Malcolm Jonestown on Peacemaker was alarmed when he spotted the Saudi horse and the others rapidly drop back towards him. He adjusted the whip to get a better grip, and slapped the rump of his mount. Though premature, it had to be done if he were to escape a collision and fall. The thoroughbred responded and burst forward through a blemish of an opening along the rail. At the 500-metre mark, he took the front position by two lengths.

Eight lengths back, Wings of Grace looked trapped behind the hard-ridden 20-1 shot, Woolloomooloo Express. Precious seconds ticked. Climpton's luck changed all of a sudden when a small but navigable opening presented itself. He kicked the horse in the ribs. Its ears went up, and it responded with fire. It became obvious that Wings of Grace was out to enjoy a damn good gallop, and he would carry through.

Out of the home turn, Climpton saw his chance at glory. He burst up the rail and moved into fourth spot. His speed, his determination to win, was fast proving Wings of Grace to be better than any stayer in racing history. Running his own race, the colt looked to have plenty in reserve. Its hoofs thundered along the ground, kicking up large tufts of grass in its spirited wake.

Up ahead, Sultan's Pride unexpectedly stumbled and delivered a severe check to Runaway Train, which was running three-deep off the rail. A chain reaction resulted. Runaway Train pushed into one horse, then against Wings of Grace, sending it into the rail. The colt whinnied in pain as a metal splinter grazed its tough flank, drawing blood. Bucking his head, Climpton's mount began to falter and it lurched sideways. Its smooth rhythm was lost.

At the winning post, the tens of thousands gasped, fully expecting Wings of Grace to tumble.

Mustering his strength, Climpton yanked on the reins to steady it. He was amazed he hadn't broken the rawhide completely with that amount of force. The horse regained control of its legs and raced up along the rail. The spectators cheered. Into the home straight, Fatty's charger moved into fifth spot. Again, a thunderous cheer rumbled from the stands. Climpton smirked. He could hear them. It was time to show the world what his ride was capable of. He dug his spurs, illegal on most tracks, hard into the horse's ribs. Wings of Grace shot forward with amazing speed, making the others around him appear as though they stood still. He cruised by the 300-metre post and reclaimed fourth

spot... then third... and then second. Hugging the rail, the sprightly colt was flying home!

The winning trick, as it had been for over a century, according to the jockeys 'in the know,' was not to ride their mounts up the ascent in the home stretch. Rather, the horse had to be coaxed up the rise. Once at the top, it should be balanced and let rip. That was how it was done.

As Climpton ascended the rise, he could sense the horse lift, an amazing feeling. At the 200-metre mark, where they had begun the race, he encouraged the horse by waving the whip in its view. Three lengths ahead, Jonestown, in black on gold star silks, looked over his shoulder and laughed a contemptuous chuckle. From here, he knew, beyond all doubt, he had it won. Something very wrong happened. His horse faltered and it began to fall back.

Like it had found top gear, Wings of Grace stretched out, urged on by the cheer of the 'riders in the grandstands.'

Over the track's public address, the voice of the race-caller broke in: "And at the one hundred fifty-metre mark, it's Peacemaker out by three lengths... BUT WAIT! Man oh man, will you look at Wings of Grace come on. He's just taken the lead."

Bounding by, Climpton gave Jonestown a haughty nod and pulled away. The race-caller's voice again came over the speakers: "At the fifty-metre mark, it's Wings of Grace out in front by two, no three lengths. What a blinding finish, ladies and gentlemen."

A riotous cheer rumbled across the track as the big chestnut lengthened its stride. Every fibre of its muscled being was pushed past previous limits. Climpton stood in his irons and punched the air triumphantly, crossing the line. Shifting his stick and reins to his right hand, he raised two fingers high and looked back. He saw the pack cross the line a fair distance behind, soundly beaten.

Peacemaker pulled up well before the winning post. It looked as though it had broken down. The ambulance stopped and rendered aid. The horse was trailered into the stables on a float. A post-race veterinary examination would discover it had been doped. Put out to pasture, it would never race again.

Climpton slowed his ride down to an easy canter and approached the clerks of the course waiting on horseback.

Wings of Grace had set records as the shortest-priced favourite and biggest winning margin in the history of the great race. It was the greatest come-from-behind victory anywhere since the celebrated galloper, Carbine. In 1890, that legendary horse had stumbled and nearly fallen at the half-mile marker, only to get up and win the Cumberland Stakes at Randwick by a head.

Up in the Champagne Bar, the girls shrieked in delight and jumped wildly in celebration, clapping their hands like a pair of rambunctious five-year-olds. Rachel's sundress barely contained her voluptuousness, as her full breasts bounced unrestrained under the garment.

Fatty rose from his chair, a little teary-eyed. He stood in silence, dropped his head, and paid homage to the long nights he had heavily invested in, planning this upset to the very last detail. He knew his horse could do it. The doping of Jonestown's mount, not the others, was insurance.

He made his way over to the plate glass windows and looked down at the track. His jockey, in black silks emblazoned with a set of car keys, led the field back into the enclosure. Before the race, the colt's fitness for the distance had been in question. Now, the outcome transcended all doubt.

Fatty returned to his party, straightened his tie, and slid his hand into his pocket. A superstitious man, he rubbed a lucky coin.

"Well, gotta go talk to the jock, then shout the public bar. It's ritual. See you people downstairs, then. Hoo-roo!"

With a swagger in his step, he walked off through the tables. Along the way, people offered their congratulations.

The speakers crackled. "Pending official course weight, ladies and gentlemen, the winner of the Sturgess Stakes here at Royal Randwick today is Wings of Grace, ridden by Rod Climpton."

Wings of Grace cantered into the mounting yard to a thunderous ovation. The stands emptied and everyone rushed the fenceline to get a glimpse, if it were possible, of the three-year-old champ return to scale. They wanted a hero, and Wings of Grace accepted the role grandly. Many had won money on him, some at the skimpy odds of just 2-1, thanks to a few gutless bookies who didn't want to stomach the risk.

Throughout his long career, Climpton had always tried to do right for his fans. He raised his cap in salute, slid down the horse's flank, and removed his saddle. Free at last, the lathered colt danced about, swinging its powerful rump this way and that, while the strapper tried to cover him with a burgundy blanket boasting the gold-embroidered Sturgess Stakes emblem.

Climpton eyed Fatty approach.

"You were right, Mr. Graden. He bloody well hates the whip. Thought I'd bought it roundin' the home turn. But I got his afterburner to kick in. Bloody beaut piece of horse flesh." Fatty smiled. He knew his strategy would have worked for any mug rider, let alone Australia's finest.

"Thanks, Roddy. You did what I asked you to do." He observed a steward approach from the scales area. "Now, off with ya and go get weighed in. I'll see you at the presentation. I got a fat bonus waitin' fer ya."

Saddle draped over his arm, Climpton was escorted off.

Under the Paddock Grandstand, the loud noise inside the crowded public bar, ten minutes later, was unimaginably boisterous. According to custom, the thousand-strong rabble gathered for a celebratory toast to the winning owner. Fatty walked in, and all attention turned to him. A deafening "Hip, Hip, and Hooray" ripped as they began a time-honoured chant, a reword just for him:

*Here's to Jimbo, he's true blue,
He's a pisspot through and through,*

*He's a legend, so they say,
Made us all kings for a day,
Now we're here droppin' 'em down,
'Cause the round's on him, so we pound!*

Wolf whistles and cheers followed.

“Whad’ya say, lads?” one of them shouted, raising a half-full schooner.

“Let’s all toast the bastard!” another man yelled.

Everyone chanted, “*GRADEN, GRADEN, GRADEN... OY, OY, OY!*”

Fatty surrendered his hands. “Steady on, lads. What say I buy all you buggers in ‘ere a coup’la beers.”

Beer spilled, glasses clanged in salute, and the rabble went wild as he strolled deep into their ranks. A mass of hands slapped him on the back. At the bar, he tossed a few thousand down on the counter for the manager to count. He saw a group of car dealers he knew at the other end of the room and made his way down. There, he sculled middies with them, one after the other.

An announcement came over the speakers: “Course weight is in, ladies and gentlemen. Wings of Grace is the official winner, ridden by Rod Climpton, paying \$4.20 for the win and \$1.70 for the place.”

Outside, in the mounting yard, workers hastily assembled the trophy stage. Climpton and the trainer stood off to one side with the pimply strapper, while Fatty stood in front. Holding the reins to his relaxed horse, he tuned out the noise of the hundreds milling about him on the lawn, happy to just stroke his champion horse’s neck. Lost in thought, he stared up at the dusk sky, at peace with himself.

Upstairs in the Champagne Bar, Julie stood at the window, folded her arms, and studied Fatty carefully. She saw him laugh with an elderly couple, a Texas senator and his wife he had introduced her to not long ago. She contemplated just what Fatty might be about, wondering how he ticked, what secrets he hid. A tap on the shoulder startled her, and she turned around.

“Oh hey, Rach,” She resumed her stare. “Look at Jim down there. Hard to imagine he could kill someone, isn’t it?”

FIFTEEN [FATTY'S RUN-IN]

/ TWO YEARS AGO /

FATTY’S ARREST FOR THE murder of Johnny Tresla, a nefarious Melbourne crime boss, made front page news all across the country.

A few weeks before the arrest, the Italian mobster was found dead, shot three times to the head with a .32 calibre pistol at point blank range. Slumped over the wheel of his late model Mercedes S500 in a remote parkland, the job had all the hallmarks of a gangland execution. From statements made by two teenagers who found the body, authorities deduced that Tesla had been dead a good eleven hours. They were biking through the dense woodlands, their story went, when they happened on an abandoned car in a clearing. The stench, they said, smelled rancid, like rotting flesh of a dead animal. Police noted the car wasn't far from the deceased's Northcote mansion.

The Homicide Squad kept the story from the media while they investigated the case. The police commissioner of the day obtained an unprecedented suppression order from the state coroner's office, prohibiting Tesla's body from being tagged at the mortuary. What was unusual were his orders forbidding the publicizing of potential exhibits found in the bloodied vehicle.

The following week, the newspapers learned about the case. Their sensational stories led to a slew of erroneous reports about a Greek Mafioso type that had perpetrated the hit. After the rumours proved false, and the journalists apologised, Melbourne's Greek population was outraged. Fearing a war between the Italians and Greeks, Special Tactical Squad detectives stepped in and took over the investigation. Weeks passed without a suspect. Then, a breakthrough! An eyewitness, with a questionable background, sprung from nowhere to finger Jim Graden at the scene. No one was surprised that Fatty's name appeared on the list of suspects. He had long been a vocal critic of Tesla, and was someone who had had more than his share of run-ins with the establishment.

They were both the same age, Fatty and Tesla. And, like Fatty, Tesla's hands dipped into many surreptitious ventures—from skyscraper construction and heavy trucking, to waste disposal and commercial shipping. But these *interests* only scratched the surface. Head of the Mafia's 'Honoured Society,' Tesla had many connections. His funeral made the *Sun Herald's* society pages. Ironically, on the day of the funeral, a drizzly Friday afternoon, the police supplied motorcycle escorts for the mammoth procession from St. Mary's Star of the Sea across town to the Tesla family mausoleum. Some years earlier, St. Mary's also held ceremony for another big time mobster, Alfonso Muratore.

Tesla's funeral procession, encompassing a virtual who's who of syndicated crime, wound through the drenched streets of Melbourne. Well-known crime figures from all over Australia attended Tesla's burial at St Kilda. Some of the most feared clansmen of the Japanese Yakusa, China's Tongs and flashy linchpins of the Hong Kong Triads also revealed an 'interest' and paid their final respects. Hundreds of limos lined the road outside the mausoleum. This was not the place to bump a Mercedes and start an argument.

Not long after, when Fatty arrived at the steps of Melbourne's Magistrates Court by unmarked police car, a sea of reporters rushed him. He waded through and walked up the steps with two burly detectives on either arm. He looked like 'Mr. Dapper' in a black three-piece suit. A woollen overcoat draped over his arms to hide the cuffs, he forced a smile when confronted with an eruption of camera flashes. Occasionally he paused to answer questions fired at him, which annoyed his escorts immeasurably. Compared to Fatty's flashy image, these plain clothed coppers were 'two-cent' slouches in cheap beige Seersucker suits. Vexed and pitifully overtired as the interview process of their prisoner

dragged on, the detectives simply shifted their weight until the media tired. The hours of legwork required to culminate their investigation into an arrest had visibly taken its toll. What they wanted was Jim Graden behind bars. Permanently. And a week's sleep.

What wasn't immediately known to the world, nor it seemed would ever be, was what the boys had actually witnessed, hiding as they did in the bushes.

Still alive, an agitated Tesla sat in his car, demanding things of Fatty and two men standing outside his window. In a thick overcoat, hands buried in the pockets, Fatty seemed disturbed though sufficiently in control of his temper while Tesla raved and ranted, pointing his finger disrespectfully. The unruly Italian flicked a lit cigarette at Fatty and started his car. That was the final straw. Fatty gave the nod to one of his henchmen. A handgun was pulled and used. The three of them disappeared into the woods and were not seen again.

The boys, too scared to tell friends, let alone their parents, sat and cried in the bushes for hours, fearful that they, too, would meet a similar fate. Finally, they found the courage and ran as hard as their legs could carry them to the police station, swearing an oath never to divulge truly what had happened to anyone.

A half-hour later, Fatty stood in the witness box before a packed courtroom. The presiding Magistrate, an elderly man in traditional gown and wig, reviewed the arrest sheet and read aloud the charges. The judge was a favourite of the Crown Prosecutor. Known as 'Hanging Judge Joe,' the ruthless dictator of the bench had sentenced many a man *nicer* than Fatty to a life behind bars without the possibility of parole. Today, and for the remainder of the trial, Fatty's life hung in the balance, pending proof of evidence the Crown had against him; primarily the testimony of their unnamed witness.

Some of Fatty's men, acting on a tip, discovered the witness's identity. Now, Fatty had a chance to play his trump card.

SIXTEEN [THE WITNESS]

A WELCOME SOUTHERLY BROUGHT relief to the quiet shores of Bondi Beach, three nights later, cooling the hot temperature considerably. A few blocks up from the beach, in a small Federation pub called the Royal Hotel, locals played pool over a beer.

In the shadows of Denham Street, across the way, a black 1966 Ford Galaxie 500 with chrome mags lay in wait. Every so often, a flash from a butane lighter flickered from inside the car. At the wheel sat Wally Briar, a tall, burly man. Growing restless, he nursed a backache. In his thirties, with clean-shaven features, he sank back against the hardness of the bench seat and contemplated fulfilling the hit contract he'd promised Fatty.

Risky Jones, a beefy man in an overcoat, slumped in the passenger seat. Once a pretty successful wrestler and kick boxer, he enjoyed the taste of a half-spent Marlboro fill his

lungs. He and Wally had been best mates since school, and Risky still got a charge out of being around him.

Callous, expressionless, and silent, they both stared across the street, focused on the front bar of the pub, thinking how much they stood to profit from tonight's monster paycheck. On the seat between them was a handgun, a black nine-millimetre.

A short time later, a man pulled the front door of the pub ajar and peeked out at the street.

Risky sat up, alert. "Bugger me blind! There he is, Wal!"

"Shaddup, numbnuts, or dickhead over there'll hear ya," Wally said in a harsh whisper. "Hell, I'll bet half of bloody Bondi are already watchin' us from their windows, Dumbo."

At the door of the pub, the man looked weary and stressed. Using the door as a shield, he nervously strained his eyes through the crack to see up and down Bondi Road for signs of trouble. A loner, he had spent all afternoon hiding in the pub, playing pool with a few surfers. Now he needed some kip. Tonight, like most other times, he couldn't be too careful about his movements. Not until Fatty was behind bars. For life! It was dodgy stuff being a stoolie for the Crown Prosecutor at Fatty's upcoming trial. There was no monetary reward in it for him. He just happened to qualify by having the *right* criminal record. The prospects that Fatty could get a fair shake were seemingly non-existent, no matter who represented him.

The coast seemed clear. He made his way down the steps and started up the dimly lit footpath. Walking relaxed him. The only sound he could hear was the regular, quiet breaking of delicate waves on the beach at the bottom of the hill. A discarded beer can on the ground provided mild entertainment and he kicked it up the block. It landed in the gutter and clunked under a parked car. He quickened his pace and headed for Ocean Street, just up the hill. The smell of the sea in the air felt invigorating, especially after breathing stale smoke all day. It, and the beer he had consumed, made him queasy. His buzz began to wear off, and the effects of a wicked hangover fouled his mood.

Several streets behind, parked in front of a small block of flats, the engine of the old Galaxie cranked over. Its side oiler 427 purred smoothly and quietly. A black plume of smoke spilled from its muffler. Slipping the three-speed tranny into drive, Wally crept onto Bondi Road, headlights switched off. Maintaining a discreet distance, he made his way slowly up the hill after him.

The man walked past a delicatessen, closed and dark, and slipped around the corner. Following after him, the car turned into a narrow, dark alleyway and came to a halt, twenty feet in. Dank and muddied, the deserted lane was a dreary place to be at this time of night. The car's arrival silenced a thousand chirping crickets under the wood fence. Tension hung in the eerie quiet. The Galaxie's headlights blazed to life. Its strong beams set the laneway afire. A family of huge rats darted about, spooked, and took cover under a dumpster. Wally and Risky spotted their target, leapt out, and casually posed themselves on the hood, arms folded.

"Reginald Henry, you're history!" Wally announced.

Startled, the man turned to see two bouncer-types pace after him. He sprinted off as fast as his legs could carry him. Flashbacks from encounters with the police in Melbourne, warning that he protect himself or else, ravaged his mind.

Risky chased after his quarry, jumping around large puddles. Wally sprinted past, like he could go another four miles, very motivated by Fatty's half million dollar reward for the witness's head. He and Risky competed with six other killer cells scouring Australia for Reginald Henry. No, Henry wasn't going to get away from him. Not tonight.

Half way up the lane, Reggie slipped in a patch of oil and fell to the concrete. When he scrambled to get up, he was pounced on. Wally reached inside his trench coat and pulled out his handgun.

"You don't appear in court, scumbag. Fatty says so. Guess it's not your lucky day, eh clobber."

Showing sinister cool, Wally stared down at his cowering prey, cocked the hammer of his Glock 22, trained it at the man's stomach, and pulled the trigger. Two shots pierced the chilly night air. Wally holstered the smouldering weapon in a pouch under his arm, happy with his work, while his victim slumped against the fence, motionless. Wooden boards behind his body splintered as they caught his fall. A dark river of syrupy blood spilled from the bullet holes into a sewer drain. At close range, Wally's police issue looked to have done its job. Risky reached down and was about to feel for a pulse when Wally stepped in.

"Don't waste yer time, Risky," he said proudly, and pulled his mate off. "The bastard's dead. A job well done, even if I do say so myself."

With a look of indifference, Risky stood up and, without a word, sprinted back to the car.

"Good idea, Risk. Won't have so far to walk with this bloody mongrel."

Risky jumped behind the wheel, doused the headlights, and clicked the column auto into drive. As he coasted quietly up to the body, he saw Wally kick the side of the man with his steel-toed boot a few times. To Wally's satisfaction, there wasn't any movement. They were there just doing their job: to kill a witness and dispose of the body. It was just another ordered hit, and they would get paid bloody well for doing it right.

"C'mon, Wal," Risky whispered abrasively. "Get the lead out and quit gawkin' at him. The cops'll be on their way by now, I'd expect."

"Nag, nag!" spouted Wally, and knelt over the body. "Risky, be a good lad and pop the trunk open. Find somethin' plastic to carry this mug in. You know, somethin' strong to hold his weight. I think my raincoat's back there."

Risky jumped out, opened the trunk, and found a large sheet of heavy gauge plastic shoved behind the spare. He rushed it over to Wally and, together, they spread it out and rolled the body onto it. Picking up the wrapped bundle at each end, they wrestled it back to the trunk and dumped it inside. Wally looked up and down the alleyway for potential witnesses, saw none, and slipped in behind the wheel.

"See, told ya my plan would work," he said, as his mate got in. "God, you're worse than a bloody woman, worrying 'bout stuff. You should have tits, mate, not a dick."

Wally eyed the time and felt the call of hunger. "Hmm, just after eight o'clock. I'll tell ya. Killin' people sure makes a bloke hungry. Man, I could eat the crutch out of a dead

rat.” He licked his chops. “How ‘bout we head down to Harry’s Café for a dozen curry pies, aye.”

Wally turned on the radio and, with a chuckle, slipped the car into drive. “Guess old Reggy back there in the trunk won’t be makin’ it to Jim’s trial after all, eh?”

The Galaxie glided up the alleyway and disappeared into an eerie mist that had, moments earlier, enveloped the neighbourhood. The car’s red square taillights faded into the shroud. Darkness returned to the vacant scene.

SEVENTEEN [THE TRAWLER RIDE]

AROUND MIDNIGHT, A GUST of wind whistled through the fish markets at Pymont. An assortment of plastic bags and newspaper wrapping scattered along the dock and into the water. Peaking through clouds, a crescent moon shone down on the wharves, casting a silver glow on the still estuary. A light fog hung.

A large steel trawler rocked easily at her dock. Fishing nets suspended outward from booms, she was an impressive looking ship, a strong and seaworthy workhorse. Named *Voltaire*, it rode high in the water and was wide-beamed. Of the Newbuilding class, she was designed as a longliner and netter. Ten years ago, Maretec Corporation out of the Faroe Islands commissioned her hull with the Danish shipbuilders, Skipsteknisk. After a yearlong stint in the North Sea, she came to Australia for the primary purpose of hunting valuable Bluefin. She was a relatively new vessel compared to the other tuna boats in the fleet. Tonight they had sailed without her. Alone at the pier, barely a ripple registered against her red-painted hull. A flock of seagulls gathered along her masts to settle in for the night. In the distance, beyond Anzac Bridge, a bulk cargo vessel docked with the aid of tugs at the Glebe Island grain terminals. The blast of its air horn pierced the early morning stillness.

A car drove onto the docks through a gate and headed for *Voltaire*. The weathered planks rattled loosely under the car’s weight. Its headlights cut an unhurried path through the mist. With a gentle squeal of brakes, the old Galaxie pulled up at the foot of the trawler’s gangplank and spooked the roosting birds to flight. Wally and Risky stepped out, right as the shroud began to lift. The air felt unusually chilly. Both recharged after their glutinous pie-eating extravaganza, the trawler was their last port of call. All that needed to be done now was the disposal of Reginald Henry’s body. What better way than a trip to Davy Jones’ locker.

Opening the trunk, Wally grabbed the body bundled like a soft taco in the plastic and tugged at it. But, the tire jack snared the mass and wouldn’t give.

“Hey Risky, give us a hand here.”

Risky pitched in. Both gave it a good hard yank and the bundle finally wrested free. One on the shoulders, the other at the feet, they wrestled the package up the gangway.

“Jesus Christ, Wally,” Risky complained, dropping his end of the load midway up. “What’d you say ol’ Reggie here weighed?”

“Quit yer belly-achin,’ shit-fer-brains,” Wally fired unambiguously. “Mate, you’re worse than a bloody sheila. Now, pick up his legs so we can get inside this floating scow and get warm, okay.”

“Attitude, attitude,” Risky chanted. “Glad I didn’t marry yer arse.”

The men saw a cabin door ajar underneath the pilothouse and slipped inside. The trawler’s nav lights turned on and cast red and green hues across the teak-laid deck.

Up inside the pilothouse, a flame flickered from a butane lighter. Fredo Camilleti, a gray-bearded salt, in captain’s cap and heavy overcoat, stood at the helm. Puffing on a hand-carved wooden pipe, the old Sicilian stared out at the stillness of the estuary. The idea of murder and the likes of the men who had come aboard were distasteful to him. Yet, he felt compelled to do this trip. His daughter was in a hospital suffering a rare skin disease. The medical bills were astronomical. For a job like this, Camilleti got paid very well. He’d done a lot of work for Fatty over the years, disposing at sea things the world wasn’t to know. And, Fatty always took care of him.

In blue overalls and woollen caps, two beefy crewmen scurried about the decks, just as the ship’s powerful Cummins 600 hp diesel engines rumbled to life. Camilleti stuck his head out through a side window.

“Cast-a the lines, boys!” he shouted.

Her heavy mooring ropes released, the trawler drifted sideways with the current. Camilleti slipped the sturdy Mekanord gearbox into drive. Under power, *Voltaire* moved away from her dock at quarter speed and headed up the narrow channel towards Johnstons Bay. The night had grown uncomfortably cold, conditions the weather service had not predicted. Air temperatures fell below thirty-six degrees Fahrenheit, odd for mid spring.

Gliding under Anzac Bridge, a newly built suspension structure near the city, the light winds barely registered on the trawler’s anemometer. Her rippled wake spread out like a shimmering fan as she motored past empty docks, manoeuvring between buoys that marked the navigable route. Beyond the inlet lay the outer mooring channel, and past that, Darling Harbour, a busy tourist trap where fireworks exploded nightly. The open sea, their final leg, lay fifteen miles to the east.

Inside the crew’s quarters, Wally paced about in a nervous state. Over on a bunk, stooped forward, clutching his growling stomach, Risky felt miserably seasick. He found a stash of seasickness tablets in a cabinet and swilled down a handful with spit. Bundled on the floor, between the bunks, their victim began to stir.

Wally froze in his tracks. “Shit! Ol’ Reggie there’s decided to wake.”

Reggie’s left leg twitched and kicked, as instinct for survival coerced movement. Hanging onto life by barely a thread, he pressed a hand against the gunshot wounds to stop the blood seepage, then fell back into unconsciousness.

Horribly pale, Wally resumed his nervous pace and thought. *Jeez, this’s all turnin’ out real bad fer me and ol’ Risky over there. Talk about luck. Hell, if it was rainin’ palaces,*

I'd get hit with a dunny door. Too bloody right, it'd be me bleedin' head if Graden found out. Last thing I need is Camilleti's crew findin' out I botched the hit.

An hour earlier, Wally had called Fatty from a pay phone outside Harry's Café. He gave the boss a play-by-play, swearing that the Crown's witness was dead. He knew Graden wasn't at all a forgiving man, especially when it came to incompetence within his own ranks. Fatty had a history rubbing out ineptitude from his inner circle. Ogre Grant, a mammoth ex-footie henchman was the last one he exampled.

A year ago, Ogre stupidly allowed a Fed posing as a phone repairman inside Fatty's Vacluse waterfront mansion while the boss was away on a business trip. A few months later, when Fatty ordered a random sweep by a security firm, listening devices were found and ripped out. Mitch Rylander, Fatty's bodyguard, confronted Ogre, a simpleton with the mental abilities of a pea. A week later, a Korean family swimming in the breakers off Maroubra Beach found Ogre face down in the surf. His neck was broken, snapped clean after a blow from a blunt object.

Grief-stricken, Wally stared through the porthole and watched Balmain glide by to port. He felt the trawler accelerate and he realised the main harbour wasn't far away. Staring back at the body, he knew he had to finish Reggie off. But how? Another bullet? A mussel crack from his Glock, known to be a very loud weapon? Back at Bondi, he'd been lucky not to attract attention. But, do it again? No, that wasn't an option. Sound travelled far too easily over water, especially so early in the morning. He'd have to somehow muffle the shot so the crew wouldn't hear. And, even if he did, they were sure to find out that he had botched the job, as good as his luck was going tonight.

"Bugger you, Reggie!" Wally stood over the body. "You're becomin' a bloody pain in my arse, mate." He studied his partner. *Surely old Risky there wouldn't drop me in the grease with the trawler crew? Or worse, the boss.*

Head drooped moodily, Risky held the edges of his bunk in a white knuckled grip. Eyes wide and glassy, he was pretty much fed up with how things were progressing tonight. If Wally had let him feel for a pulse like he'd wanted, they would have finished him off back in the alleyway. He reached down and foraged aimlessly through the bunk's drawers for something to do. He saw a folded sack, pulled it out, and held it up. It had "GRADEN HOLDEN LAUNDRY" stencilled on the side. His eyes lit up.

"Hey Wally, ol' Jimbo left this here for us. Guess he wants us to stuff him into it. You know, tie it up tight and chuck him overboard."

A glimmer of hope shot across Wally's face. "Top idea, you little rippa!"

He felt the thickness of the burlap material and knew right then they were saved.

"Now all we need are some weights. Risky, go find some."

"Sure, Wal." Risky got off his rear and rummaged through the cupboards and closets. He found several heavy bricks and held them up. "Will these do?"

The body faintly stirred to life. Wally's face turned pallid at the sight of his left foot twitch.

"Will you look at ol' Reggie?"

He grabbed a heavy stick and let fly to the man's head.

“You’re [... bam!] supposed [...bam!] to be [...bam!] dead, Reggie! [...bam!...bam!...bam!]” His head cracked wide like a dropped watermelon, blood poured from a nasty gash that ran the length of his temple. If Reggie wasn’t dead before, surely he was a vegetable by now, at the very least. A callous man, Wally laid in with his steel-toed boot for good measure.

“Gettin’ sick (...kick!) and tired of you [...kick!] poppin’ back [...kick!] to life when we [...kick!] don’t want you to!”

Wally saw no movement. Though not much of a medic, he knelt down and felt where he thought the pulse to be, detected none, and smiled.

“Good’o!”

He wiped the sweat from his brow, stood up, and walked over to the porthole. The trawler rocked unsympathetically from side to side. Noticing Fort Denison pass by a’starboard, he gulped at the amount of spray being whipped down the deck.

“Well Risky, look’s like we’re in for a bit of a storm tonight. Hope you got the stomach for it. Personally, I like rootin’ around on land better.”

EIGHTEEN [DUMPING THE EVIDENCE]

LOW SPIRITED AND DISTANT, Risky stood silently while clutching the bricks. His mind racked with worry, he stared at the lifeless body doubled up at the foot of the bunk. Wally walked over and knelt over the man. He looked at his mate and snapped his fingers.

“Wakey, wakey, ya bloody Bozo. Time to cram ol’ Reggie here in that bag before that stuff outside really turns sour. Now, drop those bricks on the bed and come bloody well help.”

Suddenly, a barrage of waves hit the ship broadside and she rocked wildly in terrifying seas. Knocked off his feet, Wally rolled about the floor, while Risky slammed up against the bulkhead, propelled by the steep downward tilt of the deck.

“CHRIST,” Risky bellowed, and held onto whatever he could grab. “What the hell was that? Are we sinkin,’ Wal?”

Before Wally could utter anything, he heard boots thump along the deck outside. An old stocky crewman in yellow wet weather gear opened the hatch and stepped inside. A blast of cold wind swept rain in their faces.

“Close the bloody door, ya big oaf!” Wally blurted, shivering. “It’s colder than a well-diggers arse out there.”

Ocka Bryant, one of Camilleti’s deckhands and former rugby forward for Bristol, liked the money he made out on the high seas much better than being kicked and punched inside a scrum on a wet English football field somewhere. He limped slightly, a legacy from his playing days, bestowed along with the opinion that the reckless sport should be banned to all except homicidal maniacs.

“Yer fellas better cop him ready,” he said in a thick Cockney accent, and pointed at the body. “We’ll be steamin’ past the bleedin’ Heads in a couple ov minutes.”

Wally rubbed his bruised forehead, picked himself up off the floor, and scrambled over to the body.

“Phew, that’s bad!” he complained. The congealed blood was pungent. ““Ol Reggie here stinks like my dirty undies.” He tested the air with a sniff, then covered his nose again. “Nope, worse! Hey Ocka, he smells a bit ripe, don’t ya think? Mate, I need you to go make some of that marvellous chum. You know, the stuff that attracts sharks.”

“Yeah, I got mackerel ‘eads and Newington Butts (guts) in the fridge,” Ocka replied with a smirk. He steamed out of the cabin and slammed the hatch shut.

The men stood at opposite sides of the bunkroom, staring oddly at each other. Finally, Wally snapped out of his stupor and grabbed hold of the body by the sneakers. He dragged it out into the open and shuffled around behind to get a grip under the man’s arms. When he tried to lift the body himself, he just about burst a vein.

“GAWD! This bastard’s heavy. C’mon Risk, shake a leg. Open the sack and bring it in behind me. We’ll stick his head in first.”

Risky hustled over to the bunk, picked up the sack, unfurled it, and held it open while Wally stuffed in the body. The last thing to go, the legs, went into the sack just fine. Wally dropped the bricks inside and stood up. He stretched to ease the pain-racked muscles in his lower back. He felt little relief and looked down at his prize.

“We’re gonna need some rope. See what you can come up with.”

Risky poked through a closet pulled out a ball of heavy twine. “Will this do, Wal?”

Wally nodded. He grabbed the cord, wound it about the top of the sack, tied a slipknot, then stood proudly back.

“There! Looks like a bloody Christmas present.”

Voltaire left Sydney Heads and the lights of civilization far behind. It bullied the ruthless conditions of a tumultuous storm, bombarded by 20-foot waves. Splinters of lightning ripped through the grey clouds, while screaming winds tore at wave tops, driving a haze of spume at her. The salt spray pelted the pilothouse windows like machine gun fire, competing with a driving rain that blew horizontally. The ship rose and fell with regularity as mountains of water pitched and rolled her, slamming her sides with sledgehammer-like blows, harsh jolts that reverberated the length and breadth of her hull.

In the warmth of the pilothouse, Camilleti stood at the helm, puffing his pipe, and fought the vicious northerly. He worked the wheel with one hand and throttles in the other. One who never relaxed, he liked taking wrenches to motors, tending to this and that. Even better, he loved fighting the ravages of the sea and the power of the waves. This storm worthily challenged his skill and courage.

He lined up for a wall of freak waves that appeared from out of nowhere and hit the first with a bone-jarring splash. Riding over the top then down into the trough on the other side, he dug into the next wave. The forward deck disappeared and a mighty surge splashed over the thick glass windows of the pilothouse as the ship popped out on the monster’s back.

Inside the bunkroom, Wally helped Risky drag the heavy burlap sack over to the hatch.

“You ready?”

Risky nodded bleakly and poised all his weight behind the door handle. Clutching firmly the neck of the sack, Wally fell in behind and prepared himself for the blast of wind to come when the hatch was opened. The men stood there and waited for the right moment, listening to the intense, sobering howl outside. Then, all became strangely quiet as the ship broadsided the wind. Wally’s eyes lit up.

“Now, Risky! Push on the bloody door!”

With all his might, Risky pushed against the hatch which offered a good deal of resistance. A release of air pressure popped his ears, as the seal finally cracked. The howling wind returned at that very moment and sucked a carpet mat right out from under his boots. He fell back against Wally.

“Ouch! Shit a brick,” Risky complained, rubbing his bruised buttocks as the hatch slammed shut on him.

Wally struggled under Risky’s weight. “Get off’a me, ya wombat.”

The men finally separated, stood up, and resumed their places.

“We don’t got much time,” said Wally, flustered. “Give the door another go.”

Risky tried the door again. “Feels like it’s stuck, Wally.”

“Feels like it’s stuck, W-a-l-l-y.” Wally, short-tempered, pushed Risky aside. “Boo hoo, yer bleedin’ whiner. What’s the matter, diddums, don’t wanna break a fingernail? God you’re useless, Risky. Give me some room, then. We’ll both give it a shove on the count of three, okay... one, two, THREEE!”

The door flung open and an icy wind blasted them. The door crashed against the outer superstructure, then threatened to come back at them.

Risky cried over the coyote-like howl. “Bloody hell, this wind’s colder than Frosty’s arse.”

Wally got in behind him. “Push it, yer little bastard! Before the ruddy thing hits us both in the chops.”

“I’m tryin’, Wal.”

Inside the dimly-lit pilothouse, Camilleti appeared gravely troubled. His ship moaned and groaned like an injured animal struggling to survive. Through the windshield, he saw an endless hammering of waves and wondered how any vessel could survive such a constant barrage. The intercom summoned his attention.

“Cap’n, ship’s suffered a few stress cracks along the seams. We’re takin’ on a little water. Whad’ya want me ta do down here in the bilge?”

“How-a bad, Rudi?” asked Camilleti, continuing to steer into the wind.

“Well, there’s a little buckling on the port bow’s freeboard, about a foot above the waterline. Not bad right now, but I don’t know how much more of this she’ll take. We must’a missed this on our last inspection.”

He leaned into the intercom. “Rudi, you stay-a down there. Keep an eye on it.”

Camilleti stayed his course. He looked down at the starboard deck and saw Fatty’s men dragging something huge towards the aft deck. He looked at his green radar screen. It indicated a swirling weather cell, showing good concentration immediately over him. The dark mass just hovered, with more coming in from the north.

Without warning, a monstrous wave rose up and crashed over the bow. A violent quake thundered through the ship. Camilleti fought to maintain his due easterly course toward deeper sea. A massive rush of saltwater poured down the rear hatches and into the bilge. The starboard motor's gauges went dead. The engine shuddered silent. Camilleti struggled with the wheel but he couldn't bring her about. With the wind slamming against the port side, the vessel desperately needed that other engine to counter Mother Nature's forces. Flipping on the pumps, he reduced revolutions to the operable diesel and crossed his fingers. He punched the emergency start button, which affected nothing. The engines were Cummins and as tough as nails. But, when they broke down, they required quite a bit of time for repair, too much time in fact. Out here, without engines, one was, quite literally, dead in the water! He primed the throttles and, again, tried to start the inoperable engine. His wise, old eyes scanned the instruments and evaluated the damage. At least he had one operable diesel. Abruptly, a volley of smaller waves caught him on the beam, and the ship staggered. Water foamed across the decks, and the second engine gurgled dead. Without manoeuvrability and unable to power through the sea, the ship yawed and wallowed, exposing her weakest parts to the oncoming waves. His ship in distress, he knew he had his best man on the job.

Down below, Rudi hastily inspected the engines. With a good deal of time clocked up in the Baltic Sea, he was used to dangerous conditions and situations requiring immediate answers. He tweaked and tested everything he could think of with a spanner, screwdriver, and a voltage meter, while a foot of saltwater splashed about his galoshes. The noxious smell of diesel, abundant in the cramped compartment, made him queasy. He stood back and scratched his head. He thought he knew these engines.

"Well, don't this bloody well beat all."

He gave the starter on the port side motor an angry kick. The engine coughed damply and came to life. With an odd smile, he turned his attention to the starboard diesel.

"Don't s'pose we could go two fer two?"

He laid his boot in. It, too, roared to life.

"Well, wadd'ya know. Must've been a loose bridgin' wire. I'm a ruddy genius," he muttered, just as a big wave slammed into the trawler's side. He braced himself, got his footing, then got back on the intercom.

"Hey Cap'n. Engines are up and runnin'."

Greatly relieved, Camilleti brought the revolutions up to operating speed and put the transmissions into drive. It felt good to finally power out. The bow turned into the wind, albeit slowly.

NINETEEN [SHARK BAIT!]

IN THE GALLEY, OCKA sung to himself as he cooked up a bloody muck in a large pail over by the sink; a muddle of fish guts, mackerel heads, and cod liver oil. It definitely

looked to be chum, a vile concoction guaranteed to attract all species of man-eater for miles around. A burning cigarette dangled from his lips as he stirred the brew. Every now and then, a careless ash dropped into the mix, which didn't bother him, not in the slightest. He gave his potion one final stir, banged the metal spoon against the rim of the pail, and marched towards the hatch, bucket in hand. He opened the steel door and stuck his head out into the reduced breeze. He saw Wally and Risky shuffle past the sack in tow. He heard muffled profanity blurt from Wally's lips as his leather-soled work boots, a no-no out there, slipped awkwardly and with regularity on the sodden deck. Ocka shook his head despondently.

"Ave a look at 'em, right, right. Not even wearin' boat shoes. Bloody amateurs!"

Wally looked back at the sailor wearing a wicked grin in the doorway.

"Hey Ocka, ya bloody Galah. I see you got tickets on yerself. Fancy yerself a bit, don't ya. Strike me pink! You gonna come help us here with this bloody sack or what?"

Ocka deemed the wisecrack unworthy of a response, flicked his lit fag over the side of the ship, and walked after them. Rather grand and leonine in bearing, Ocka somewhat smugly regarded himself "British to the bootstraps." He caught up to them and began dousing the chum over the sack with a big serving spoon.

"Once dis Tin Tack (sack) 'its the water, tis all over, Rover."

Wally heard the sailor's reassurance. "See Risky, told ya not to worry, matey. You and I are in good bloody hands with ol' Ocka back there."

The three of them stood on the aft deck and looked out into the gloominess. The storm had diminished and was drifting out to sea. Mesmerised by the intense propeller churn, which boiled like a witch's cauldron, Wally looked as white as a ghost. Sea legs hadn't grown for Risky either. His eyes glazed over with fear. He gladly would have donated his left testicle to science to be rid of this place, to be anywhere but out here, amidst all this chaos. He was a suspicious man who, when he smelled flowers, looked for a coffin. He hadn't ever really thought about dying. Even tonight, with death staring him in the face, he could not bring himself to *believe* it. Death wasn't supposed to be something one *chose*. Instead, he always took comfort in the thought that death would spirit him away before he knew what was happening, and he wouldn't have to think about it beforehand. But, tonight, it wasn't looking that way.

Standing behind them, Ocka gave a prolonged, demented laugh. "What's this? Big tough Wally 'ere is afraid ov a wee ten furlongs (water). Wot a pounce. Want me ta git yer paddlers, sweetie?"

Wally didn't respond, not a flinch. He just wore a gauchely stupid expression.

Standing in a light shower, Ocka grew impatient.

"Eh up, wake up, boff ov yew dickheads. Yer blokes 'ave a Uncle Bob (job) ter do, so yew bleedin' well be-eter do it."

Wally and Risky both hogged the gateway, still unresponsive.

Ocka gave a heady sigh and tossed the empty bucket back up the deck.

"Rip the 'airs," he scoffed, and shoved the landlubbers aside. "I'll 'ave ter take care ov your Jackson Pollock (bullshit) maself."

He reached behind and grabbed hold of the cumbersome sack. Uttering a loud, damning grunt, he mustered all the energy in his bullish frame and dragged it up. It

teetered precariously on the transom's ledge. Ocka stood back, his arms crossed over his big chest.

"Now, yer blokes give the bag the bleedin' old 'eave-ho, Joe, right, and it'll be gone, right, John."

Still the men ignored him.

"Eh up, if yer don't, right, Wally, right, I Orange and Pear (swear) Jim Graden's gonna 'ear about it."

As if he had uttered magic words, Wally's eyes began to blink from the sprinkle hitting them. He saw the sack down by his boot, lifted his leg and, marshalling all his strength, gave it a stout kick over the side. It dropped down and hit the boiling wake with a monstrous splash, then sank quickly into the dark murkiness.

"Knew yer 'ad it in yer, Wally," said Ocka, patting his gloves together, trying to get the circulation going. "Wite then, ya gents up for a peas in a pot (hot) cuppa everton toffee (coffee)?"

Wally rubbed his mitted hands agreeably and turned to his offsider, who still looked in a state of shock.

"C'mon, mate," he said, slapping him in the stomach.

Risky coughed and gave Wally an austere look. "Jesus, Wally, you didn't have to do that!"

"God, yer a bleedin' whiner, cobber." Wally trotted after Ocka. "I say we go get some hot char from Ocka's kitchen, aye."

Risky felt a vibration through the deck as the engines turned faster. It was an indication they were headed home. He trudged after his mate. An eerie mist appeared. It felt evil, out of place. He slowed to a dawdle to catch his breath and grabbed hold of the railing. He desperately needed to clear his head of the evil he'd been a part of. He peered over the side. The waves had calmed, reduced now to a swell. His eyes bulged when he saw a sinister, terrifying shape cut through the chop. A large black dorsal fin passed to within a few feet of the hull, headed at flank speed towards where they had disposed of the sack. A shock of adrenaline mixed with fear surged through his body. He couldn't quite get the words out.

"Th-there, Wally," he yelled, and pointed over the side. "L-look.."

Ocka rushed over and spotted the back of the monster. "Clock, I told ya'." He gave a coarse chuckle. "That chum ov mine is bleedin' lethal."

Wally scurried over and, when he stuck his head over the railing, saw nothing.

Risky stood there, terrified, just staring down at the sea with the fullest pupils.

Wally grew frustrated. "What'd you blokes see?"

Half way up the deck, Ocka stopped in mid stride and turned.

"Yer're kiddin', right, right?" he scoffed. "Gypsy Nell (Hell), there's 'undreds loike thaat wahn ahhhht theer. Playful wee buggers, they ahh."

Annoyed, Wally followed after Ocka, seen disappearing through a hatchway. Holding onto the rail, his pace quickened, and his thoughts ran wild. He needed answers. Plenty of them.

Entering the galley, he reached out and grabbed the deckhand by the arm and spun him around.

“Well! What was it?” he demanded.

“It were a Noah’s Ark (shark),” Ocka replied with a sense of cool. “A ‘uge Bronze Whaler.” He went over to the stove, scratching the wiry stubble on his face. “T’was a big blighter. Yep, fif’een-footer it ‘ave a looked.”

Ocka opened a cupboard above the stove and fetched an old dusty kettle. Filling it with water, he dumped in a handful of teabags, and placed it on the burner. He struck a match, lit the gas, and adjusted the blue white-hot flame, then proceeded to sharpen his bowie knife while waiting for the water to boil. He’d seen hundreds of sharks in his day, many far bigger than that one. He cared not about the shark’s presence, or what it would do to the man inside the sack.

TWENTY [FATTY'S RELEASE]

THE MORNING SUN ABOVE downtown Sydney poised above a skyscraper, shading a small newsstand near a small park on Bridge Street. A delivery driver piled up newspapers against the curb. The front page announced the headline: “CROWN WITNESS DISAPPEARS. JAMES GRADEN TO BE RELEASED TODAY.”

At an old seaside pub in Coogee, a band of rough, unshaven derelicts lazed inside the back bar, drinking beer. In dark shorts, workers boots, and armless South Sydney rugby shirts, they gathered around a pool table, pondering their navels and little else. An hour ago, they should have clocked in at a construction site. Instead, they decided to bang around the balls and screw off work altogether.

A burly fellow played a disappointing shot. He whacked the cue across anything in his path of a metallic or unyielding nature: the pool table, a chair, the light swinging above the table. Only a matter of time intervened before flesh and bone came into the equation. Frustrated, he threw down his stick, seized the remote, and pointed it at a television set up on the wall. When it warmed to life, he ran through the choice of three channels. A breaking news event on the screen brought a sudden expression of staggered admiration to his face. A bloody genius, he thought, that he could drive the damned contraption. He was the smartest one there. Pitiful!

“We interrupt your program for a news flash,” the cute redhead on the tele began. “James Graden, prominent Sydney car dealer and businessman, is due to be released from police custody in Melbourne sometime before noon. It is expected the Crown will drop charges of murder for Johnny Tesla’s death due to the disappearance of a key witness.”

Leaning on their sticks, the men let out a cheer and punched their fists in salute. Their hero was, at last, vindicated. They cracked schooners over the pool table in toast, spilling beer on the worn green felt.

A few hours later, the clock in the square outside Melbourne’s Criminal Court struck eleven-thirty. The doors to the building burst open. Reenergised and jubilant, Fatty couldn’t hold back his elation. A free man, he swaggered from the courthouse in suit and

tie. The waiting horde rushed in and fired questions. Camera flashes almost blinded him. He just stood there and basked in the glory of his acquittal. But, he wanted out of there, too. Mitch Rylander caught the boss' stare, stepped in, and forced a hole.

Fatty and his bodyguard waded into the sea of crowding bodies. It didn't take long before they were again blocked. The reporters demanded a statement. Fatty held his hands up in surrender. He thought about what he would say while the rabble quieted. He remembered standing in handcuffs on this very spot a week ago. A shiver went up his spine. Today, he was about to put this humiliating period in his life behind him. An eager reporter, with thick bifocal glasses and a case of acne, shoved a microphone into his face.

"Mr. Graden, did you believe you were innocent of the charges?"

"That's a loaded bloody question," Fatty replied with a haughty laugh. And he had to. It was important that he publicly show the pressures of such a public trial hadn't gotten to him. How he answered the reporter would influence Australia's opinion of his character. He gathered his composure and searched for words. He wanted to conceal his hatred for such a poor judicial system that had tried to hang him.

"This is clearly an injustice. When a tax paying citizen in good standing is forced to defend himself in a trumped up case like this one, the public must raise questions about the judgment and tactless dealings of those in high places who misuse their authority and neglect their responsibilities."

Far to the north, inside the Surry Hills police station on Goulburn Street, a handful of Sydney detectives watched Fatty's televised interview with moderate interest. Sullen and distant, they milled around the coffeepot in a lunchroom beside the interrogation cells. These veterans of the consorting squad knew they had screwed up in their responsibility to protect the witness for their Melbourne counterparts. Yesterday, their case had been iron clad. Today, it was history!

Fatty's many run-ins with them over the past twenty years were legendary. His gambling activities and association with known mob aficionados like Charlie Wilson and Roy Adkins categorised him as a dubious character, "a Person of Interest." Charlie and Roy were found floating face down in the harbour, shot dead. After that, Fatty moved under an umbrella of suspicion and walked on shaky ground.

Detective Harry Edwards, the squad's leader, sat on the edge of the table, munching cake. Gray-haired and tall, he wore his blue shirt sleeves rolled up. Sweat stains showed under the armpits. His eyes glazed over when he heard the report.

"Look at Lord Muck there on the tele, will ya?" he said with a curled lip. "Thinks he's better than everyone else. He's one slippery bugger. Hell, he's got those mug reporters believin' he's innocent. A right regular Robin Hood he is."

Edwards sipped his coffee in silence. He knew, first hand, how dodgy a character Fatty was. The heavy stubble on his face was evidence of the around-the-clock time he'd put into the investigation. He shook his head, and disappointment poured from his eyes.

A few years earlier, he was the lead dick on a slew of horse-doping capers around Rosehill and Warwick Farm. Working on a tip from a stable hand, he determined Fatty had masterminded them all. When he presented the evidence, his boss, then Detective Inspector Bruhauer, a man later thought to be on the take, ordered him to drop what he had.

Standing on the sandstone steps of the courthouse, Fatty looked weary. When he tried to leave, the reporters wouldn't budge. Mitch stepped in and cleared a path, manhandling those stupid enough to defiantly linger. Seeing that Fatty had made it safely through, he stopped and turned his attention to the surrounding horde.

"Now, now, boys. No more questions. Mr. Graden's just happy to have this behind him," he said with authority, acting more the diplomat than a feared heavy. "Now, c'mon, let a guy have a fair go, aye? Thanks."

Fatty hurriedly gave a few stragglers a perfunctory "no comment" and got into the back of a rented limo, which idled at the curb. He could hear the rattle and hum of the "Number 55" streetcar a few blocks behind, clackity-clacking its tracks along William Street. For him, the fight was over. For now. Right at this very moment in time, all he could think about was mending. He never had had blood actually on his hands. But, he was responsible for plenty of it being spilled. It was a necessary evil to get ahead. Since his childhood, he was driven by a rough father under threat of the strap to get ahead of the game, to become something, to be important. There were many who had gotten in his way, who deserved his vengeance. Maybe some who didn't. He never went willy-nilly looking for trouble. Somehow, it just landed on his doorstep. He had to deal with it in the only way he knew how. Violently.

Fighting a small band of reporters hovering at the sidewalk, Mitch punched a way through and jumped into the back seat. The Lincoln stretch motored away. Fatty heard the cheers fade and managed a faint smile, as his car turned the corner at Bourke Street. Headed for the domestic terminals at Tullamarine, the two-hour flight back to Sydney would be a long, thoughtful one. The courtroom decision back there had been a big win for the Graden camp. However, soon an attempt on his life would be made, and he would pay an ultimate price.

TWENTY ONE [TROPHY PRESENTATION]

THE CHAMPAGNE BAR ALMOST empty, Julie and Rachel stood at the plate glass window. Staring down at the crowd in the mounting enclosure, the outside stadium lights flickered on. The throng had grown threefold. So, too, the police presence.

Fatty stood on the grass, sipping a stub glass of Glenfiddich on ice. He held the reins of his colt and chatted with an elderly couple, the husband a former schoolmate of his. He drowned them out unintentionally. The big win hadn't yet fully registered.

Wings of Grace relaxed his stance and peered alertly about the track. Draped in a burgundy gown, a winner's sheath about its neck, the colt exuded a sense of royalty, peering supremely at his subjects packed along the fences.

Fatty beckoned his strapper over, and he handed off the reins, finished with the horse. He proudly watched the chestnut prance over to the stage for the awards ceremony.

Johnny and the girls gathered along the white picket fence from the member's lawn. Julie gleamed with joy when she saw Fatty standing in the middle of the yard with a group of ruling state politicians. She wanted to expand her list of wealthy, powerful connections. Perhaps bed them if necessary. Old men were so easy.

Fatty's eye casually wandered the crowd and spotted her. Julie's gaudy hat was hard to miss. With a broad grin, he beckoned her with his hand.

Julie was puzzled about whom he meant. She pointed to Johnny.

Fatty shook his head.

Perplexed, she pointed to Rachel.

Again, he shook his head.

With a shy and questioning smile, she pointed at herself.

Fatty smiled and nodded his head exuberantly. Grinning from ear to ear, she fought her way through the crowd, headed for the official's gate. The old uniformed guard on duty caught Fatty's nod, saw Julie's approach, and tipped his cap as she passed on through. She appreciated the guard's gentlemanly manner and smiled warmly at him, shaking his hand as a friend would. He had opened the gate for thousands of women before her, but none as pretty or classy. Her manners and breeding were apparent, evidence of her privileged Kirribilli upbringing and convent school education. Spiralling like a ballerina, she held her hat so it wouldn't blow off her head and raced across the lush green turf of the enclosure.

Fatty laughed at the sight of Julie skipping towards him like a schoolgirl. He reached out, grabbed her hand, and introduced her around. Then, he said their good-byes, much to Julie's dismay, and led her off to the stage. Both stepped up on the carpeted riser and took their place beside several older racing officials. Julie smiled purposefully at them.

The crowd let out a cheer. Fatty smiled and gave them a hearty thumbs up. They cheered again. He and Julie were ushered to the back of the stage, next to a table draped in velvet. There sat a three-foot tall silver trophy. His eyes boggled at its radiant beauty, glimmering in the glow of the stadium lights. The Sturgess Stakes trophy was a superb work of art, hand-crafted by Redlich & Co. from over 340 ounces of sterling silver.

"That bloody thing'll look good in the showroom of my Benz store. Note to self: 'book an armoured car.'"

Emerging from under the Queen Elizabeth Grandstand, two uniformed officers escorted an elderly couple into the mounting yard. The crowd noise hushed and all eyes turned to them.

Walking with an unsteady gait and propped by a cane, the Governor General, Sir Davis Hill, was a stately looking gent. Tall and debonair, a David Niven type, he wore grey tails, vest, and top hat. The Queen's representative to Australia, he showed manners polished to perfection, which befitted his high profile, ambassadorial role. By his side ambled Lady Hill. On the tubby side, she smiled warmly for the cameras. Charm and personality radiated from her sun-weathered face. A favourite with Sydneysiders, she had a cooking show on television. Scones were her specialty.

The two of them stepped up onto the stage, assisted by a few track officials, and took their places beside Fatty. Sir Davis extended his hand and Fatty grasped it firmly. The respect was there. The crowd went wild as the popular politician was asked to approach the microphone to begin the ceremony. He hesitated briefly while an aide brought up the trophy.

“Mr. Graden,” Sir Davis started, “on behalf of the racing fraternity, it is indeed my great pleasure to present to you and Wings of Grace this cup. He ran a hard race. One of the greatest races we have had the pleasure to witness in the history of this course. What a fine colt. Congratulations.”

The crowd let roar... *GRADEN, GRADEN, GRADEN... OY, OY, OY...*

Wings of Grace enjoyed the public’s attention and whinnied in reply.

Fatty strolled up to the mike. Taken by the warmth of the turnout, tears came to his eyes. He turned to the Governor General and accepted the trophy.

“Thank you, Sir Davis. For an old car dealer, this is indeed a surprise. I’ll be brief, ‘cause I know you all expect it.”

The crowd laughed.

“Without good horse breeding and a competent rider, I wouldn’t be on this stage this evening.” He raised the trophy proudly.

The crowd applauded. Fatty stood back and watched his horse nod its head up and down in approving play. Fatty, again, came to the microphone, and the crowd quieted.

“Thanks, Wings of Grace.”

The assembly cheered. Fatty whistled at Rod Climpson to join him. The jockey stepped up on the stage. Slapping his rider’s whip against his knee-high boots, he wasn’t one for accolades. When Fatty presented him with a \$200,000 check, money changed that.

“And thanks to you, Roddy.” He shook the jock’s hand with a gleaming smile, and turned back to the crowd. “I’ll see all of you here next year.”

The audience went wild. Fatty turned to the officials and shook their hands. Then he grabbed Julie’s and, together, stepped down and made their way across the grass. Walking arm-in-arm, amidst a flurry of camera flashes, they waved the crowd farewell.

In the waning crimson twilight, the evening sun settled behind a row of tall London Plane trees that grew along the perimeter of the track, casting giant bulb-like shadows over the racecourse. In the solar embers of its passage, a steady stream of cars crept across the track from infield parking, headed for the exits at Allison Road.

Behind the grandstands, the drunken exodus of thousands of race-goers stirred a common chorus, screaming and shouting as they went. Amid pickpockets, lost children, hurling bottles, and stumblers being helped to their feet by good samaritans lest they be trampled, the mob trudged the concrete towards the gates.

Walking by the Queen Elizabeth, a young upstart in jeans, T-shirt, and a mohawk cut, gave a healthy middle finger to grandstand gawkers.

“Suck ass, you rich bastards!”

Walking with him, a pretty pink-haired girl, tongue ring evident, looked a bit scared as her boyfriend came down from a race-day high.

On a wrought iron bench over by the stables sat a portly, white-bearded man. Nattily attired in a royal blue vest, feathered derby, and cane, he contemplated their questionable intelligence.

“Ignorant inbreds. And that’s what this country’s got to look forward to for its future. Bloody drunks.”

Fatty and his entourage strolled across the member’s lawn, headed for the racecourse. Their sudden intrusion frightened a family of rabbits feeding on scraps of food from the tables. They scampered into the marquee tent where the jazz quartet, beatniks in suits, packed up their equipment.

Fatty lifted the latch on the paddock gate and held it open, while his people filed through. He pulled Johnny aside while the girls and Mitch went on.

“So pal, are ya gonna screw her or what?”

Johnny’s eyes lit up. “What? Rachel? Hell, yeah! But, I’d best suit up first. Don’t wanna catch anything.”

“Yeah, mate. Good call. I got a whisper from a bookie mate of mine she’s on the game. Don’t wanna see yer dick droppin’ off in the prime of yer life just ‘cause of the clap.”

Behind the winning post, the Sikorsky’s engines whined and blades swooshed, preparing for takeoff. The pilot glanced over his electronic flight systems, reviewing indicators and adjusting dials, while he conversed with Mascot tower over his headset, requesting a departure clearance.

A moderate breeze rustled through the bushes as Mitch walked up and opened the cargo compartment near the tail. He stowed two weighty satchels full of money, then assisted the girls into their seats. Fatty and Johnny slipped into the middle chairs which faced rearward, while Mitch hopped into the co-pilot’s seat and strapped in. The helicopter’s blades spun faster. A deep whirring drone resonated through its fuselage. Fatty observed the tranquil hues of a fading orange sky spread above the grandstands. Late afternoon had given way to the pale blush of evening. The world seemed at peace. His wander was disturbed by the chopper lifting off. The sensation of it wander in a crosswind made him feel anxious, and he hurriedly clicked his seatbelt.

Wheels retracted, the Sikorsky spun about in hover mode. Below, red and green nav lights pulsed through the windswept bushes. Moving off, it skimmed the Randwick terrain at tree top level, crossed a traffic snarl that choked Alison Road, and climbed rapidly, headed for the harbour.

TWENTY TWO [RIDE TO HABERFIELD]

ZOOMING OVER THE FLYING boat base at Rose Bay, where a romantic mode of travel hadn’t yet succumbed to modernization, the Sikorsky headed out across a harbour glistening in the sun’s afterglow. Fatty watched the privileged shoreline of the eastern suburbs fade behind the rotor tail. A thousand streetlights sparkled like woken fireflies. Sydney had whole districts filled with palatial houses that seemed to consist of nothing but balconies and plate glass, with scarcely a leaf to block the beating sun or interrupt the

view of such a magnificent body of water. To the west, the downtown area looked fairylike. This was Sydney dressed in her sequins. The high-rise office towers around Circular Quay, the harbour's brilliant beauty, the girders of the Harbour Bridge, and the sails of the Opera House all glowed, awash in flood lighting. Sparkling waters reflected a magical swirl of gleaming, brilliant colours: the reds and blues, the greens.

He tore his eyes from the beautiful vista to stare at Julie. She was entranced at her lofty view of Fort Denison whoosh underneath. He leaned over to Johnny and said, as if sharing a confidence, "Great looker that one, don't you think?"

Johnny said his piece but Fatty didn't seem to listen. His focus riveted on Julie, he undid his seatbelt, rocked his hip sideways, reached into his pocket, and said with a snicker, "Let's see what she does with a little oilin' from ol' Jimbo." He pulled out a wad of money wrapped in a rubber band, rose from his chair, and manoeuvred between the girls. "S'cuse me, Rachel," he proffered, counting out a load of hundreds.

Rachel seemed oblivious to Fatty's presence. In seventh heaven, she played footsies with Johnny. She couldn't keep her eyes off his package. She walked her long painted fingernails up his leg, while Fatty snuggled into Julie.

"Jules, here's a little somethin' for you."

He palmed off three grand. She stared at all the yellow coloured \$100s.

"Gee Jim, this is really a lot," she said, and tried to hand it back. "I really don't deserve it. I haven't done anything."

"Nonsense," he snapped, and rolled her fist over the stash. "I made out like a bandit, ta'day. I want you to have it."

She shrugged her shoulders and slid the gift into her purse. She stared longingly at him. Those blue starburst eyes of his intrigued her. Fatty lightly kissed the tenderness under her earlobe. Her skin tasted like honeysuckle. Startled, she shivered with raw excitement at his manner. Her full red lips parted to allow his tongue entry. Her eyes stared into his with such intensity that her breath caught in her throat. She kissed him deeply. Their tongues swam in each other's mouths. He touched her everywhere. She felt so warm, so hot, so exquisite. He licked away her bittersweet perfume until she writhed, ready to orgasm. Abruptly, she pulled away, and removed her straying hand from where his member bulged.

"What is it?" he asked, his eyes stoic.

She peered blankly at the water below. The familiar waterline of Kirribilli where she had been brought up loomed.

"N-nothing, Jim," she stammered, uneasy with her feelings.

She caught her breath and wriggled her posterior in the seat. She was amazed at how much wetness had gathered in her tiny lace panties in such a short time.

In the darkness of the cabin, Johnny thrust his tongue deep into Rachel's throat. Her arms dangled in submission. She threw back her head and one breast sprang free. She pressed his hand to it, and he dove down to hungrily nurse. Her breath panted in short, dainty gasps against his neck as she straddled him. Long, beautifully shaped legs fell off to either side of his lap. Rachel growled like an animal while running her fingers brutally through Johnny's hair. She licked his face and neck, and bit welts wherever bare skin availed itself.

Fatty ignored them and resumed his seduction of Julie. His hand moved up her bare leg. It disappeared under her sundress. His face wore a wide, guileless smile. She panted slightly at the brush of his breath on her cheek. The firmness of his lips slanted over hers and elevated her desire to a fervently satisfying pitch. He possessed her. Totally. Ruthlessly. His hand crept higher and searched nearer her moistened thatch. She gasped, rolled back her eyes, and lifted her leg to make it easier for him to *find* her. She tingled all over. Her heart soared with expectation. She became totally oblivious to her appealingly dishevelled long strands of hair, which stuck to the corner of her mouth. She knew only that her body thirsted for his *wandering* touch. In the dimness lit only by the moon, the outline of her bright red satin bra revealed bulging shapes that overwhelmed him. He peeled the spaghetti straps from her shoulders and let the silken fabric drop. His heart pounded when he unhooked the front latch of her bra. Her breasts tumbled free. He greeted them with a look of astonishment. There, presented before him, were the most gorgeous breasts he had ever seen. His fingers traced her swollen, blood-filled tips in a slow and practiced method. She responded, arching her back, pushing her chest towards him.

“Ohh God, Jim,” she whispered, biting her lip, “... mmm, baby, I wish you wouldn’t...”

Try as she did to fight reasoning, his caresses felt so marvellously pleasurable that she thought she was going to cry. Her heart rose into her throat, and her entire body trembled with beautiful torture. He sensed his touch was bringing her quickly to peak, and he preyed more intensely on her breasts.

“Relax, Jules,” he whispered throatily into her ear.

She obeyed.

He drooled over the beautifully shaped conical forms, which tipped provocatively upwards. Her aureolas were puffy and pink; the nipples big and protruding, tilted youthfully up at forty-five degrees. He basked in her glory and wondered if it were at all possible for the skin on her chest and neck to be any smoother than the silkiness of her arms. He assured himself the difference would be so minuscule and slight. He circled his index finger soothingly around those firm nipples. Julie, her mouth slightly ajar and lips beaded with moisture, eagerly thrust her breasts towards his mouth. She grabbed a clump of his blond hair and pulled him down. His salivary tongue traced a beaded line across her chest from one nipple to the other. She dipped her head back, inviting him to lick her neck. He did, kissing her ever so tenderly. His powerful, masculine tongue darted all about her lips, then deep inside her mouth. Suddenly she felt a tremendous gush *down there*. She bit his lip hard.

TWENTY THREE [BACK AT DEALZ]

THE HIGH PITCHED SWISHING noise of a helicopter approached, growing exponentially louder. From the darkness, the black Sikorsky appeared and glided across busy

Parramatta Road at Haberfield. It skimmed the tops of trees at extreme risk to the pilot's ticket. He had no choice. Fatty ordered him to land behind his auction house.

Descending into the parking lot at the rear of the three-story building, wheels opened from the chopper's underbelly and locked into position. It touched down in a clearing and whipped up rubbish and dirt in the lively wash. Flashing nav beacons illuminated the yard filled with auction cars. Two portly men waddled from the building as fast as their stubby legs could carry them. Stooping low, they slipped under the feathering blades, opened the back door, and helped the girls out. Julie and Rachel reconnected the straps of their sundresses in an attempt to make themselves presentable. Johnny stepped out and tucked his shirt in, while Mitch moved in a low crouch and opened the cargo hatch. He hefted the satchels at one of the men.

"Stan, put these money bags in Mr. Graden's office."

Stan staggered under their weight. "God, the boss must'a made out alright."

Mitch smirked at the yardman's naïve remark and watched him hurry off, swerving occasionally in his step. The handles stretched, and the heavy bags were quite literally dragged along the concrete.

Fatty poked his gleaming face out and stepped down onto terra-firma. Subtly, he did up his fly. The helicopter thrummed to life. He hurried over to Johnny to get out of the way.

"I think we should'a swapped 'em," he said with a soft chuckle, and took a whiff of the sex still on his fingers. "Yeah, bloody good root."

The helicopter's blades swooshed faster. The girls stood in a dangerous place. Fatty reached forward and pulled them out of the way at the very instant it lifted off. Its gear retracted, the executive job held a hover while the pilot radioed for a departure clearance. His clearance granted, he steered the Sikorsky over the tall perimeter fence lined with dangles of razor wire and disappeared into the darkness in a controlled ascent.

Two large Rottweilers bounded from the building's shadows, excited to see their master. Fatty looked unfettered as the two hundred pound monsters charged him. Taking the last twenty feet in a few bounds, the dogs pounced. One dog stood up and lay its huge paws squarely on his master's shoulders, while his shorthaired brother paced about, sniffing his legs, trying to determine where Fatty had been. Fatty patted them both and, in a demonstration of dominance, brushed aside the slobbering dog. The dog jumped back up again.

"Get down, Rufus," Fatty snapped. "Can't ya see we got guests? Where's yer bloody manners?"

He backhanded the dog and it yelped. Sitting obediently, both dogs tilted their heads to the left, then to the right with a questionable look while he foraged through his coat pocket. They knew what was in store, and they began to salivate.

"Aha," he announced, finding a morsel. He mocked the canines like children and hid the treats behind his back. He liked to tease. "What, boys?" he said with a grin. "Where did da wittle tweekies go?"

The dogs jumped up and down, then sat back down and resumed their cute game, tilting their heads from side-to-side. Fatty tired of the amusement and showed the snacks, caramel doggy bone treats.

"There ya go, boys."

The dogs *inhaled* them ravenously, then sniffed his hand in desperation, hoping for more.

“Nope, sorry. Got no more for you lads.”

He turned to the girls, who had already backed considerably away in stark terror. With an impish grin, he knelt down and talked into their ears.

“Boys, go say hello to the nice pretty girls over there.”

The dogs lumbered over, their salivating tongues flapping, and sniffed around Rachel’s legs. She shrieked in panic as they jumped up and down excitedly.

“Help me, Jim.”

Rufus gave up and cantered over to Julie, who had tried to scramble up onto the hood of an auction vehicle, but was unsuccessful. She stood there and screamed bloody murder while the attack dog sniffed up her dress, burying his nose into her private places. The smell of her sex aroused him, and he got an erection. Finally, she managed to get up on the car. One of her high-heeled shoes accidentally fell to the concrete. The dog sniffed the expensive Italian leather. He lay over it and gnawed it like a bone.

“Hey Jim, that bloody dog of yours just destroyed my best pair of Jimmy Choos. Hell, I paid five hundred bucks for those pumps!”

Fatty walked over, grabbed both dogs by their studded collars and pulled them off. The dogs let out yelps and struggled to fight free from his powerful grip. Fatty stood his ground and laughed.

“Come on, these blokes are just pups. The boys fed ‘em an hour ago.”

He pointed the dogs at the building and released them. The Rotts raced for the door, stopping every so often to wrestle each other or to lift a leg against one of the cars. Fatty and his men followed in their tracks, chuckling aloud.

Julie and Rachel were intent to stay right where they were. When the dogs were safely locked up, or shot, they would be a lot happier. But, before they ever moved a muscle in this lifetime, the dogs needed to go and not be out in the yard without restraint. Soon, being alone bothered them. Any chance of help was fast disappearing towards the building. They determined this wasn’t a time for principles, gulped down their fear, and chased after Fatty, who was about to disappear inside the building.

“Jim, hold up,” Julie hollered, running barefoot.

Fatty turned. He was impressed with the urgency and speed both girls managed without shoes. Rachel darted past and inside after Johnny. Julie trailed, but only marginally. Fatty reached out, wrapped his arm around her trim waist, and escorted her inside.

TWENTY FOUR [KICKING BACK]

IN HIS UPSTAIRS OFFICE, Fatty relaxed behind his desk. Shoes up, fingers interlocked behind his head, he sank into his high-back chair. The girls sat across the room on the

Chesterfield sofa, nattering about nothing interesting that he could make out, while Johnny fixed martinis at the bar. He stared blankly up at the ceiling. His feet ached and he fought off a headache. It had been a tough *fight-for-every-yard* kind of day. He just wanted to tune out everything. Over the years, he had taken many a nap in this chair after auctions. Buttoned and padded, it's comfort felt damned great. His eyes rolled back into their sockets as a soft melody drifted from speakers in the ceiling. It was 'ol Blue Eyes singing *All the Way* from the '60s movie, "Jokers Wild." A warm, tingly feeling enveloped him, and his face gleamed with joy at the thought of all the money he had won. However, his winnings paled in comparison to the mounting debt that he swam in. For now, he didn't want to think about the negative. He opened his eyes and watched Johnny hand off drinks to the girls. The anticipation of tasting a stiff vodka swimming in olive juice stirred his salivary glands. Johnny approached with the glass. He reached for the shiny, icy mix. Stirring the liquid with skewered olives, he swallowed. The chill crept down his throat. It felt magnificent.

"Mmm, dirty and excellent! Always knew how to make a martini, didn't ya, mate." He noticed the satchels against the back wall. "Hey, pick those bags up and set 'em inside the safe, there's a good fellow. While you're doin' that, I'll call for a car. Where'd you say we're goin' to, tonight?"

Johnny sculled his drink. "The Babylon Club, Jim. It's the latest hotspot." He laid his empty on the bar and lifted the bags. "Gawd," he said, straining under the weight. "Whad'ya got in 'em? Rocks?"

Fatty watched him disappear through a private door.

Johnny staggered up the hallway. He stopped in front of a bookcase filled with old hardbound classics. Two well-formed arcs from the wall unit were etched into the wood floor. Johnny reached behind a novel and pulled a lever. A mechanism triggered and the bookcase pivoted outward, exposing a secret vault.

Inside, fluorescent tubing flickered on. The amber glow illuminated everything including a security camera. It watched him enter, its red light blinking as it taped. On one wall, ornately framed artwork of some 19th century French masters and two authentic Faberge eggs adorned metal shelves. Worth millions, the collection represented a dozen break-ins Fatty's boys had pulled over the years. Too hot for a Christy's auction, they couldn't surface. Not yet. On another wall, velvet-lined glass cabinets, stacked one above the other, displayed an assortment of polished military nine-millimetres, six-shooters, and rare pistols. Of historical significance, some of the guns dated as far back as the Civil and Boar Wars, and the American Wild West. One belonged to Bat Masterson, a pearl handled job. The four cases at one time belonged to Hanging Joe, the heartless magistrate who had tried to throw Fatty in the slammer. Their theft was righteous payback, its own sweet reward. Against the back wall stood a filing cabinet with drawers labelled "Evidence." They held dirt on people that Fatty had accumulated over the years. To the side were two metal boxes. Johnny knelt down, removed the locks, and popped open the lids. They were nearly empty, containing a paltry eighty thousand. The Graden household ran a high cash burn rate. The contents of the satchels quickly over-filled the boxes. He pushed down on the lids, which barely shut. Securing the padlocks, he took the keys and exited the room. The door glided shut, sealing the vault.

Walking into the office, he handed Fatty the keys.

“Well boys and girls,” Fatty said, and rose from his chair, “time ta hit the bricks.” He sculled his drink and escorted his troop out of the room. The monitoring system automatically dimmed the lighting. In the absence of human life, the fish tank resonated with a gentle, soothing gurgle. It illuminated the room in a wavy peacefulness.



It was a little after eight o'clock as the rented black Lincoln stretch motored towards the city. Swerving in and out of the traffic along Parramatta Road, the roadway about Leichhardt was dusted with a light wash, evidence of a light shower. In the distance, the skyscrapers of the city, flood-lit and ominous, towered over their surroundings like termite mounds in a desert.

Cozied in the back seat, Fatty draped his arm around Julie. Clearing his throat, he reached into the refrigerator for a bottle of Moët. Powering down his window, he aimed the bottle at a passing billboard. The ad showed a former prime minister promoting some benign charity event.

“Hey Frazer, yer bastard,” he snapped, digging his thumbs under the cork. “Run old Gough out of office, will ya! Here, eat on this, ya lazy prick.”

The champagne cork exploded and sailed across the empty lanes. It handily missed the sign, but hit a car instead. Ignoring some dickhead in the old Monaro give him the finger, he lapped the sudden shot of effervescence, and swigged the bottle.

“Poop, I missed. Always hated that bastard.”

The limo crossed the Anzac Bridge near downtown. The view of the water under the suspension span revealed a team of tugboats pulling a huge orange container ship away from the docks. A deep howl from its horn cut the cool night air. Fatty stuck his head out the window, leaned into the wind, and felt the blast. He now understood why dogs were so fond of this sensation. Suddenly, the aftershock of his big win hit home like a pistol-fired shot to his temple. He saw the bullet spin towards the sweet spot, right between his eyes.

“Not bad, not bad at all.” He broke into laughter.

Johnny and Rachel, from the side bench, looked on, puzzled at his fanatical, almost deranged outburst. Fatty ignored them. A thought about Marilyn danced in his mind. He wished she was there in the car to celebrate his win. She was the only woman he'd ever trusted: the only woman that wouldn't lie to him, for power or for money. She was the only female he could truly consider a good friend and confidant, one who would never willingly hurt him. Intuitively, he knew it. That was the one truth he felt in his guts and bones. She didn't have it in her.

Marilynn, right now, was up in Brisbane, indulging herself in spa treatments at an exclusive salon. She adored being pampered. It gave her more pleasure than anything else. That explained why she had married Rod Vance. He was wealthy and connected, and gave her everything she wanted, everything except companionship. He had his little

stash of floosies on the side. She knew about his infidelities but didn't make it an issue. That trump card might come in handy later.

A thought about Jim Graden crept into her mind. She felt a connection with him, something different than she'd ever experienced with any man. Sitting under a hairdryer, her manicurist finished the last stroke of pink polish. She daintily stretched her fingers, examined her nails, and approved. There was something about the way Jim Graden touched her that conveyed his appreciation of her as a person. She cared for him. Deeply. He was the man she wanted, needed.

Julie looked unsettled about something. "Jim, I really need to go home and change." She twiddled her curls and lamented the loss of her Jimmy Choo pumps. Occasionally she dragged strands of hair past her nose. "Maybe wash my hair while I'm there. Phew. Hate smokers." She looked at him deeply. "Won't take long. Hey, I've got something for Rachel to wear, so we only need to make one stop. Point Piper, okay?"

"Not a problem Julie," Fatty said, and caught the attention of his driver in the rear view mirror. "Hey Junior, Julie here needs you to divert. She'll tell you her address."

A strapping bull of a man, Junior tipped his cap in the rear view mirror. The Maori's tribal name was too long and much too complicated for Fatty to pronounce, so Junior it was. Julie crawled to the driver's compartment to give directions. Unable to resist such a gorgeously trim target, Fatty slapped her on the arse. She turned and glared at him, lips thinned, eyes narrowed in play, then wiggled her posterior. She enjoyed being a tease, and Fatty expectedly got a rise in his pants.

The expensive designer shops of Double Bay fell behind the Lincoln as it cruised up New South Head Road. It traced the sweep of moonlit bays and yacht-cluttered coves. Driving past the sandstone walls of Cranbrook, an elitist school, it slowed and turned onto Wolseley Road. In the distance, the lights of the city and Opera House sparkled on a still harbour. The limo continued down the narrow street towards the outermost tip of Point Piper. Trophy homes poked from the trees. Big gates opened to reveal broad drives, Grecian urns on ornate plinths, and garages housing fleets of cars. The milieu stunningly demonstrated no correlation between money and taste.

At the end of the road, the limo turned into a driveway. A sign announced, "Point Piper Manors." The cobblestone drive fell steeply to the water. Long rows of malibu lights illuminated the windy lane. The landscaping resembled a tropical rainforest, full of flowering orchids, silky rubber trees, and palms. At the bottom of the hill, a five-story building with tiered levels was nestled against the harbour.

The limo pulled up under the foyer's concrete overhang. Junior engaged park, jumped out, and opened the door for Johnny and the girls. Fatty stepped out and hesitated, taking in the magnificence of the harbour. A half-mile off, he saw Fort Denison, a fortress island that had held convicts of the early settlement. Today, it served as a lighthouse and maritime station to measure tides. He looked around and wondered where everyone had gone. Johnny was already inside waving at him. Fatty told Mitch to stay in the car, and pushed through the revolving doors.

The foyer was ornate, appointed with a decidedly Napoleon-ionic feel and full of incredibly expensive antiques. French chairs and end tables graced the shiny marble floor, and framed gold mirrors adorned faux-finished walls. Fatty grew annoyed by the

squeaking of his leather soles as he crossed the polished surface, and tiptoed into an elevator where his party waited. After a short trip to the top, the door opened into a private foyer. Julie foraged through her purse for the key. Servicing one giant apartment per floor, the design of the chic foyer had European royalty in mind. The space contained antique Adams chairs, a tall occasional marble table with gold frills, a Persian rug once belonging to a very wealthy Sheik—one of Julie’s earlier flings, and 14-carat gold leaf papering on the walls. A thick gold-rimmed mirror, more gauche than attractive, was mounted in the centre. Julie stopped to check her hair in it, then walked up to the hand-carved double doors, swiped the card, and pushed them wide.

TWENTY FIVE [A LAVISH LIFESTYLE

IT WAS PALATIAL ELEGANCE, worthy of blessing the front cover of *Australian House and Garden*. Julie led the way, down a few steps into the sunken living room, by a crescent-shaped sectional made of peach leather, and headed for the bar. Fatty hung back and admired the layout. Flickering flames from a pit fireplace augmented the ambiance of mood lighting inset into the ceiling. A multi level architectural layout, the dining area sat on an elevated plateau to the far right. A wall of glass admitted an incredible view of the harbour to diners. A full compliment of silver service was laid out on the table’s polished cherry wood while, in the centre, a crystal vase of exotic fresh flowers radiated a fragrant, tropical aroma. To the left of the room, a huge entertainment centre built of mahogany and chrome occupied some of the wall. It contained a big screen TV and the latest electronics. Beyond that, Julie and the others stood at a fully stocked bar built of back-lit glass bricks.

“Nice digs, Jules,” Fatty declared, when he finally found his voice. “Must’ve cost a bloody fortune.”

“Why don’t you come join me for a drink?” she said from the bar, while Johnny walked Rachel to the bedrooms to go change. “I’ve got scotch, whatever you’d like.”

A patio door near the dining table caught his eye. “Yeah, I’ll have a Glenfiddich, neat, if you’ve got it. With a few cubes.”

A stiff harbour breeze whooshed in through the doorway, kicking up the lace curtains.

Out on the massive tiled patio, Fatty breathed deeply. He could taste the strong tang of saltwater fill his lungs. He leaned against the railing and gazed out at the sparkling glimmer of the harbour. A few bays over, the illuminated shells of the Opera House, surreal and white, floated like sails on the water. Just beyond, spots of bright light peppered the downtown office towers. To his right, through the inky blackness, lay the Heads and the open sea. Up the shoreline, a passenger ferry departed the wharf and steamed past Redleaf Pool, cutting a path between the moored boats. On board, tourists snapped photos. Fatty’s brow furrowed uneasily.

“Bloody Japs!”

Julie walked up from behind with drinks. “What is it, baby?”

Fatty couldn’t take his eyes off the crowd, flashing cameras at him. He released his bitter and indignant emotion, cooled, and took for his glass.

“Oh, nuthin’. Just had a thought about dear ol’ dad, that’s all.”

A racist, he remembered his father, a decorated war vet who had defended the New Guinea shores against the little yellow horde. He recalled what the old man would say every Anzac Day, “*Only good Jap’s a dead one.*”

“Is he still alive?”

“Nah, the ol’ bludga’s dead,” he said, and guzzled down his scotch. He watched the ferry disappear around the point. “Guess the old bugger was right. And here we are fifty years later. Still can’t understand why those wankers in Canberra turned a blind eye on our diggers who gave their lives for King and country and opened the floodgates for that lot. All for bloody tourism and chasin’ a damned quid. Shits me to tears.”

She heard his mumbling but dared not ask him to repeat it.

Fatty turned to Julie. He stared at her trim figure in the glow of the patio lights. She felt his eyes *massage* her every extremity. She blushed, sensing her energy and passion grow with every shortened breath. Her lips swelled, and she tried to fight off a raging river of desire that flowed through her body.

“What’s on your mind, then?” she challenged, and crossed her arms defensively over her chest.

He caressed her cheek with the back of his hand. His eyes bore into her icy blue ones, an interesting shade. Hers were like two cool grey-blue glaciers, almost chipped ice. Captivating. Mystifying. He caressed the back of her neck.

“You look soo beautiful.”

She heard his well-oiled song and shed a tear. Sex had been a hot and heavy experience in the helicopter. Now he owed her love. She looked innocent and sullen as he pulled her in. Their lips rubbed with firm and fiery purpose. Breath rushed out in surprise and she leaned in with half-lidded eyes. Their tongues swam together in a common oral cavity. He reached behind and grabbed the swell of her taut, well-arched bottom. Rumped, panting and flushed, she pulled away and looked up at his face. There was *definitely* something different about this man. Her eyes began to tear and her legs wobbled. His tongue tasted her cheeks. Trails of liquid-fire were left on her skin. She snaked her fingers up the lapels of his suit jacket and kissed him passionately with the widest eyes. His lips slid down her neck, nipping and sucking at skin, concentrating where her neck and shoulder met. He had found her soft spot.

“Mmm,” she whispered, “don’t stop.”

He pulled her head back by the hair, pressed her against his hardness, and gently bit her neck. His touch made her gasp, and he reached for her bra.

“No, Jim,” she roused, and slapped his hand. “Let’s not go there! Otherwise, we won’t leave. Or, have you forgotten there’s company?” She adjusted her dress, and with a flounce of her hair, walked back inside.

Johnny sat alone at the bar, sipping on a healthy nip of Courvoisier.

“See you’ve found my good stuff,” Julie said as she glided by, headed for the bedrooms.

He raised his glass in toast and reached for the remote. Swivelling around, he channel-surfed the television, pausing briefly at a cricket test match.

“Bloody Pakistanis! Couldn’t hold a cricket bat if their life depended on it.” He continued through the stations. He stopped at an interesting news story. He sat back and listened to the announcer recap Rod Holton’s suicide, as Fatty walked up.

“Poor sod.”

“Yeah Johnny, ol’ Holtzie was a great mate,” Fatty said, and swigged his scotch. “Why he didn’t go and chuck a toaster in the bath is beyond me. Would’a saved his family a lot of anguish.”

Johnny saw the funny side. “Hell, if I wanted *out*, my best way would be to prick my skin a coupla hundred times with a pin and go swimmin’ in shark infested waters wearin’ a turtle costume.”

Fatty laughed. “Too lame, son. My choice of suicide would be to eat a bomb then run into a supermarket and blow me’self up. I can hear the page now: ‘Cleanup on isle five.’”

Laughter was Fatty’s way of hiding hurt. Earlier, from the racetrack, he had called Holton’s wife and offered her his condolences and any support she might need. She told him Rod hadn’t made any threats. His family had no inkling that he had considered suicide. But, in looking back, subtle clues were overlooked.

Their mirth died.

Fatty and Holton were, in many respects, very much alike. Holton was the last of the old-style dealers. Both loved fast cars, were very showy in public, spent *huge* sums on advertising, chased after tall, leggy blondes, and gambled like the stuff grew on trees. But, Holton was more than those mere inclinations suggested. He had a cheerful nature and possessed a great ability to win friends over quickly. He had come up through the ranks under the wing of Sir Fred, probably the greatest dealer of them all. A self made man, his educational background was practically zilch. But, his *secret* to success was never conferred with a stupid degree anyway. It was about getting on with everyone. He did that very well. Representing an era of flamboyant car salesmen, he was one of the first dealers to regularly advertise on Sydney television and appear in his own commercials. In the late ‘70s, he boasted a budget of a cool half-million a year for television alone, *big* money in those days. As a prominent supporter of motor sport, Holton was both a competitor and team backer. A dab hand at fast driving, he once set a lap record around Bathurst’s treacherous Mount Panorama circuit in his red E-type Jag. But, he was swimming in debt. Mightily. Fatty knew it. Holton was in financial distress, and had been under pressure for some time after his first business failed. After the stock market crashed, his Mercedes, GM, and Jaguar franchises all suffered.

Fatty seemed glum. “And I’d only been drinkin’ with the bastard a few nights ago at the Wentworth. He was wearin’ his problems okay then. Strewth! And the bloody Gap of all places. Always was a charming, affable bloke. Always polite and civilised, too. I’ll miss the prick.”

It was all too much. All he could find in his glass were ice cubes laced with scotch. No booze. He sucked and chewed them, then looked about the apartment. “Not a bad pad, aye,” he quipped, forcing a smile. “So, what’d the chick do? Kill someone?”

Johnny hesitated. “Well...”

Fatty's mouth fell. "You're kiddin'?"

"She's a widower from what Rachel tells me, Jim. He was a car dealer. Died right over there." He pointed to the head chair at the dining table. "Somethin' in his food apparently didn't agree with him. He carked it. An allergy to shellfish or somethin' like that is what she said." He got up off the stool and modelled a long sleeved black shirt and matching pants. "These were his. Julie gave 'em to me. Pretty snazzy, aye?"

In one of the bedrooms, Rachel and Julie looked over an array of clothing laid out on the bed. Julie became excited.

"He's got me creamed and ready. I'm about to burst."

"Well honey, I can pop that little cork for you right now." Rachel untied her dressing gown and knelt at Julie's feet. Tongue-delicate, she licked and Julie moaned.

"Ohh God, that's good."

She relished the feel of Rachel's two long fingers rubbing the pleasurable knot of flesh. Finally they slipped inside and masturbated her. A gush of fluid ran down her thighs.

"Just what I needed, Rach."

Julie and Rachel sauntered over to the men at the bar, hips and tight butts swinging seductively. Both were more than ready for attention, and demanded it. Like well-fed cats, feathers hanging from their mouths, they smiled a private smug look between them. Both were well primed and ready for the feast.

"Jim, you wike?" Julie rubbed up on him, then his knee. In a low cut, sexy leather outfit with matching open toed stilettos, her Cat Woman look was definitely a prick-teaser, the kind of dress that showcased her slender form and cleavage.

Fatty's mouth fell open. "What? Jim, you like?" He felt a rise in his pants. "Strewth, that goes without saying, gorgeous!"

She looked so bloody hot! But then, to him, she would have looked stunning in a paper bag.

Pirouetting for show in a tight-fitting spandex leotard outfit and black heels, Rachel's still swollen nipples from her love play with Julie showed through the sheer brocade top. Rubbing her hands sensually over her hips and thighs, acting like Monroe, she liked nothing better than to steal her girlfriend's thunder. Both had always been competitive and enjoyed the hunt. She glided over to Johnny. Her red-painted lips curved in a seductive, almost sly smile. Her long slender fingers crept up his chest, feeling the heat of the man.

"Mmm, baby you're hot," she huskily said, and encircled her hands behind his neck.

Johnny's hands went for her breasts and started feeling her up.

"Hey Johnny darling," Julie said, "why don't you go get your suit tails from the back bedroom. We're all ready to leave."

Julie sent him off so she could win the game. Slipping in behind the bar, she opened a big drawer and chose a studded purse from the bountiful selection.

"Strange place for accessories, don't you think?" Fatty inquired.

Julie looked at him with that flummoxed, dead-end expression.

"I'm running short of space around here. Want to buy me something bigger?"

Fatty scoffed. "Not bloody likely."

She sauntered around and threw her arms about him with the saddest eyes.

“I know what you’re up to, Moss,” he said. He had that wide guileless smile on his face, the one he loathed to suppress right before he fleeced his mark. He loved her confidence and the way her blue eyes tried to mock him but couldn’t quite do it.

TWENTY SIX [AT THE BABYLON]

FATTY’S LIMOUSINE TURNED INTO Riley Street, south of downtown. A drizzle dampened the blue light district of Oxford Street, making roadways slick. Motoring down the quiet thoroughfare, the stretch drew to a halt behind a lineup of cars. A few blocks ahead, couples stepped from luxury rides, ‘dressed-to-the-nines.’ Strolling up the red carpet under a pink canvass awning, camera flashes exploded in their faces, and reporters stalked those worthy like paparazzi.

Fatty eyed the media frenzy on the sidewalk with a cool curiosity. On the side bench, Johnny cozied up to Rachel, sucking on one of Fatty’s thick Cohiba cigars like a Mafia Don.

“Well Jim, the joint looks great, don’t ya think?”

Fatty watched Julie do a last minute touch-up in the mirror. “Pigs arse,” he said, and grabbed her hand. “You look stunning, babe.”

She smiled and put her brush away.

The limo pulled to the carpet. A red-uniformed valet helped the girls out, and they walked up the carpet with Johnny as chaperone. A master of entrances, Fatty was last to step out. He put on a tough look for the cameras as reporters rushed him. He held up his hands to calm their frenzy, making small talk with those he recognised.

At the end of the carpet, a huge bouncer sat on a barstool. In a black leather bomber’s jacket and bow tie, his bulk purposely blocked access to the nightclub’s door. The gorilla recognised Johnny and Mitch, and began small talk with them. From out of nowhere, somebody laid the hardest slap on his back.

“Ronnie Sigmund, y’ol bastard!”

With arms the size of a human leg and a hellacious snarl, the veteran bruiser had enough facial hair to pass for a Hell’s Angel biker. He turned to identify the dead man.

“Jim!” he cried in astonishment, and shook his hand.

Fatty smirked. “So, you geezers busy tonight?”

Ronnie pointed to a roped off area where a hundred wannabes prayed for entry.

“Joint’s packed, Jim. But I’ll get Tiffany to seat your party immediately. You remember her from the Highrollers Club, don’t ya?”

Fatty pictured the leggy blonde. “Bloody oath!” He ruminated the sexual romps he had had with her in the toilets.

Something crackled over Ronnie’s earpiece. He lost his smile.

“You’ll have to excuse me, Jim. I got a few troublemakers inside harassin’ one of the bar maids.”

Minutes later, a very irate Ronnie burst through the door, holding two men by the scruff. He tossed them to the curb. Tiffany, in a sheer black dress, appeared.

“G’day, Mr. Graden,” she said, sizing him up with a grin. He hadn’t changed. “C’mon inside. I’ve got you handled.”

Inside, smoke lay thick over the loud, restless crowd. The thousands there were crammed like sardines into the inadequately lit and claustrophobic space. Its eclectic décor was reminiscent of something from the dingy back streets of the French Quarter. Spotlit French Impressionist nudes imparted a graceful, lived-in elegance. The walls were an exposed red brick, accented by plush burgundy curtains tied back with gold rope, assuring a seedy mood. Under the paintings, half-moon booths offered rest for the weary and romantic.

Wading through the revellers, Fatty noticed a private entrance across the way. Bordered by dark curtains, it was guarded by two huge brutes. Above the entrance, a pink neon sign announced, “Cabaret Room.” Fatty and his team followed Tiffany, who gave a curt nod to one of the bouncers. He pushed aside waiting patrons to make a hole, and they passed through like dignitaries.

On the other side, it was quite a different world. Measurably quieter and a quarter the size of the previous area, it appealed to an odd sense of adventure: a marriage of old burlesque meets crazy exotic Miami. The rhythm of bongo music mixed with the sounds of breaking ocean waves.

Fatty studied the mix-and-match décor. To his left, cherry wood-panelled walls flanked high-back booths of suede. On the right, flaming torches adorned a Tiki-style bar with a thatched roof. Fake palms, neon signs, plastic Toucans dangling from swings, and tall wooden statues of Polynesian Gods with their tongues poked exuded a sense of being stranded with headhunters on a Tahitian island. About the bar, fashionably attired people gossiped and sipped bizarre concoctions from balloon glasses.

Tiffany approached with menus. “Got your table ready, Mr. Graden. Sorry for the inconvenience. Right this way.”

Directly ahead, closed curtains, thick and black, dressed a crescent-shaped theatrical stage. Every few seconds, black and white stills of Gatsby-era women modelling beachwear flashed on the shroud. Surrounding the stage, spotted throughout tables draped in linen, the well-dressed spun yarns in jollity. It looked comfortably busy.

Tiffany led the group to a secluded booth, off to the side of the stage. Johnny and the girls slipped in, and Fatty took up the edge of the oval shaped seat. Mitch stood off to the side, *staring down* the crowd for signs of trouble.

“So, Mr. Graden, scotch?”

Fatty sat back, unbuttoned his jacket, and mentally peeled off her clothes. He would love another chance to toss a leg over this one. In her early twenties, she bore an uncanny resemblance to a stunning Swedish Goddess. With long blonde hair matted in a ponytail, her black dinner dress had a low cut front that more than adequately displayed her perky

breasts. And, her bubbly demeanour matched; always a smile, always chirper, never a harsh word said about anyone.

“Not tonight, Tiff. I want your best champagne.”

“Right away, Mr. Graden.”

She slipped behind the curtain, and Fatty peered about.

“Interesting joint,” he muttered, twiddling his thumbs on the table. Suddenly, his eyes narrowed to fiery slits, and his mood quickly soured. “Oh, piss off!”

In front of the stage, a nerdy man in a dark pinstripe sat with three beautiful women. Balding and in his fifties, Rowan Braddock was a long time arch nemesis of Fatty’s. There was definitely no brotherly love between them. Around town, Rowan had a reputation as a bit of a dobber, or tattletale. An overly thin face and not much meat on his bones, he looked more a rat than a human being. In Fatty’s opinion, he had the spine of one, too.

A tall authoritative man with clipped grey hair walked up to Rowan’s table, whispered a few words in his ear, and then left. Fatty’s blood pressure rose when he identified the visitor.

“Jesus, that’s Harry Edwards. How does the little prick know that bent copper?”

Fatty motioned to his bodyguard. “Mitch, get that piece of shit Rowan ‘outta here!”

Mitch stared at the area where Fatty indicated, bewildered. He couldn’t see who the boss was on about. Fatty stared straight at the lug with such wrath in his eyes that it blurred into madness.

“You’re shittin’ me! What? You don’t see that little bastard over there?” he said, and pointed again. “Hell, even ‘Blind Freddy’ can see him. Crikey, he’s right over there, Mitch, ya louse.”

Still nothing.

“C’mon Mitch, the bloke’s got a noggin on him like a sucked mango. See him talkin’ to those birds? Over there. Hell, I’ve seen a better head in a piss trough. Now, get on yer bike, Mitch, and get ridd’a that bastard.”

Mitch finally spotted Rowan and walked off.

Fatty slouched gloomily over the table and watched Mitch talk with the bouncers in back of the room.

“Sick and tired of being this frickin’ town’s banker,” he garbled. He cringed at the thought that his \$200,000 loan-shark contract with the skinny freak was already a week past due.

“The weak prick. Hell, a good root and a fart would kill him.”

Fatty considered himself a pretty fair and accommodating human being. After all, he had a reputation for helping those down on their luck regardless of who they were. He was only charging Rowan a measly 200% on the month-old loan. Through Johnny, he’d given the little prick a second chance to pay up; four o’clock tomorrow. After that, no more extensions. Either Rowan turned up at Haberfield with the full amount, plus interest, or it would be lights out for the little double-crosser.

Rowan chatted with one of the women, a slim, tall brunette in a red satin dress. He pushed another glass of wine her way, hoping to get lucky tonight. He felt a harsh fingertap on his shoulder and turned.

“Eve’nin, Mr. Braddock,” Mitch said, his huge mitts cupped in front. “Seems there’s a problem. You’re gonna have ta leave the premises.”

“Who the hell do you think you’re talking to!” Rowan demanded, pointing his finger angrily.

Mitch grabbed his waving digit and twisted it. Rowan screamed and collapsed to his knees. The bouncers, amused observers more than anything, watched the ‘obvious misunderstanding.’

Rowan’s female companions quietly bolted the scene. Mitch grabbed hold of Rowan’s head and twisted it around.

“See him over there. He don’t want you around tonight.”

Stark terror etched Rowan’s face. A handful of tables away, Fatty calmly waved his hand, a Bolivar torpedo cigar nestled between his fingers. Rowan gulped. Mitch grabbed him by the hand.

“Come on, mate. Time to bugger off.”

Rowan knew Fatty had the goods on him. Once, they were partners in a handful of brothels, privately owned terraces in Darlinghurst and Paddington. An elaborate network of hidden cameras snapped some embarrassing moments in some of the bedrooms. Fatty used the footage to get himself out of a pickle every now and then. “Insurance” he called it. Both men did quite well indeed. Until late one night, four years ago. Rowan was a lousy gambler and had gotten his nuts into a jam. He owed some Greek heavies from Melbourne a huge sum. The lowlifes in Rowan’s employ helped him burn down two of the establishments for the insurance money. Arson squad investigators came knocking on Fatty’s door. They had found the petrol canisters that were used in the crime, half-hidden rather stupidly under a mattress in a dumpster behind one of the businesses. What was damning was the bar codes on the jerry cans. They were traced back to a credit card belonging to Fatty. A good bit of detective work on the part of the coppers, he thought. Fatty used a video tape of a prominent criminal magistrate cavorting with an underage girl at one of the brothels and nothing more was said.

Mitch dragged Rowan to his feet, barely allowing the little whiner time enough to gather his cigars and gold Dunhill lighter from the table, then *walked* him to the door.

Watching from afar, Fatty chewed on his cigar. He summoned Tiffany over and pulled a slip of crisp hundred dollar bills from his pocket.

“Tiff, four hundred should cover Mr. Braddock’s bill,” he said, as smoke drifted over his eyes. “And a hundred for you.”

Tiffany stared at the money. “Gee, that’s more than enough. Thanks, Mr. Graden.” She blew him a kiss.

Puffing calmly on his cigar, he felt a lot better, like a terrific load had been removed. He turned to Julie, seen chatting with Rachel about someone over at the bar she knew from the racetrack.

“Jules, let’s dance.”

Before she could react, he pulled her from the booth and whisked her through the curtains.

TWENTY SEVEN [A PRIVATE INTERLUDE]

A WARM BREEZE BLEW through the open balcony door and into Julie's apartment. Across the living room at the bar, a crystal clock beside the liquor bottles on the shelves struck three. Soft romantic sounds from Barry White played over the speakers. The deep baritone voice floated up the hallway and into the master bedroom.

In the dimness, the sliding glass of the bay alcove window was ajar. A fresh, salty scent rode in on a scattershot of moonbeams that diagonally strafed the walls and carpet. At the centre of the room stood a canopied king size bed. The sensual aroma of burning incense wafted from a bedside table.

Cream satiny covers tangled messily about Julie's tight, bronzed body. Naked and upright on her partner, only her upper torso was visible. The top sheet wrapped tautly about her waist, which exposed the curvature of her perky, youthful breasts.

Pinned underneath, Fatty lay on his back, his face gleaming with absolute delight. He reached up and ran his rough-skinned palms over her large round globes, feeling a fine dusting of soft, peach-like fuzz around her pink aureolas.

"Yer tits are bloody excellent," he said, as she raised her body up in response to his touch. "Oh yeah, baby. You're perfect. A Goddess given form."

Julie laughed. "You say the nicest things to a woman. My tongue is double jointed, as you're about to find out, big boy."

Her hands moved to his rigid penis. One hand gently cupped the testicles, while the other stroked his manhood. Placing her mouth over it, she licked from the base all the way up the shaft. She sat up, grabbed his erection, and brushed it past her anus. More for the pleasures of sex than love, her animalistic actions were self-serving as she tossed aside all her lady-like upbringing and hungrily fed him inside her. She slid down onto him, and her eyes rolled back in their sockets. A look of immense satisfaction shot across her face. She had wanted it all day. Now she had him. All of him.

She concentrated on her thrusting, pushing up and down on him in an unyieldingly hot rhythm. Her cry pierced the early morning still, a loud and gratifying whine that told the world of her glorious orgasm. She dug her fingers hungrily into his chest.

"God damn it, Jim, I want more of you," she demanded with gritted teeth, and beat his upper body with clenched fists. "Much more. Do you hear me!"

She collapsed down on top of him. The intensity of her orgasm still throbbed inside her body and rippled through her vagina in small, delicious tugs. She lay there, back arched like a bow; her rounded butt merged into perfectly smooth legs. Long, fine hair flopped

messily over piercing eyes, she purred closely against his mouth and lips like a leopard over its kill, feeling his cold, rough hands move up and down her hot, sweat-coated back. This was her gypsy night!

Fatty pinned her arms by her side and tossed her over. Straddling her thighs, he gazed down on his sweaty prize and admired the swell of her youthful breasts. He concentrated on one breast and took all of it inside his steamy mouth. Rubbing his tongue around its base, he released it then proceeded to lick up her body, kissing her throat and chin delicately. She bucked back her head to expose more of her skin, as though she were a willing kill to a vampire. He delighted himself in the sensations that her delicious salty flesh provided.

Dragging his tongue down her chest and stomach, a mass of nerve endings reacted intensely to his stimulation. The further he moved down her body, the louder her moans grew. He lapped at her belly button, then down to her hips. Moving to her taut, inner thighs, the glistening trail of saliva he left led to her womanhood. He drew his nose in closer and tasted her exotic juices. Delicious, like cream. Grabbing her ankles, he raised them up, and spread her wide. Her firm buttocks and mohawk blossom exposed to him, he could not help but stare at the beauty of her coral pinkness.

“AAHHHH!” she sobbed, shaking her head hysterically from side to side. She grabbed the satin sheets with clenched fists and gushed her sweet juices.

She gave him a feral smile as though something caged, and wrapped her legs tightly around his waist. She released a barrage of small whimpers, rocking slowly while he moved in and out of her with careful, shallow thrusts. Her moans grew more intense, and her fingertips danced down the valley of his spine. She gripped his butt firmly with both hands and felt the firm hot muscles of his back flex. She breathed harder, more raspy, as he quickened his pace. Impatient, he drove her like a jackhammer, slamming into her sweet center with everything he had. She responded, screaming out his name. Clawing at his shoulders first and then his chest, she begged him not to stop. He continued his ruthless onslaught. They felt as one, and the bedroom was filled with their heady smell and excited breathing. Fingers clasping his to accentuate her sensations, she could not stave off the inevitable.

They reached the pinnacle together.

Julie kissed him long and deep, and tears rolled down her cheeks. She wanted to spend an eternity just mingling her tongue with his. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she sighed. Right at this very moment, she could think of no other place she wanted to be other than where she was right now. With him.

Restless and vulnerable, she lifted her head and gazed dubiously into his eyes. Her heartbeat dropped to manageable levels and she memorised his facial features. She drew crop circles in his chest hair with her long fingernails, whirled a collection around one, then gently tugged.

“Do you think it’ll always be like this, Jim?”

He looked up at her from beneath hooded lids and traced her bottom lip with the pad of his thumb. He could feel her legs intertwine with his under the satin sheet.

“Mmm. Think so, Jules.”

Exhausted, their sweaty bodies clung tightly in spoon-fashion. His arm nestled under her breasts, she couldn't remember the last time she'd felt so safe. His eyes grew heavy, and he finally rolled over onto his side. Already fast asleep, he began to toss about. She watched a worried expression engulf his face. It was as if he was in some sort of horrible torment. His eyelids flickered, and his eyeballs moved about incoherently under the skin, while buckets of sweat poured from his brow.

She thought he was encountering something so terrible and so sinister that it controlled his thoughts. She guessed it was maybe a time in his past so dreadful that it defied imagination. She wondered what it was, guessed at it for a few seconds, then blew it off and fell asleep.

TWENTY EIGHT [THE REAPER VISITS]

A CHILL TOUCHED THE air one bright autumn afternoon in Stanmore, an inner-city western suburb of cosmopolitan distinction. Maple trees shed the last of their leaves, and a blanket of gold and red covered the ground. In an oasis of tranquillity, away from busy shopping strips bearing Italian ambiance, old mansions had long been converted into boarding houses and flats. Newington College, including an estate of playing fields, sprawled at the bottom of the hill. Gothic buildings of the boarding school blended elegantly with modern day structures.

Signalling the end of classes, an electric bell sounded from the Le Couteur wing, a red bricked building that housed the library. Fatty stood out on the sandstone promenade in a beige suit, waiting for his son. He glanced at his Cartier. The time was a little after three. Its 18-karat gold casing glistened in the sunlight. His eyes impatiently scanned the boys in grey suits, striped ties, and boater hats exiting.

“Where’s the little bugger?”

It was uncharacteristic for his eight-year-old not to want to rush out first. The boy loved to bowl down a half-dozen bodies in the process.

The crowd thinned and Dillon was still nowhere in sight. Fatty grew anxious and was about to dial the school’s superintendent, when a blonde-haired boy ran out of the building. Heedless that the wooden doors he pushed through slammed hard against the wall and almost tore from their hinges, he bounded with all his weight into his father’s waiting arms.

“Arggh!” Fatty grimaced. The boy kned him in the privates.

“Sorry, daddy. Didn’t mean it.”

“Yeah right, yer little bleeder,” he smirked, and twirled the boy around and around.

“Me little mate, aren’t ya.”

“Daddy, I’m getting sick.”

Fatty set his son down, grabbed his hand, and walked to a black Statesman Caprice waiting at the curb. He rubbed his boy's head affectionately, recalling a troubled time a few years back when members of Benny Wong's Tong gang snatched him in broad daylight outside his day-care. The kidnapping was motivated by the gang chieftain's desire to muscle his way in on a gold leaf smuggling operation that Fatty was about to pull. Wong needed leverage. Fatty found out about it while on a business trip and put out the word. Dillon was safely returned within forty-eight hours, and Wong's famous floating restaurant sat on the bottom of Kowloon Bay, the result of a 'mysterious' fire.

Thin and jockey-small in stature, a chauffeur, in traditional black and cap, held open the rear door of the formal. Dillon raced up and jumped inside. He bounced up and down on the buttoned leather seats.

"Good to see you again, Master Dillon."

Mindless of his manners, Dillon continued giving the back seat a good workout. Fatty patted his driver on the shoulder and slipped in, eliciting a wink from him.

"He's a chip off the old block, that lil' nipper of yours is, boss."

"Thanks Eddie."

With the same blonde hair that women swoon over, that dimple on his left cheek, and a swagger in his step, the boy looked the spit and image of his old man.

Eddie closed the door and got in. The South Australian wasn't someone to take lightly. Well into his forties, he had been a loyal friend of Fatty's for years. If push came to shove, he would give his life to protect the Graden family.

Some years earlier, Eddie had caught his wife cheating. He slit the throats of her and her lover while they slept in a cheap motel room. Desperate for an alibi, Fatty swore to the Adelaide investigators that Eddie was playing cards with him the whole evening at the Digger's Club in Sydney. A respected criminal judge, who sat at the card table, collaborated the story. The police dropped the investigation.

Eddie leisurely drove Fatty and Dillon up the private cobblestone road. They rounded the Buchanan Oval, where college students played serious games of rugby, and entered Stanmore Road at the top of the hill. They headed west to the home of Fatty's ex-wife, located in a swank country estate outside Castle Hill, about an hour's drive away. The Family Court limited his parental visitation to once every other month for only a few days at a time. Fatty missed the boy immensely and occasionally arranged to drive him home from school. Christmas was a couple of months away, a time when family, even though split, he thought, should be together.

The Statesman drove along a two lane rural blacktop at a respectable clip. The road wound through grassy landscapes and horse stud farms. Here, *civilization* was a meaningless term used by big city newspapers. A street sign loomed, "Dural, 8 Miles."

Fatty sat close to Dillon and tried small talk. But, the boy ignored him, focusing instead on his new toys, a GI Joe soldier and a military tank he'd found under the armrest. Fatty stared out at the countryside. Watching the blur of rich pastureland was calming. He didn't care much for the big city and still enjoyed the setting that he and his wife had chosen for their home all those years ago.

A pair of stallions sprinted along the white picket fence in a paddock, spirited by the fast-moving car. Fatty knew his boy loved horses and tapped him on the shoulder. Surprised, he looked at his father, wide-eyed, then out the window where he pointed. His mouth fell open.

Wowww!" He pressed his childish face against the glass.

Tails sailing behind them, the fast moving horses kept pace with the car. It was a spectacle. Reaching the outermost edge of the property, the horses hit the brakes and reared on their hind legs as if to wave good-bye.

Dillon looked at his father with deep, saddened eyes. "Daddy, can we stop?"

"Fraid we don't have time, son. Yer mother's waitin'." Fatty knew how psychotic she could get. He wanted no part of her wrath. "Tomorrow, aye?" He tickled his ribcage.

Dillon wiggled about in hysterics.

A few miles up, an old black Ford Bronco was backed up on a dirt track. All appeared quiet at the bottom of the hill where the main road crossed. No traffic anywhere. With huge mud tires, no license plates, and a monstrous bull bar, the four-wheel drive looked sinister, parked in stealth behind a mountain of earth. Its big block Cleveland revved loudly, desperate to race. It burst down the farm driveway, kicking up dirt and rocks. The ear-splitting noise from the leaky exhaust carried down into the valley, beyond the road. The driver, shrouded behind tinted glass, slammed on the brakes. Maintaining distance from the road, the truck's engine returned to a rough idle and waited.

Fatty cuddled close to his son. A strange feeling overcame him. Heeding his acutely sensitive inner sense, he became anxious. Something wasn't quite right, and he wasn't sure what bothered him. He hadn't seen any traffic for quite some time. For this time of day, the roadway should have been much busier. He leaned forward, pressed the intercom, and asked Eddie for his read. But, the driver shrugged his shoulders. Fatty settled back and stared at passing meadows full of cows. The last thing he remembered was a sudden rush of wind against his face. He felt his body ejected from the car, and then darkness.

The black Bronco had inflicted considerable damage, ploughing hard into the driver's side where Dillon played with his toys. The formal spun wildly down the road. Eddie fought for control, but he couldn't keep the car on the asphalt, couldn't keep it from drifting at a high rate of speed onto the wet grass of the shoulder. He clipped a light pole and saw his life pass before him. The impact sent a powerful shudder through the vehicle's subframe. It shot across two dirt driveways in a sideways motion. Finally, it came to rest, nose first, in a ditch full of water. Hot steam shot up from its ruptured radiator.

As abruptly and ferociously as the episode began, it was over. The luxury car was unrecognizable, the mangled hulk almost split in half. A rip ran horizontally across the roofline, between the doors.

Back at the impact site, a white haze hung over the scene. Water poured from the Bronco's engine. The truck looked ready for the scrap heap. The door sprung open and

dangled on busted hinges. The panel quickly separated and dropped to the asphalt as the driver stumbled out. Skinny and small, he limped away, nursing a dislocated arm and made for the paddock. Climbing over a white picket fence, he fell to the ground on the other side, picked himself up, and hobbled towards the refuge of a dense forest down in the gully.

Inside the Statesman, Eddie was hunched over the wheel. Blood oozed from deep lacerations to his neck. His jugular severed from flying glass, he was dead. In back, Dillon was just regaining consciousness. Dazed and heavy-lidded, he roused and peered about the car. His father was gone. He panicked and tried to open the back doors, but the locking mechanism had fused shut. Scared, he leapt forward and beat on the privacy glass to waken the chauffeur. When he saw all that blood, he knew Eddie couldn't help. He realised his worst fear. He was alone!

He jumped back to the back glass and beat on the thick shield with his fists. He hoped to break it. After a while, he wasn't getting anywhere. His fists were very red and sore. Through the glass, he saw his father spread out on the bitumen a distance up the road. His spirits revived, he was sidetracked by the smell of something burning inside the cab. Bashing his fists more furiously on the glass, he tried desperately to wake his father. He beat and beat, shutting out the pain, until the glass was covered in his blood.

Face down on the roadway, Fatty's limbs began to twitch; first, his fingers, then his hands, and then an arm. As if by telepathic signal, he fought to regain some semblance of consciousness. Lifting his head, his vision blurred, and he cowered from an intense pain. He tried to piece together the cause of being out there.

"God! Dillon!"

A powerful migraine bore into his cranium like a power drill. He scanned the barren roadway. Up the road, he spotted his car, its nose buried in the drainage ditch. He noticed a column of smoke rise from the engine compartment. Then, a silhouetted figure pressed up against the rear glass.

"Dillon!"

Terror struck home at the spectacle of his boy rapping his fists against the glass. He struggled to his feet and screamed bloody murder. He gritted his teeth, took a few steps, and fell to the ground. The pain from a fibula dislocation hurt like nothing he had ever experienced. He cried out again when he popped the bone back in place. Rising to his feet, he put weight on the leg. He shut out the creeping coldness from a loss of blood flowing from a shattered kneecap. His suit shredded, face heavily lacerated, with urgency he limped toward the smouldering wreckage.

"Pain be buggered," he spat, infuriated that he wasn't in the car. His only thought was to save the boy. He dragged his leg along the asphalt, hastening to cover ground. Smoke from the car grew heavier, thicker, denser, blacker. From his vantage, the entire passenger compartment seemed engulfed, shrouding all trace of little Dillon. Fatty shuffled harder in a weird sort of straight-legged canter.

Forty feet from the car, he saw a flicker of flame lap hungrily about the chassis. He bit hard on his tongue and hobbled with greater intensity in a sort of shuffled hurry. He heard the faint, muffled cries of his child desperately pleading for help.

“Baby, daddy’s coming.”

The smell of gasoline filled the air. He squinted hard and saw a puddle gather under the rear of the car. The sun’s rays cruelly caught its rainbow aura. He knew it was gasoline. A lick of fire danced dangerously close, and Fatty yelled, “Get out, get out!” As he got closer, his son disappeared into the smoke.

Dillon coughed hard and knelt on the floor, crying for help. Thick white smoke painfully clogged his lungs. His hope faded, and he gave up. Then, at the sound of his father’s voice, he struggled back up on the seat and pressed his cherubic face against the bloodstained rear glass.

“Yay daddy, I’m rescued.”

An intense heat filled the interior. Dillon saw flames consume the front seat. The stench of Eddie’s burning body made him sick. The experience was a cruel, useless lesson, and his heart sank.

“No, no, no,” he bawled, as the deathly flames continued their relentless march toward him. Bravely, he turned his back to the menace. Defying his school’s safety drill to ‘drop and roll,’ another lesson from which he’d never profit, he again beat on the rear glass with all the strength that his small frame could muster.

“Daddy, daddy! Please! Save me! Help! Help! Daddy, please! Please!”

The closer Fatty came, the more desperately Dillon pleaded.

Hobbling as fast as his smashed body allowed, Fatty felt suspended in slow motion as if treading molasses. Suddenly, an eerie reddish orange light flickered inside the car. His heart rose into his throat, and desperate tears ran down his face. Only fifteen feet away... now twelve, he was so close, so close. A spectacular burst of flames shot skyward through a crack in the car’s sunroof. The paintwork ignited. Fatty turned his face away from the heat. An almighty blast tossed his heavy bulk backwards like a rag doll. He slammed hard to the ground, as the car launched out of the ditch like a moon-shot. Setting sail for an azure blue sky, the mangled hulk cracked like an egg, climbing higher. Left behind was a charred crater in the ground. As the missile levelled out, sheet metal imploded. A horrible grinding noise echoed through the countryside. It came back and struck the earth with a bone-jarring jolt, flattening the car unrecognizably.

The dust and debris settled. Fatty came to, shook his head, and struggled to his feet. Blood flowed from a burst inner ear drum. His mind couldn’t comprehend the destruction that commanded his blank stare. With shock, shame, and sorrow, he bowed his head, dropped to his knees, and bashed the wet ground with his fists. Two elderly people from a nearby farm house rushed to see if they could help. He pushed them away and got to his feet. Shrieking aloud his pain and failure, he took small comfort in knowing that his beautiful son’s death would have been instantaneous.



Inside Julie’s Point Piper apartment, an antique clock beside the bed ticked past six o’clock. Outside, in the ghostly grey predawn light, the harbour was still. In a deep, nightmarish spell, Fatty tossed and turned. The satin sheets half-covered his lower torso.

His expression revealed a man gravely troubled. A heavy sweat poured from his brow. Suddenly, his eyes popped wide. The inner deep blue of his corneas filled with terror. With an ashen face, he sat up and cried out like a banshee.

Julie awoke. She reached across and cradled his head in her naked bosom. Stroking his fine blond hair, she rocked him gently from side to side as though he were an infant.

“There, there, baby. You just had a bad nightmare, that’s all. It’s all right now.”

Her words didn’t register. His ordeal was much more terrifying than just a nightmare. He had met the Reaper. His terror-dazed eyes darted about the bedroom while she nursed him. At this time, in this place, he could not reveal to her his most intimate truth: today was the anniversary of his son’s death.

TWENTY NINE [SALES DAY]

DETAIL CREWS LABOURED FROM mobile trucks, washing inventory around the massive sprawl of Graden Holden. Everything with four wheels sparkled in the early morning sunlight.

Johnny Millhouse walked about the lineup, frustrated, making notes about old stockers on his clipboard.

“Jesus, this one’s already a hundred-twenty days ripe. That one’s outta here.”

With a curt flicker of his pen, it was so.

Billy Brewster strolled up with a friendly smile.

“Mornin’, Johnny.”

“Hey, Billy.”

“So, why’re you doin’ an inventory check? Thought the finance blokes were comin’ next week.”

“Cause some of these bastards have to go, Billy. Here, take a gander at this one for example.” He pointed to a base model Commodore with a stick-shift and no air. The secret code on the sticker divulged that it had arrived on the lot three months ago. “C’mon mate, this is a price leader, and you ain’t moved it yet? Could’a gone to some acne-ridden computer geek over at Sydney Uni. I gotta toss it a birthday party, as long as it’s been here. Not bloody good enough, Buck’o.”

Billy was as cool as they came. Called ‘King Ratbag’ by his troops, because of his ability to bury buyers in whatever they purchased, he had managed teams of car salesmen for donkey’s. He’d seen it all, every con and low down dirty rip off and fiendish scheme imaginable. Billy was perfect for what Fatty needed to run Australia’s number one Holden store.

Billy ran his fingers through his slicked-back hair. “Sorry, mate. I’ll get right on it.”

“Yeah? Well, shit like this won’t cut the cheese around here, Billy.”

Johnny scribbled some notes as he walked through the cars.

“Bugger me blind! Another one. Hell, Australian Finance is spot-checkin’ our entire floor plan this Sunday. That’s three days from now. Gotta get this report back to Jim, pronto, or my balls will be shoved in a grinder and minced right royally.”

He flicked through the pages of his clipboard and eyed some disturbing stats.

“We’re carrying five-mil in floor plan. That’s makin’ Jim real nervous.” He slapped the clipboard on the hood of a car, chipping the paintwork, then looked at Billy with a resolute stare. “Mate, you need to move some of these turds. That’s your bloody job.”

Billy forced a smile. He knew much of what he had on the lot was over two month’s old, a poor reflection on any manager’s ability to move cars. In this business, it was all about inventory turnover. The more you sold, the more the factory sent you: later models, better colours, paid spiffs and backend incentives. That was a sad fact, but that’s how the car business worked.

“You bet, Johnny. I gotta sales meeting with my blokes in a half-hour.”

Johnny’s face soured. “Billy, get your boys rockin’. Jim expects it. Ta’day’s the start of our big weekend sell-athon. Labour Day comes once a year, mate. And this four-day weekend is important to Jim if he’s to get his new finance package from Australian Finance. I know that’s what they’re thinkin’ next door at his Benz joint.”

Johnny signed off on the paperwork and shoved the clipboard into Billy’s chest.

“Mate, Jim’s fronted a lot of dough on advertisin’. Tell ya what. I’ll sweeten the pie and pay out, say, fifty big ones in spiffs this weekend. But that’s *only* if we can move.. oh, what’s a good round number? What the heck, four hundred cars. You up for that, sport? Got the ‘nads for that kind’a number?”

Billy grinned. “Absa-bloody-lutely, boss!”

In the lunchroom, Graden’s sales force lazed about collapsible tables, talking noisily. All young ruffians with brash attitudes, many in the room wore cheap suits and worked the eight-to-five shift. They were the ‘frontline’ crew. A few smoked and drank coffee near an open door. A couple of them looked like a train wreck! Today, they hated to be the first cab off the rank and nursed nightmarish hangovers. In another part of the room, some folded paper darts and tossed them about to pass the time. Progressing from darts to spitballs, the adolescent crowd grew rowdy and impatient.

Billy walked in with a mass of paperwork. His adjutant, a tall, stick-like *yes man* in a no-taste gray suit followed a few steps behind. He looked devilishly Gestapo. Billy wasn’t in a good mood and slammed the bulky files down on the desk.

“Mornin’, guys. How you blokes doin’?”

“Doin’ good, boss,” the men replied, aping his dull drone.

“You lose some weight?” one of them asked.

“A few pounds maybe,” Billy said, and slapped his gut.

“But boss, I thought Aids was a debilitatin’ disease ta have.”

Everyone cracked up.

“Quit tellin’ people that, Stan, or they’ll think I’m a dirty rotten poof. Okay men, listen up.”

The room quieted.

“It’s slow on the lot right now. I mean, real frickin’ slowwww. So, you need to start workin’ the phones and get some of yer customers in here. Who’s got an appointment?”

A few hands went up.

He wasn’t happy. “Okay, here’s the deal. If you don’t got no appointments, you don’t get no ups. Simple. Each of you blokes has to have one shown appointment written into my log in the next hour or you don’t get to take *any* ups for the rest of the day. No appointments written in my log, no new customers. That clear?”

“Clear, boss!” came the cry.

“Good. Here’s another thing. Those bastards over at used cars think we’re a bunch’a bloody wimps. They’re goin’ ‘round tellin’ everyone they can outsell us. So, I’ll bet dinner down at the Fiddler’s Arms, for every bloke here this mornin’, that we can sell more in the next four days than they can. That’s ‘til Sunday night. Fer that, you get all the whores, steak, and beer that five grand outta my pocket will buy. What do you all say to that?”

The salesmen cheered.

Billy peered through the window at the used car office, eyeing the salesmen in a similar meeting. He picked up the phone and cupped the mouthpiece, listening while it rang.

“When they answer, you blokes shout as loud as you can. Show them what pricks they’re dealin’ with.”

The phone finally answered.

“Whadda we think ‘bout used cars?” Billy yelled into the mouthpiece.

“Used cars sucks!”

“Who’s strong?”

“New cars is.”

Billy hung up and looked about the room. “I’m gonna make it short and sweet for you ladies. A day don’t make a week, a week don’t make a year, a year don’t make a career.”

Several rolled their eyes. They had heard his speech before. Billy spotted a pair of larrikins in back of the room aping him.

“Good, glad you blokes know the spiel. ‘Cause it’s on all yer bloody heads if we fail this weekend. I’ll do whatever it takes to make a deal. But, don’t get me involved, or I’ll cut yer deal down to nuthin’. He tossed the keys to his demo on the table. “Chuck their bloody car keys up on the roof if you have to. I don’t give a shit! But yer customers ain’t leavin’ without a turn.” Billy eyed the room. “Right, whadda we do from ‘ere?”

“Take no prisoners,” they grumbled.

Billy held his ear. “You blokes are mumblin’. I can’t hear ya.”

“Wee — Take — No — Prisoners!”

The salesmen filtered outside, grumbling their indifferences. A group in street clothes kicked tires, a little downhearted.

“God, I hate that ra-ra bullshit Billy keeps crammin’ down our bloody throats every damned meetin’.”

“Yeah, mate, I hear ya,” a fresh face replied. “Hey, I got some blow hidden in my desk. Wanna go sniff up a few lines?”

The group went silent. A man in a brown bomber jacket chuckled.

“Mate, better not let ol’ Billy hear you talkin’ like that, or he’ll wanna come in your office and join ya. Bloody coke addict he is.”

There were befuddled looks.

“C’mon, ‘nuf time for yer coke habit later, mate,” ‘Bomber Man’ said, and slapped the ‘newbie’ on the back. “Core blimey,” he said, taking a gander at his watch. “It’s eight-thirty already. I gotta get home for a quick pull on the meat. Bloody Jeopardy’s on tele in a half-hour.”

“You’re lucky,” a lazy huckster in a suit said. “You should pity me, mate. I’m on the early shift. The sun’s comin’ up and already the joint’s packed. Look at all those people. I feel like hidin’ in the dunnies right now rather than havin’ to deal with a lotta bloody tire kickers.”

THIRTY [DODGY BLUDGA'S]

THE TEMPERATURE SOARED INTO the upper eighties. The early morning air felt like a blast furnace. Shooting across a cobalt blue sky over residential Ashfield, thousands of gregarious Rainbow Lorikeets with brilliant iridescent pastel feathers dove in and out of the eucalyptus trees, feeding on an abundance of flowery branches.

The Graden yard looked like the circus was in town. Clowns danced like fools among the hundreds there, bending and twisting thin balloons into elongated creature shapes. An inflatable play castle bounced with cheerful kids inside. Nearby, a petting zoo brayed, clucked, mooed, and hissed, full of everything from rabbits to mules. Under a tent, a grill offered free food. The aroma of barbecued meat wafted over a long line of freeloaders awaiting their chance to dine at Fatty’s expense.

Under the shade of an elm tree, salesmen, members of Billy’s ‘A Team,’ sat on a wall like hyenas. Guzzling sodas stolen from the food tent, they hoped for a sick antelope to stray from the herd, watching customers pass their post. They lazily surmised what each of their victims had in their pockets to spend. None wanted to venture out of the shade into the hot spring sun unless it was a pure lay-down buyer.

An elderly foursome in traditional Hindu dress emerged from a row of cars. They strolled towards the salesmen, wanting information on a couple of used cars that had taken their fancy. They mistakenly entered A-team’s feeding ground.

The salesmen spotted their prey. A scuffle broke out, each man fighting for his right to feed. Their childish fracas subsided, and the victors sprang into action. One of them, a fast-talker with glasses, stringy beard, and a bad case of acne, stood and adjusted his loud fish design tie.

“Oh, for the sake of Allah,” he joked, “I’m a very good Punjab.”

His mate laughed haughtily. Both of them marched from their shady lair.

The pair walked up to the leader, a lofty turbaned man in classic gown. 'Acne Man' extended his hand and held his breath after sniffing the overpowering effluvium of curry and body odor.

"Crikey, what's old Raj here been eatin'?" he muttered. "Bett'cha this camel jock's not had a bleedin' shower in a month. Phew, don't know how his wife puts up with it."

"Oh yes, mister salesman," the Indian said, like he'd just stepped off a ferry from Calcutta. "Good blessed morning to you. Please to tell me the price of your very wonderful car over there." He pointed to a sparkling white Commodore in the line-up.

"Why do you like that one, mate?"

"Because it is a very good car, oh yes, oh gracious me. I feel that Allah has blessed it."

"Flippin' hell," the artful shyster mumbled, and rolled his eyes. "Better straighten this bloke out the Graden way, I s'pose." He smirked. "By the time I'm done with him, he's gonna wish he'd never come here."

"G'day, Raj. Name's Spiv Speers. Best forget about that one though. All those cars back there 'ave been sold. Yeah Raj, they're waitin' fer the trucks ta arrive now. Bugger 'em anyway. I got some bewdies hidden away out back." He hurried his dot-headed mark along. "Have I got a deal for you."

"Oh no, not Raj. My name is Asif, not Raj as you would call me."

A long line of high mileage ex-rentals stood in a weedy area behind service. With varying degrees of body damage, hubcaps were missing from some, while others had ashtrays filled to the brim in butts. They smelled horrid. Enterprising salesmen like Spiv Speers stood to make hundreds in spiff money if they could move them. A stereotypical car hawker, he was the type who would gladly roll the mileage back a few zeros, or do whatever was necessary to make a crap car look good.

"Here ya go, mate!" He pointed at a car with the highest miles. "Owned by a nice ol' Abo lady from Redfern. Yep, she wuz in here just the other day. Nice old bird."

The turbaned man walked around the worn out car with a dubious stare.

"Oh, but this car has duct tape wrapped around the front bumper. That is not good, oh no, no, no. Has it been wrecked, Mister Spiv?"

"Course it's not been wrecked! And that's not duct tape holdin' it together. Nah, mate. It's a special device that only looks like duct tape. Car handles like a dream. Runs like bloody new. Just keep it off bridges."

Under the door jams, the Indian saw a batch of brown spots. He put his finger through one.

"Please to tell me what these are? They look like rust holes."

"Those aren't rust holes, mate. They're air vents."

"Oh yes, Mister Spiv. But, please to tell me why the car is painted orange."

Spiv threw his arm over the Indian's shoulder. "Raj, there's nuthin wrong with the colour orange, mate. All the cars are gonna be orange next year. Hell, me manager wanted this one fer himself, but he forgot to put money down on it yesterday. Raj, I can get this bewdy for you for a song. Price is \$22,900!" He slapped the hood confidently. "Hell, this is the same deal I'd give me own bloody mother. Honest!"

"Oh yes... well, it is a little more than I can afford—"

"Listen Raj. I feel yer pain, mate. There ain't much I can do 'bout the price. But... hey, go with your gut. Just think of it as an investment of a lifetime."

“Very well to thank you very much,” the Indian said, still leery. “Well, we shall be looking around some more... oh yes, oh yes, thank you very much, Mister Spiv.”

“C’mon, Raj. Hell, I’m gonna get fired if I don’t sell this car *now*. Help me set the record for the longest runnin’ salesman at Graden Holden with a job. Record stands at three weeks. I’ll even throw in a middle-class tax break if you buy it. This car’s one of a kind, mate, so you’d better jump fast, ‘cause it won’t last long. Tell you what, I’ll even toss in a free frisbee just to sweeten the pie. We got a deal, ain’t we?”

“Well...”

“Strewth, you’re a hard man. You’re bloody well killin’ me. Tell you what. Special deal just ‘cause I like ya. But it’s gotta be ta’day. \$21,436 and fifty cents, but, that’s it! That’s thievery! You can’t *buy* a better deal. And, it comes with our famous ‘30-30’ guarantee. Thirty seconds or thirty feet off the lot, whichever comes first.” He laughed. “Nah, just kiddin’. Come on over to my lair... er, office, and we’ll finish ‘er up. Take just fifteen minutes, my Indian friend.”

THIRTY ONE [CAVEAT EMPTOR!]

RESEMBLING SOME SORT OF cubicle jungle, long narrow hallways spidered from the reception area. The showroom was crowded with tiny glassed-in spaces similar to storage closets than offices. The pace was hectic as customers and salesmen fought for the very best deal.

Darting from one of the ‘closets,’ Spiv ran down the hallway with a grin, headed for the boss’s office. A folder full of freshly signed papers was tucked under his arm. His customers were more than car-yard cream puffs. He had himself a ‘lay-down,’ the dream of every salesman.

Back inside Speers’ cubicle, the Indian family sat at the small table. Staring in disbelief at each other, both felt anxious that they had done the wrong thing signing their lives away. Buyer’s remorse, a salesman’s worst enemy, dogged them, taking its first bite.

Across the hallway, one of Billy’s veterans sat alone in his stall, listening to his wife complain over the phone. A tall, skinny fellow in his late-forties, he sported a scruffy moustache, dishevelled hair, and a frown. His head propped drearily with one hand, the die-hard boozer felt trapped, unable to escape his wife’s lengthy ear roasting about his infidelities.

The sun had begun to rise when he put the finishing touches to a fierce all-nighter on the plonk. After partying with some mates and few old hookers he’d chatted up at a scruffy pub in Arncliffe, he stumbled out, so drunk that only a good spew might help, and drove home, one-eyed. When he walked up to the front door, he couldn’t find his key so he kicked it in. When his wife heard the racket, she rushed into the living room and found him staggering about. His trousers were down around his ankles, and he emitted an awful stench of beer and sex. He approached her with arms extended, a vicious hard on and lips

puckered, wanting some. When she refused, he fell into the shower with a curt “Bugger off then,” and rushed to make the eight o’clock sales meeting.

Pounding down the fourth straight cup of coffee, he looked like a train wreck! His eyes whirred about in their sockets. He found himself in the throes of a hangover so severe that he contemplated swearing off drinking forever. Occasionally he would grunt, as bile and puke rose in his throat. Gulping back the flow, all he could do was allow her to rant.

“But Enid, it was only Joey and some of the lads at that rotten pub, I swear. C’mon, sweetie. I didn’t have any hookers with me. Look, I told you before. I gave ‘em up months ago. You remember my promise, don’t you, hon? One of the blokes down at the pub had a bad carbie in his car, so I helped him fix it. We were there for hours. That’s why I was late. Promise.”

Spiv ran through reception, headed for the sales tower. He’d been on the job for only a week and already he was close to putting a big deal to bed. And it wasn’t even ten-thirty yet!

“Crikey, this is way better than that two bit drive-in bott’lo gig, that’s for bloody sure,” he muttered, remembering the dead end job he’d left, running cases of beer out to waiting customers in their cars under the Cremourne Hotel.

He leaped up a small flight of stairs and disappeared inside the tower. Surrounded by panelled glass walls, the elevated office had a bird’s eye view of everything that went on. Inside its cramped confines, a dozen salesmen lined up, awaiting a ‘pencil’ from Billy, who was behind his desk working deals. A small fan blew weakly in his face. In back of the room, a few reps joked around. Billy stopped crunching numbers on his calculator.

“You blokes got a frickin’ deal?”

The culprits shook their heads.

“Well, bugger off then. Can’t you blokes see I got work to do? Now, quit hidin’ out in my bloody office and go sell somethin’, you little bastards.”

The young men smirked as they walked out, jostling each other.

“Little pricks!” he yelled through the glass. Billy snatched a write-up sheet from the next salesman in line and glanced over it.

“Wally, did you take yer people for a test drive like I said?”

“Yeah, boss.”

He approved the deal. “Here you go, then. Go close the buggers. Next!”

Grabbing the deal folder from the next man, he scanned it and almost died.

“Stan, this bloke’s Humpty Dumpty on his trade. I need another four grand from the mongrel. Mate, I explained the program the last time you were in ‘ere with this piece of frickin’ toilet paper. Did ya ask him just like I told you to?”

“Well, er...”

A green-pea salesman, Stan looked bewildered. Billy saw it and eyed a slick salesman sitting over on a chair.

“Hey Mick, help out old Stan here. He’s new to the business. It’s time for a closer like you, mate. Go see how much you can fleece from his deadbeat customer... say, another \$1,500, then come back and we’ll finish ‘er up.”

“Right’o.”

Mick took the deal from Billy and raced out. It was typical for the moderately successful closer to hang around the sales tower; his intent, to leach onto other salesman's deals. Every dealership had a golden boy. Mick happened to be Billy's.

Stan stood there in disbelief.

"Stan, get outta the way. There's others waitin.'"

Billy blew a fuse. "*Hey, hey, listen up, all of you!* If you salesmen can't do what I ask, I'll get involved. And when I get in on yer action, you lose. It's that simple."

The room went silent and he took another deal. Billy made a few alterations and handed it off. "C'mon, next!" he snapped, observing the growing line-up of salesmen and his increasing workload.

The salesman mulled Billy's figures.

"But boss! Me customer won't go for this. He's a *Too-High*. You know what those Chinese pricks are like."

"Mr. Grissom, you must be the world's only livin' bloody brain donor. Mate, I don't give a shit if the bloke's purple! He's gonna buy from someone. Now, go be the salesman I hired you for and close the frickin' deal, okay? Bloody hell, if your old man heard that defeatist remark, he'd have kicked yer arse into Sunday, God rest his soul."

Looking sourly at his boss, Grissom stomped off, batting the deal folder about in the air. Billy's mention of his dad, Morton, infuriated him. A hard nose Melbourne auto trader, Jimmy's father lost his life a year ago in a fiery plane crash over the Snowy Mountains. Kicking the wall, he left the office. He muttered a few choice obscenities about Billy's penis size.

"Listen Jimmy," Billy shouted through the glass, "you're a waste of sperm, mate. At least I can get mine up."

He took the next deal and reviewed it. "Good! This deal fits like a bum in a bucket. Okay," he said to the salesman, "so when you give these numbers to the customer, you say, 'Here's a pretty good deal for ya.' But Mr. Customer says, 'Oh man, but I told you I can only put down three grand.' So ya cross out the six thou you wrote here in this square, see, and put down \$5,750. Easy. Then you say to the customer, 'Is that more what ya had in mind?' You nod as you say this. Try to get 'em agreein' with ya."

The salesman, a distant cousin of Billy's, was a crawler. No one liked him.

"Sure thing, boss."

In a corner of the room, several troublemakers joked about, sparring in jest, pulling ties, and the occasional headlock.

Billy tossed down his pen on the deck. "You blokes are in more shit than a poofta's finger! Now, if I catch you in my office without a deal again, I'll fire the pair of you. Can't ya see I'm busier than a one-armed Sydney cab driver with a case of the crabs? Have some frickin' consideration. Now, off with ya."

Billy saw the wry smile on Spiv's face. "Well, Mr. Speers. Wadd'ya got?" He took the deal and looked it over. "Good, I see they signed. Always helps to close 'em, rather than lettin' those bastards close you... LIKE THE REST OF YOU WEAK-SUCKS ARE DOIN' TA-DAY! So, d'ya reckon you got yerself a deal?"

Spiv's grin broadened. "Yip."

Billy read deeper. He shone a callous smile. "I gotta tell ya, I'm gettin' my rocks off just lookin' at these numbers." He scribbled notes on the appraisal. "Yer blood's worth

bottlin', mate! Okay, this is already a five-pound deal. Now, if you wanna make a cool six grand profit, go see Gunna. But I'll warn you, he's tighter than a fish's arse and can talk a dog off a meat wagon, so be careful. Think he's havin' a smoke out back." Billy handed back the deal. "Slick, tell him we need fourteen thou for the trade to make the deal. Remember, he's as cold as a polar bear's backside, so go easy on fleecin' him for more money, or he'll do his block."

Spiv stood there like a stunned mullet.

"Well, go on, kid." Billy shooed him off.

Spiv lumbered away, glum at the thought of having to sell the whole deal to Gunna all over again. Billy jumped out of his chair and rapped his knuckle against the glass.

"I want 'em de-horsed out of their trade-in ta'day, no matter what. YOU HEAR ME! They're drivin' our car TA'DAY! Oh, and congratulations on poppin' yer cherry."

THIRTY TWO [GETTING LUCKY!]

AN OLD RUSTY VOLVO pulled in. The driver's door pushed open. Out stumbled a curvaceous young blonde in a revealing top and mini skirt.

"Come to pappa," Cosmo muttered, a young ingrate, and felt a rise in his pants. A shiver of adrenaline coursed through his body as he slithered up.

"Um, may I... uh, help you?"

"I wanna buy a car." She occasionally hiccupped and slurred. She had been drinking all day.

Cosmo couldn't take his eyes off her huge breasts. "Why of course you do, sweet thing. And you've come to the right place. You're in luck. We've got a great selection on the lot right now. Step inside and we'll talk about your particular—"

"I wan' that one!" she demanded, pointing at a canary yellow racer.

"Not a problem, luv. Follow me."

A short time later, they consummated a deal. Parked in a deserted area by the empty wash bays, Cosmo's customer settled herself into the driver's seat.

"Well, that just about does it." He took a hard gander at her pink stockinged legs and stiletto-heeled FMP's. "Don't worry 'bout that old clunker you drove in. We'll get rid of it. Torch it if I have to... *ha, ha*. All your stuff's in the trunk."

She noticed his eyes rivet where her mini-dress slid up past the curve of her rump. Her hot pink stockings contrasted fetchingly with her white Mary Janes.

"Well handsome, there's jus' one more lil thing," she said sweetly. "Can't drive a new car 'til its pwoperly broken in."

"Pardon?"

She grabbed the recliner lever and released it, leaning her seat back as far as it would go. Spreading her legs wide, she revealed closely trimmed red pubics that glistened

beautifully in the sunlight streaming through the moonroof. Holding the salesman's eye, she pulled aside the bottom of her pink bikini panties and fingered her wetness.

"Got the key for my ignition, darlin'?"

Cosmo gulped. "Are you sure, Suzanne?" He looked around furtively.

She dipped a perfectly manicured finger between her luscious folds and tasted it.

"Course 'm sure, darlin'. Wanna take a test drive?"

Cosmo climbed in on top, unzipping as he went. Trying to force space, the cold leather of the steering wheel hit his rump as she helped him undo his belt. He could hear her urgent, shallow breathing as she fumbled with his trousers. She snaked her fingers over his erect package. Cosmo had been hard from the very first moment she'd arrived on the lot. He groaned, luxuriating in the uncomplicated pleasure of animal lust as he lowered his hips to join hers. Grasping his exposed member in one hand, she spread her folds with the other, wiggling on the seat impatiently to help him into her.

"Hurry, hurry," she panted impatiently, flooding with wetness.

Cosmo sank deeply inside. He stroked slowly in and out. She shuddered and opened her mouth. Holding him close, she lifted her pelvis to help with their awkward and urgent coupling.

"Ram me hard, baby. Like daddy does it!" she cried, feeling the river start to flow, as his thickened penis slammed her. "Yeah, that's how he does me."

Lost in the excitement of exhibitionism, she wrapped her hosed legs about her partner's waist, pulled him still deeper inside, and rode out a grand climax.

Reenergised, she lay back in the seat, her face glowing, while Cosmo continued to pump away. She relished sex in any public place. It was an absolute rush, as she dangled one lovely leg out the window. She was starting to dry up. His size, larger than what she was used to, began to hurt. She grimaced and struggled to push him off, but he was too strong. She lay there and let him have his way. Finally, he finished himself off with a loud grunt. Her femininity exposed, her smell wafted up with the heady scent of sex friction. He bumped the steering wheel with his naked butt, then fell out on the concrete. He heard unexpected chatter on the other side of the wash bays and hastily pulled up his pants.

"Oh shit! Customers!" He panicked that his zipper jammed.

Hearing the prattle also, she returned her seatback, tossed out his shoe, slammed shut the door, and started the engine.

"I'm goin' home to my big thick, black, luscious vibrator. Think of me. Toodles."

Revving the engine, she slipped it into drive, twinkled her fingers Ciao, and tore off with a rewarded grin. Racing up behind the service building and out onto the main lot, she felt his cum ooze from her swollenness. An elderly couple, walking towards the sales building to see about a deal, jumped out of the way as she roared by.

THIRTY THREE

[BAMBOOZLED!]

EMERGING FROM THE WASH bays, Cosmo strolled like a zombie onto the front lot. His penis was still as hard as a mad dingo's donger, and his head swam in the afterglow of such an incredible and crazy sexual encounter. A stupid look, like he was high, streaked over his mug. An Italian family walked by, but their questions about a car's price and the whereabouts of the toilets didn't register. His mind basked in the excitement that bubbled through his buff frame.

He slipped through a row of new Commodore 'Sportpacks' and headed for the shade of an elm tree that fronted Parramatta Road. The heat was intense, and he hurried his pace. He jumped up on the brick wall where salesmen normally sat waiting for unsuspecting prey. The scent of sex was still very evident on his suit and undergarments, which continued to anaesthetise him. A tap on his shoulder interrupted his wander. He turned, fully expecting to see Billy standing there, ready to let him have it for goofing off. Instead, there stood a man in jeans and an open-neck shirt out on the sidewalk.

"G'day mate," the stranger said. "You look like a salesman. Well, I need a car. Wanna help?"

"S-sure, Guv'na. Wadd'ya lookin' for?"

The man vaulted the waist-high wall and onto the lot.

"I'd like to take that one over there." He pointed to a dark blue Caprice with lowered suspension and mags.

"Can we take it for a drive?"

"My oath, mate. That car's a bloody runner."

"Yeah? Got the keys?"

"Course. Cosmo's the name. What's yours?"

"Ah.. Angelo."

"Kewl, Angelo. Let's take a walk over and I'll get some details off it. Mind you, I have to go inside and get the keys. Got your license handy?"

He paded himself down. "Nah, sorry mate. Must'a left it at home."

Cosmo felt a little apprehensive.

"Well, store policy is to hold a license before test drives. But.. well, hey, you look honest enough, so let's skip that part. I'll have to go with ya, of course. I'll be back in a flash with the keys." He made tracks for Billy's office.

When he returned, he saw the man sitting in the driver's seat.

"Here you go, Angelo." He handed off the keys and jumped in.

The Italian turned the car over. Perusing the instrumentation, he revved the big block V8. He backed off on the petrol and reached for the floor shifter. Tires screeched loudly as the car sailed out of the parking space in reverse. He barely missed the bumper of another car and came to a bone-jarring halt. He slammed it into drive. The Statesman shot off up the row, headed for the main gate.

Cosmo held on for dear life. "Steady on, mate. My boss'll have a heart attack if he sees us burnin' rubber off the lot."

The Italian man ignored him and sped for the entrance. Flying out of the driveway, the vehicle charged into traffic and carved a reckless path towards Parramatta.

Approaching an intersection, Angelo stomped on the brakes even though the signal was green. The forward momentum whip-lashed Cosmo's body into the glove box.

"What the f—"

"I'll take it from here!" Angelo demanded, and pulled out a long knife tucked down the back of his jeans.

"All yours, mate," Cosmo said with a nervous smile. He got out and stood in the middle of the highway.

The Statesman roared off against the red light. Startled by blaring horns, Cosmo scrambled over to the sidewalk. A heavy transporter came up fast in the outside lane. It shot by and kicked up a wave of water from the gutter. The salesman was drenched.

"YOU BASTARD!" he yelled, whilst flipping off the ignorant trucker. The container truck's airhorn blared in reply. He shook himself off like a wet dog. Beaten, he hung his head gloomily and started the long walk back to the dealership.

THIRTY FOUR [PUTTIN' 'THE MAN' TOGETHER]

GUNNA LEANED AGAINST THE BUILDING and enjoyed the taste of a well-earned cigarette with one of the service writers. The small piece of ground, an oasis of green amidst a sterile concrete landscape, was littered in cigarette butts. He had been writing bids on trades for most of the morning. His tired, overweight frame demanded peace and relaxation. Now he wished to smoke himself into an early grave.

"You know what pisses me off? I was in the express lane at Coles the other night gettin' groceries. There's this cute chick with a shoppin' basket who jumped in front of me while I wuz flickin' through a porno waitin' for the bloke at the head of the line ta finish with the cashier arsehole. Well... she, like, asks me, 'Oh, is it okay. I only have a few things?' I say, 'yeah, go on,' and returned to pervin' at the centrefold. So, come to find out its more like twenty-one 'things,' and then, since she's already there, right, she goes and grabs a coupl'a candy bars and more bullshit off a nearby stand. Gives me the shats! Those 'ten items or less' signs at the grocery stores are so bloody big. Happens every time I'm in there, some useless bastard says, 'Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't see the BLOODY GREAT sign' bit while they're standin' in front of ya, pickin' their nose."

He felt a tap on his shoulder. When he saw who it was, he rolled his eyes dispassionately.

"Wadd'ya want, kid?"

"Mr. Kilbright," said Spiv, "I need fifteen-five for my trade to make a deal."

A cigarette dangled lazily from Gunna's lips as he stared cruelly at Spiv. Smoke floated up over his eyes. The fat man had a reputation for being a ruthless buyer, one who was hard to pin down on figures. Cagey as a fox, he recognised the respectful approach as a ploy to work him over. He wrenched the deal folder out of the salesman's hand and eyed the \$13,200 appraisal he had written earlier. He shook his head and blew smoke in the salesman's face.

"You shittin' me, kid?"

"Well Mr. Kilbright, I really need this deal. I'm not makin' much money on it, and I only just started here yesterday. And.. well, I'd like to make a good impression with the boss. I'd really be grateful for any help."

Gunna looked testy. Twenty-five years in the business had taught him to spot a swiftie a mile off. He wasn't any man's fool. He'd worked for all the big names in the business since before electricity was invented. He could hardly believe it. Here was this wet-behind-the-ears salesman trying to do a number on him. Audacious? Sure. Strangely, he liked it. Gunna heeled his cigarette on the grass, pulled out a Mont Blanc from his top pocket, and penned in the change.

"Okay, kid. And this is only 'cause I like ya. Tell yer what I'm gonna do. You're an eager little shit, so I'll go fourteen-seven." He held out the deal jacket temptingly. As Spiv reached for it, he pulled it back. "But that's it. Better get me that car, sport."

Spiv frowned. "Well, er... I'll do my best, Mr. Kilbright."

Gunna could have spat nails. "No son, you'll do better than that!" He pointed his finger angrily at the salesman's nose. "You'll get me that car mate, or I'll have yer bloody job. Go work your customer, mate, not me."

Spiv trudged back into his sales cubicle. Soft rays of sunlight filtered through the blinds. They cast a rich aura over the room's sparse furnishings. His Indians seemed happy to see him return. They wiggled their bones in the plastic chairs for lack of ease. After an hour, their posteriors had grown numb.

Spiv hovered over the table in silence. "Well...er, okay," he said with hesitation, and extended his hand. "Twelve-five for your car as you wanted, Raj."

The turbaned man nervously returned his shake, unsure why he had let himself get cajoled into trading into a worse car than he owned.

"Now, all I need is yer signature on these three forms and we're set to go." The Indian signed the paperwork. Spiv grinned. "Press hard, mate. Five copies!"

The commission he stood to earn on a seven pound deal played to his greed. Earlier, another salesman had come up to him and said, "Check out this bomber." He unfolded his pay voucher to reveal a yellow slip with a \$1,274 payable commission.

His customer balked at the last page of the contract. He stared at the small print. Spiv saw his big pay check threaten to fly right out the window. The Indian shook his head, reading the strongly worded legalese for a minute or two, then signed.

Spiv sighed in relief, then gathered up the paperwork. "Good Raj, done deal."

The Indian blinked nervously through thick-rimmed trifocals. "Mister Spiv, I would like to pick the car up on Monday, oh yes."

An air of silence fell.

"N-no, mate. Deal's gotta be today. Raj, what you'll be doing today is leavin' your Honda here and drivin' the new one home. That's it."

His customer looked rueful.

Spiv gave him the thumbs up. "No worries, mate. Your car'll be safe here over the weekend. Then on Monday, come over in the morning. I'll put you into another car while I take care of yours. Financing won't be a problem. I got the best man in the finance booth waitin' for you. Trust me, I've seen worse credit apps than yours and they still got a zero interest rate. You need to get anything out of it?"

He glanced at his wife. She shook her head glumly.

Spiv gave a confident wink. "Don't worry, mate. I'll take care of everything. See you in a jiffy."

Spiv darted out at breakneck speed.

The Indians stared dully at each other and felt helpless. They had no choice. Spiv had their keys in his pocket.

Several cubicles up, a few salesmen sat around. Shoes up on the desk, they drank coffee. The temperature outside had just struck 90 degrees. Neither man wanted to trudge out in such heat and get stroked by tirekickers.

"Remember Mrs. Smith from last month?" one of them asked. "Sticker price plus a thou and a five-year extended warranty on a four-year lease? Easiest five grand I ever made. What a gullible ol' goat. I'll bet you fifty bucks I can get another five hundred out of her."

"You're on."

The salesman flipped through his rolodex, pulled out Mrs. Smith's number, and dialed it.

"Hello, Mrs. Smith? This is Mike Strongbreath over at Graden Holden. I'm the salesman who got you that great deal on your new car last month. Yeah, that's right." He rolled his eyes. "I'm the one who reminded you of your late grandson. Listen, the reason I'm callin' is that I got a bit of bad news. We ran into a legal problem with the paperwork on yer lease. It seems the lass in accounting typed in the wrong residual amount on your contract and now the bank won't accept it. You might have to return the car. It's such a small error we would just normally ignore, but you know how banks are about details. What's that? Yes, I know you love the car and would hate to miss out on the huge savings you made on the deal. Tell you what. Why don't you hold on for a minute while I go talk to my manager."

He put the phone down, cleaned his office, and not much else. He came back.

"Great news, Mrs. Smith. The boss says you can keep your car. All you gotta do is come down to the dealership and sign a new agreement, and we'll take care of the rest. Of course you won't have to pay anything, but your payment may change slightly. No more than a few bucks a month, probably less than ten or eleven dollars at most. And, I almost forgot. My manager said that for us to be able to do this, the papers gotta be signed today... Ok, that's fine. I'll see you in about an hour, then. Oh, and Mrs. Smith, be sure to bring your old lease so we can replace them with the new ones. Oh, you're

welcome, Mrs. Smith. It's my pleasure. I'm glad to have been of service. See you soon. Bye bye."

By the end of the day, Mrs. Smith had solved her 'legal problem,' kept her new car, and had a nice, friendly chat with Mike about how much he looked like her dead grandson. And, her monthly payment only went up \$13.79. Mike Strongbreath got an 'atta boy' from his boss, fifty dollars from Joe for the bet, and another \$550 in added commission, which he blew after work on a stripper named Bambi.



The sales tower was devoid of salesmen. Billy had his shoes up on the desk, watching the horseraces on a small black and white perched on a credenza.

Spiv barged in.

"Well, Slick. Did you sell that car?"

"Yip! Got the dot-heads in my sights and popped 'em for a cool seven-pound profit."

Billy snatched away the deal and reviewed the documents. He reclined back with a haughty smirk.

"A seven-grand profit. And, on your first week at Graden Holden. Not bad. Not bad at all. You did tell 'em to unpack their trade like I told you?"

Spiv nodded.

"Good'o, now we're cookin' with oil. Got the keys to his sled?"

Spiv pulled the bundle of keys and palmed them off. Billy dialed a mobile number.

"Hey Gunna, Spiv's trade is yours now. Yep, I got the keys in my hot little hands." Billy looked up and his mood soured. "What? You still here? Go get those bloody lay-downs into their new car. Go on, get outta here!"

Spiv hurried out of the office as Billy hung up. Returning his shoes to the desk, he gave a heady sigh and swiveled his chair around to watch the closing stages of the feature race at Doomben.

"Go, go, you little bugger. Go Doggy-Do-Do," he cried, watching his bet sneak up on the rail to take the lead. "Who loves ya, you sweet horse you. Yes, yes you little be-ut-ee."

THIRTY FIVE [TAKING DELIVERY]

THE INDIAN'S HIGH MILER SAT in a spot reserved for deliveries. It basked in the late afternoon sun. Its orange paintwork looked bloody awful! Sitting in the driver's seat, Cosmo was more than ready to call it a day. He cut up four lines of rock cocaine on an old book with his credit card.

"Here ya go," he said to his mate, a burly fellow, "I'll give ya first crack."

The overweight salesman sniffed down a line without hesitation. "That's what I like. A bloke who don't mind sharin' his stash."

He made loud snorting sounds, trying to free up a lump of coke lodged in back of his nose.

"Mate, I had a rotten day," he smarted, and inhaled a second line. "Nuthin' but bullshit complaints.. oh, the frickin' door squeaks.. oh, my nuts hurt when I sit in the leather seat.. oh, there's not enough room under the steerin' wheel for the wife to suck me off."

Cosmo grew cranky. "C'mon, can't hog all of it. Its sniff, sniff, give. Don't mess up the rotation. You know the rules."

"Shaddap yer whinin'. Reckon I'll have me one more line before Spiv's customers get here."

His deep snort sounded like a tornado spawning. A sudden rap against the glass interrupted his moment. "Wha?" His nose covered in white, he saw Spiv standing outside the door. He was greatly relieved. "Whew, be right with ya', cobber. Soon as I [*sniff*]... get some [*sniff*]... of this shit up me nose [*sniff*]... Whoa!" He felt his watery eyes whir in their sockets. "What a rush."

"C'mon!" Spiv cried, and rapped again on the glass. "Get outta the bloody car. Before my customers get here."

"Yeah, shake a leg," cried a beleaguered Cosmo. "I need me shit back."

The burly man finished off the powdery shooter. "Shut yer cakeholes, the both of yis. You blokes are actin' like a pair of whinin' hookers with a case of the clap."

Cosmo watched his stash disappear up the bully's nose.

"Bugger! Told ya you were takin' too long. Snortin' up my shit. Look at ol' Spiv out there. Hell, if I ain't careful, he's gonna want some blow, too. C'mon and give it here. And don't be spillin' none of it."

The effects of the low-grade drug kicked into high gear. The salesman felt strangely woozy. Swaying around like a boat in a storm, he did the unthinkable and tipped over Cosmo's book.

"Jesus Christ!" blared Cosmo, devastated at the waste. "You just spilt it all on the seat. That stuff's expensive. Oh man, I need to get high. Now that ain't gonna happen. God, you're a bloody grub."

"Them's the breaks, Daddy Jim," the big man chanted, and handed the book over. His smile grew more stupid with each passing moment. Finally, he tripped out of the car and was confronted by a very disgruntled Spiv. "Sorry mate," he slurred. "Where ya [*hiccup*] customers at?"

"Look at the both of you. Doin' bloody coke in a car I'm about ready to deliver." Spiv looked inside and saw the spilt substance. "Jesus, they'll be here any tick."

"No [*hiccup*] worries," the portly man said, and dove back in. He snorted and licked every available morsel. "There, Spiv, old son," he said, slurping his fingers. "Clean as a bug [*hiccup*] in a rug."

Cosmo licked the book cover.

"Sorry, Spiv. Please, not a word of this ta Billy, or I'm in for it."

"I wouldn't do this to you, Cosmo. Jesus Bloody Chr—"

He was interrupted by an abrupt tap. "Raj. Y-you guys are all finished up, I see."

The Indians looked drained after their ordeal in the finance office, too tired to notice the fat salesman in the background, shirt hanging out, holding salute like some dickhead off the Benny Hill Show.

THIRTY SIX [A BODGY DEAL]

GUNNA CUT AN IMPATIENT and reckless path through the westbound flow of Parramatta Road. He was on his way to meet a buyer for the white Honda Legend he drove. He loathed being late for appointments almost as much as diet-fasting. Caught up behind slower traffic, he whipped into another lane and thumped the accelerator. Its four speed automatic responded cleanly and the speedo climbed. He crunched numbers in his head about what he stood to make on the sale. The portly wholesaler had neither title to the car, nor the right to broker it. Ownership papers hadn't yet been transferred; only the Indian man's deposit receipted in and a credit app taken. Blatant fraud! Gunna knew the wholesaler, a cash buyer who didn't ask questions. He risked losing his dealer's permit if he got caught. It was a distinct possibility, though distant enough that he felt supremely confident that it wouldn't happen. The 'system' and those unwritten laws he'd helped develop for the car industry had never failed him. It all came too easily to the wily duffer and bandit.

A short time later, he pulled into a parking spot in front of an old rustic pub on the western edge of Homebush. He switched off the engine. He sat there and couldn't believe how horribly dilapidated the pub appeared.

"What a shit hole this joint is."

It was a favourite haunt frequented by local abattoir and railroad workers. A wooden sign, faded by the elements, caught his attention. It dangled by chains from a thick, splintery beam and creaked in a strengthening wind. Semi-legible Old English lettering read, "The Old MillShed Pub."

Tied to a newspaper stand, an old blue heeler barked hoarsely at him as he got out. It was a muffled, pitiful sound, like its voice box was ready to cave in. Gunna knelt down and patted it. Its saddened eyes widened and yelped thanks for the attention, if only passing. Gunna had mercilessly shot dogs in the past; greyhounds he owned, which cost him big money when they lost at the track. But, no animal looked so helpless as this little friend.

"Poor little bugger. Yes, you're a good little doggy," he said, and scratched it under the ear. "I'll bring you a beer just as soon as I go kick yer owner's arse and tell him what a piece of shit he is for leavin' ya'out here."

Rubbing against Gunna's legs, the dog yelped a few times.

Gunna stepped into the pub. It was as though he had gone through the gates of hell, briefly enlivening five thousand flies that had dropped by to see what the locals were doing. Dim and seedy, it was an austere and utilitarian place, with scuffed linoleum floors, laminated surfaces, and glass-doored wood coolers spray-painted from a can. An overhead fan cranked noisily. Gunna recognised the song that spun on the turntable in the corner of the smoke-filled room. He laughed.

“Bloody hell, ol’ Slim Dusty and a ‘Pub With No Beer.’ Now, there’s a drinkin’ tune if ever I heard one.”

The pub was liberally arrayed with rough, boisterously drunk, and dangerous looking fellows, most with copious tattoos, long hair, and scraggly beards.

“Like a filthy ZZ Top convention,” he muttered darkly, but correctly.

A couple at one end engaged in a rather noisy argument. The woman spewed a loud blast of obscenities before leaving her companion and those that had taken his side — an unkempt rabble in singlets, dirty shorts, and heavy leather workers boots. She stormed angrily to the other end of the bar where her work pals with big beer guts and messy hair gathered. In her defence, they shouted abuse and exchanged further obscenities. The noise between the groups rapidly peaked. Suddenly, a single half-filled pint glass flashed through the air from one end of the bar to the other. Beer sprayed wildly in a variety of arcs. The glass smashed into a million pieces on the linoleum floor by the door. With surprising agility for a fat man, Gunna jumped out of the way and cast a nervous eye toward the troublemakers. He wasn’t there to turn tail. Money motivated him, and he headed smartly for the bar. Thanks to Mick, a brawny server, the fight quickly died.

“Whaddl’ya ‘ave?” the bartender asked, wiping his forearms with a cloth.

Gunna bellied up to a stack of empty middy glasses not yet collected. “Coopers.”

Two burly gun shearers from Coolongolook occupied badly torn vinyl barstools nearest him. With cold hostility in their faces, both wore shorts and white singlets speckled in sheep’s blood. Massive bellies pushed up against the counter as they pounded down schooners aplenty of frosty cold ale. One of them chased down the booze high with an occasional nicotine rush of a bad smelling fag. In between guzzles, he lifted his head to watch an old black and white on top of the fridge.

“So, how’s the beer here, lads?” Gunna inquired.

One of the shearers stared at him blankly.

“Cold as buggery!”

The obscenities started to flow from the rabble at the far end of the bar once more.

“Oy,” shouted Mick. “Zip yer bloody traps NOW, before I toss youse people all outta ‘ere.”

The rousers quieted obediently.

The bartender turned to the taps and kept his half-lidded eyes on Gunna while he drew the man’s pint.

“So, how’d ya come to find me place?” he asked, and slid the glass down the scuffed wooden counter.

Arresting it, Gunna looked up and recognised genuine curiosity in the man’s eyes.

“Meetin’ a mate o’ mine. You might know ‘im. Kevin Metcalf.” He took a large gulp of beer and wiped his mouth with a trembling hand, still shaken from the flying glass incident.

The bartender calmly swabbed the countertop with a rag.

“You talkin’ ‘bout Kev? Yeah, he’s sittin’ over there. See him? Over by the dunnies.”

His eyes followed the bartender’s finger. He saw a primitive-type smoking at a table. Sure enough, it was Kevin. He grabbed his beer and made tracks across the creaky floor, just as two more glasses let fly—one over the bar, the other exploding on a nearby wall at the entrance to the toilets.

“Strewth!” Gunna adjudged, quickening his step while nervously shielding his beer, too scared to look back. “What a pack’a mad bastards.”

At a rickety table, Kevin sucked on a hand rolled fag, oblivious to everything about him. A horrible stench came from the dozen empty beer cans stacked up like a house. Several ashtrays were filled to the brim with butts. Gunna pulled up a chair and sniffed the enticing scent of a genuine marijuana cigarette.

“G’day Kevin, y’ol bugger,” he said, and shoved out a meaty hand. “You pick the best places fer a meet. This sad joint’s a right nuthouse.”

Kevin stared blankly through Gunna. Ignoring the outstretched hand, he flicked ash on the floor, and scratched his scruffy face with nail-bitten fingers stained in nicotine.

“You got the car?”

“Yeah, Kev. It’s right outside.”

The ex-con’s hair sprung up in all directions from mashed patches, evidence that he hadn’t slept well, or if he had, the appropriate question would be ‘where’? He wore the filthiest pair of shorts imaginable, a soiled singlet, and a pair of worn down thongs.

Fair crack of the whip, Gunna thought, astonished at the man’s frostiness. *I feel ‘bout as welcome as a pork chop in Jerusalem.*

“Well Kev, all I need is seventeen grand cash. Love to stay, mate, but that lot over there’s got me packin’.”

Kevin nodded coldly, took one last deep drag of his roach, then flicked it across the room. Without a word, he grabbed his cigarettes and Zippo, pushed out his chair, and walked for the door. A steady flow of glasses and bottles began to fly up and down the length of the bar. Kevin wasn’t bothered.

“Hey, wait up, Kev,” Gunna cried nervously, and took flight in a lumbering, humorous waltz, seeing the ruckus escalate to violent shouting and fisticuffs now that the culprits’ ammunition had exhausted itself.

At the doorway, Gunna was nearly bowled over by three burly coppers with truncheons pile in. He escaped out onto the sidewalk, relatively unscathed.

Kevin gave the Indian’s Honda a half-hearted glance. He seemed satisfied with the way Gunna had described it, pulled out a fist full of cash and handed it over, just as police dragged out several troublemakers, kicking and shouting profanity. Gunna could scarcely believe his eyes as one of the uniforms slugged a prisoner in the back, then went to work with his billy stick. He grimaced at the show of blood flow from a deep gash that ran the breadth of the rabble-rouser’s brow.

A heartless man, Kevin cared nothing for what was going on in the background.

“Gunna, I gotta hit the frog and toad. I was up ‘til sparrow’s fart this mornin’. Gotta go sleep off this hangover I sentenced myself to at the Rooty Hill RSL. Where the keys to this pig?”

“Up on the visor, Kev,” Gunna replied, still counting his money as though he didn’t trust him.

THIRTY SEVEN [OUT ON THE HARBOR]

THE SKIES OVER WATSONS Bay resembled a pale blue Monet backdrop. Above the ferry wharf at Doyles, hundreds of seagulls dove in and out of the bay, feeding on a school of whiting. Rippled waters lapped gently against the azure blue hull of a very stylish, futuristic super yacht, *Laydown Buyer*. Lazily it rocked in the shallows at its mooring, its bow almost aground on the beach. Easily eighty feet long, its pedigree and distinction befitted an Arab Sheik or European royalty. Her twin diesels could easily catapult the Italian monster in a blink of an eye to outperform most cruisers half her size. She was one of Fatty’s toys, a present to himself for selling a parcel of land up at Noosa Heads three years ago.

The buyers, a nefarious group of Hong Kong Triads, then, wanted to develop the 300-acre tract into a casino. One who kept his finger in the pie, Fatty retained a silent ten percent ownership. When the Chinese tried to muscle their application for a gaming license through political channels, a background check found them linked to the underworld. That killed off their dreams for easy money. Too late perhaps for the Chinese. Not so for Fatty, who had gotten a tip about the investigation from an insider who owed him, and sold off his interest well before the decision.

Inside the saloon, its ultra-chic décor whispered black tie. Reminiscent of the finest hotels, her rich interior exuded unmatched quality, accented by lacquered finishes and burl-oak veneer contrasts.

Fatty lounged on a long, curved settee made of crocodile skin. A hunter of game, he revelled in possessing the only such hideously expensive factory option in the world. Casually dressed, he looked in a chipper mood. His leg draped over the side, he had the newspaper spread out on his lap. He perused the auto section. Every so often, he chuckled at the lame ads from competitors. On a side table was a wrapping full of huge skinned prawns. He dipped one in cocktail sauce then took a bite.

“My oath, that Tiger’s fresh.”

He picked up a Bloody Mary off the table and took a swig of its ultra-spicy mixture. He coughed and spluttered.

“Strewth, Jules! Couldn’t be any bloody hotter, could it?”

From a leather stool across the room, Julie smirked, amused by Fatty’s chagrin. She buried her face back in the pages of her *Cosmo*. She would have loved to spike his drink

again, at another time, if given the chance. Her little trick got her the right amount of attention. She craved having other's eyes upon her, and dressed for show. Her revealing yellow thong bikini fairly glowed against a handsome tan. A see-through white lace shirt tossed for effect about her shoulders did nothing to diminish its appeal. And those shapely tanned legs of hers. Casually crossed, they dangled like poetry. She lifted her head over the magazine and watched Fatty return to his reading. A sulky frown betrayed her boredom. She was used to getting her way and hated to compete, especially with a newspaper of all things. His tempting stash of seafood gave her an idea. She slipped from the bar and tiptoed over.

Fatty perused the sports section and scanned a list of football odds, reviewing what the bookies offered on the Swans game against Brisbane this Sunday. He hoped to be up there for the game. It was an excuse to see Marilyn. His peripheral vision caught a hand reach for his meal. His reflexes first rate, he slapped it.

"Hey, those are mine."

Julie pulled back her hand. "Ouch, that's not fair."

She stormed back to her barstool, empty-handed. She pouted and rubbed her wrist like he had broken it, without eliciting his sympathy at all. Not so much as a glance did he give her. The chime of Fatty's mobile disturbed the moment, a Frank Sinatra piece. He thrust his paper to the floor and eyed his watch: 10:05 a.m.

"Five bloody minutes late."

Across town, at Graden Holden, Billy locked his door on salesmen holding deals so he could report the sales bookings from yesterday.

"Hi, Jim. We finished with ninety-five units. Not bad for a Thursday. Two were over eight grand profit, three at seven. The rest was fleet business, twenty to an airline company, and the remainder were minis to some weak suck salesmen I'm 'bout ready to fire. Oh, had one Indian who bought one of those high-miler grunts. Gunna already presold his trade." He hesitated. "Oh, and some arsehole from the Trade Commission served me with ninety-five thou in fines. Not as bad as last month, if that's any consolation. We're on track for a hundred-eighty units. Tomorrow we'll double that."

Fatty's eyes warbled in their sockets. "Put the feelers out. I need to know who's behind all these fines and where we're screwin' up. I've had six straight months of this crap. Can't stay profitable and keep my number one status with the Trader's Association if this shit keeps on."

Clouded in worry, he hung up. The phone rang again. "What now," he muttered testily, and answered it.

High atop Chifley Plaza skyscraper in downtown Sydney, the Board of Australian Finance had concluded a special session, reviewing Fatty's businesses. From her office beside the boardroom, the chairman's secretary broke the news.

"Mr. Graden, Judy Morris here. Mr. Crompton and the executive committee have made a decision on your recent application for fifteen million dollars in additional floorplan for your Mercedes store. The unfortunate death of Mr. Holton, your guarantor, heavily influenced their decision, which I regret to inform you was an unfavourable one. Now,

Mr. Crompton did go on to say that, if you could move some inventory fairly quickly, then they would reassess their position.”

Fatty paced about, fuming while he listened.

Julie just stared at him. “Jim, is everything alright?”

Stonily, Fatty strode over to the bar and poured a stiff belt of whisky, then disappeared around the corner and headed upstairs to the flybridge.

Above decks, he stood atop the curved flight of stairs and breathed in the crisp salt air. The heat of the early afternoon sun felt soothing on his face.

“That toofy yank prick,” he muttered, riled at the company’s chairman. “Mongrel gives me the bloody irrits. Bugger him if he don’t like me hidin’ cars when his floorplan checkers come knockin’. Sick of the bastards anyway. Now I’ll have to handle this myself.”

He peered into the distance, toward Bradleys Head, and the serenity of the harbour behind his yacht. The blanket of water glistened and yawed in a soothing tempo. Belting down his drink, he marched to the helm and fired the engines. He looked over the bow, where people lounged at tables for lunch. Below him, on the forward deck, lay Rachel, topless and spread-eagled. She was laid out like a delicatessen. Her hand disappeared inside her tiny thong bikini bottom. She was getting herself off. She revelled in her opportunity for public exhibitionism and put on a good show. Fatty thought when he was done with Julie, he might enjoy a dip into that porn queen’s pond.

He sounded the horns and scanned the promenade. “Where’s that little bastard?”

A young man stood on the wharf chatting up a pretty teenage blonde in a string bikini.

“Hey Joe,” Fatty yelled, and gunned the engines, “drop the tart, mate! We got work to do. Pull in the ropes.”

Joe blew the girl off and vaulted the teak railing. Releasing the bow ropes, he rushed aftward.

The girl, a Jessica Simpson clone with store bought titties, glanced up and poked her tongue at Fatty, then stomped off back to her father’s table.

“Oh yeahhh, baby. And I do love spunky tarts at that,” Fatty said, licking his chops.

The thrusters were engaged and the aft lines cast. The yacht moved sideways from the dock. With sufficient clearance, Fatty tapped the reversers and the cruiser glided away from the beach. Pirouetting gracefully, it left the shallows of the bay, traversing a slow path through much smaller boats at anchor. The sun dipped behind fluffy clouds as the cruiser rounded Vacluse Point. Passing stately mansions that lined its priceless sandstone shores, the ship increased speed in the moderate chop. A heady wind blew through Fatty’s hair. He slipped on his Wayfarers and his mouth curled to form a perverse smile. A jaded, high speed freak, he opened the Detroit diesels wide out. The ship’s wide chimes came into play. A spectacular sight blocked the view astern as tortured water from the drives created a towering rooster tail. Approaching thirty-eight knots, her bow rode level with the horizon as she began her charge across the harbour. Nothing disturbed the equilibrium of a yacht of this scale. She ran level and true, headed quickly for the Harbour Bridge.

The cruiser approached a squadron of 18-foot skiffs locked in battle off Bradleys Head. Fatty eased back on the throttles and glided past the leaders, waving them yield from a distance. In the clear, he opened the throttles again. Fiddling with the autopilot, he programmed the coordinates for the half-hour trip to White Bay. The mechanism engaged, and he saw the green light on the black box blink. He felt the rudders change direction in tune with the coordinates of the GPS. He stood back and watched his vessel, worth millions, drive itself.

A good distance away, beyond the city, Johnny approached the Gladesville Bridge. Behind the wheel of his big black BMW, he ascended the wide concrete carriageway spanning Parramatta River. All he could think about was his destination, the Hunters Hill Hotel, a popular pub. His throat was as dry as a Pommie's towel!

"God, the both of us are gonna be flat out drinkin' like lizards soon," he said, and looked over at Hero, who muffled a yawn.

The Queenslander had a twelve pack of beer between his sandals. Convinced he could no longer resist the temptation, he busted into the case of Brisbane Bitter. Jet lag asserted itself, and he dropped two soldiers in steady succession. Stacking the empties behind his seat, they clanged in tune to Johnny's cornering. He ripped into another.

"Hero, you're a bloody mess, mate. You gotta stop this drinkin'." He felt tempted. "Oh, bugger it. Pass us one."

Hero ripped a burp and palmed Johnny a bottle. "I know, Johnny. This is no good, no good at all. But, for some reason, drinkin' makes me feel better."

Johnny ripped the top off and took a hearty swig. "Not for long. You'll probably collapse into some kind of hysterical DT's by Sunday, probably just about the time you board the plane back to Surfers. They'll keep you here in town and zip you up in a straightjacket, then drag yer arse down to the nuthouse. There, they'll likely beat you on the kidneys with big sticks until you straighten out. Maybe hook the battery up. Might do you some good, mate."

Hero was a hard man to reason with. He shrugged and took another mouthful.

From the centre console, Johnny's cell phone rang.

Fatty reached over the shifters and disengaged the autopilot, as the rocky outcrop of Fort Denison loomed off his port quarter.

"Johnny, we gotta problem. I need you down at the Merc holding yard at White Bay in twenty minutes. You know, the wharf we used a coupla months back to smuggle in that ratbag senator from Indonesia." He listened. "Yeah, that private dock near the bauxite terminals. Seems AFC don't believe we can sell cars, so I gotta plan hatched to get us that fifteen million in floorplan quick."

The Opera House passed by to port. He listened to Johnny ramble, then glanced at the ferries lining the commercial wharves at Circular Quay taking on or unloading passengers. The city skyline, where glass skyscrapers rose from the water, composed a magnificent spectacle, worthy of a postcard.

"What? You say you got Hero with you? Good, bring him along. He'll fit in perfectly with what I got planned."

The cruiser glided under the bridge, a heavy span of four stone-block towers and latticework of girders and metal plates. Emerging from its shadows, a fleet of colourful 49er-class skiffs were locked in a tacking duel off his starboard nose. One of them strayed from the pack. Caught in an unexpected breeze, the boat cut across his projected path. Fatty pulled back on the throttles and employed an evasive manoeuvre, turning the cruiser hard-aport to avoid what would have been certain collision.

The novice skipper waved apologetically.

“Hey, choose a finger, ya’ bloody mongrel!” Fatty tossed a stiff bird at the teenager, seen wallowing helplessly with a blown sail. “Good, ya bastard. You bloody well deserve it.”

Nearing the turnoff to Hunters Hill, Johnny slammed on his brakes at an opening in the centre divider. The car’s anti-lock mechanism pulsed violently as he executed a perfect one-eighty. In a cloud of smoke, he punched the accelerator and the big seven series shot off from whence it came; its low profiles screaming along the asphalt in protest.

“Johnny, that bloody well hurt!” complained Hero, after his head bounced unceremoniously off the door pillar.

“Sorry, Hero. Gotta go ‘twenty-to-the-dozen’ and meet up with Jim.”

Hero watched all chance of having a gut full of piss disappear in his side view mirror.

“Yeah? What’s up?”

“Change of plan. The boss wants to see us. Nuthin’ major.”

Johnny glanced over, saw his despondency, and smiled. “No wuckin furies, sport. There’s still time enough fer you ta get yerself shit-faced, so keep your bloody shirt on.”

Hero looked robbed. “Shit! I was lookin’ forward to chattin’ up a barmaid, too.”

Powering by Millers Point, a jut of land where the Maritime Services tower made its presence known, Fatty entered Darling Harbour. He hurriedly jerked back on the throttles. The backwash crashed up against his cruiser’s swim platform as he reduced his speed to an idle. He loafed by a ship, a gypsum carrier, taking on new cargo. One who had experienced more than his share of run-ins with the Water Police, and a glove-box full of tickets to prove it, he risked a stiff fine and probably jail time if they caught him breaking wake here again. The government workers up in the tower, their binoculars trained on him, evaluated his movement.

Julie walked up and rubbed her bikini top and breasts against the back of his polo shirt. More interested in steering his cruiser than playing silly-buggers, he didn’t respond to her seductive ploy. But, the jingle of ice cubes against crystal soon piqued his interest, and he turned. He eyed her captivating smile and took the glass.

“Thanks for the scotch, Jules.”

She cuddled up. “Jim, why are we down here at the docks? Are we headed in?”

A small, empty wharf lay off his starboard point, fifty feet ahead. Happy with the drift, he turned and gave her a half-hearted smile.

“Yep, ‘fraid so.”

She tossed her arms around his neck. Her eyes narrowed seductively.

“You need anything, big boy?”

He studied her look, saw hurt in her eyes, and smiled warmly. Deep down, at a certain level, and as far fetched as it sounded, he cared about another’s feelings, those he didn’t

consider a threat. She hadn't yet shown her claws. Softly, he caressed her arms as though she might mean the world to him.

"No, not right now, pretty one. But thanks."

He gripped her shoulders with his big mitts and kissed her deeply. She fell into the moment and melted under his spell.

He broke away, startled. From the corner of one eye, the dock was uncomfortably close. He snatched back the throttles into crash reverse and spun the wheel hard apart. Julie stood back, impressed with his skill at the wheel.

Out on the foredeck, Joe felt the sudden jolt of the screws wind in emergency reverse. His body lurched forward and he grabbed the rail for support. The wharf struck at one o'clock.

"Chuck the bloody line, Joe," yelled Fatty, gunning back more on his port engine. "Jesus Christ, it ain't bush week."

His deckhand tossed the rope and it hitched tightly about the wooden pole, as Fatty brought the ship alongside. Thumping the pilings aft, Fatty moved the shifters into neutral and switched off the engines. Joe raced aft to secure her there.

"Probably just a graze," he muttered, miffed at himself for having risked the ship for a piece of arse.

"Guess that's why they invented Bondo." He disappeared below. "Go read a magazine or take a bath, Jules." His words floated up the stairs faintly. "We're gonna be here for a while."

THIRTY EIGHT [BRIEFING THE BOYS]

JOHNNY AND HERO STOOD out on the dock. In Hang Ten shorts, Tommy Bahama shirts, and sandals, they looked the cut and polish of catalogue models on a photo shoot at Bondi than Fatty's trusted.

Fatty leapt the short distance to the jetty and walked up to his men. He slapped Hero's shoulder.

"Ya bloody tough Queenslander. You did me a fine job at the ponies a coupla days ago. So, how's the Gold Coast these days? Still full of stupid bimbos and wannabes?"

A tooth pick dangling from his lips, Hero squinted in the sunlight.

"Yeah Jim, still the same. Hasn't changed much since you bagged that rotten old broad up at Southport a few months back. What was her name?" he said, tapping his chin. "Oh yeah, Roxy."

"What, that old stripper?" Fatty chortled, taken to task. "Nah mate, you got the story all bloody wrong, as per bloody usual. That licker fancied you, ya bastard." He crossed his arms and gave Hero, who thought it was funny, an austere look. "You know that that bitch called me 'bout four weeks ago. Oh, and thanks for givin' out my private number, ya bludga."

He looked at his watch. "Johnny, we got work to do. It's already two-fifteen. Don't leave us much time."

Fatty led the way up the dock, towards a holding yard bordered by chain-link fencing. They passed by a foreman's trailer erected on blocks, and walked through an open gate. Fatty stopped, draped his meaty arms over their shoulders, and lazily pointed a finger.

"Some of this shit's gonna disappear in the next few days, gentlemen. And we're gonna get all we can."

Fifty Mercs sat about the concrete flats, wrapped in plastic. Unduly delayed by an organised go-slow over at Federal Customs, they shared space with hundreds of other imports. Fatty had been told they were on strike. He knew better.

Johnny's jaw dropped. "Wadd'ya mean, Jim?"

"I mean what I just said. I got a Benz dealer yobbo up in Brisbane who's already said he'd take half of 'em. I know another bloke who, I'm pretty sure, will pay me for the remainder. We'll truck the cars and stick these dealers in the process. A mate o'mine up north runs a chop shop. He'll pay big money for import parts, 'specially when they're all Mercs." He chuckled. "Seems those toofy banana-eaters up in Queensland don't know how to avoid car accidents."

"B-but Jim, what about the finance company. They'll be lookin' for this stuff. They do their flooring check next—"

"Screw Australian Finance!" Fireballs spawned in Fatty's eyes, a dangerous situation. "I got someone heavy on the inside for this one. I'm payin' him to watch our backs."

Fatty read Johnny's doubt and simmered, if only marginally.

"Listen mate, there's a big earn in this one for everyone. And, my caper gets rid of all this stale shit I'd have to otherwise give away at a fire sale. By the time these crates get compliance plates, they might as well be last year's models. Still don't know who's screwin' me over." There was hesitancy. "Anyway, look at all these dud colours Germany sent me. Hell, my mates livin' on the point at Vaucluse aren't poofta's. Couldn't see 'em drivin' somethin' beige or green. No siree. Men buy these things. M-E-N! We're the ones who make the money go 'round in this world, RIGHT! And we all want red or black convertibles to pull the birds."

A glint of a smile crossed Johnny's face.

Fatty turned to the Queenslander. "Well Hero, you in?"

The caper sounded like music to his ears. "Just give me the word, boss."

Fatty patted them both on the shoulder. "That's what I like to hear, boys. Everything positive."

The foreman's trailer, typical of any blue-collar worker's domicile, was a dreary place in. Every bit a male domain, stale air was all you could breathe, and no air con. A beat-up oak desk was against the back wall. Flanked by metal chairs, an old withered leather chair stood behind.

Fatty walked in, held the door open while his men entered, then closed the door. He strolled over to the desk, reached into a drawer, and pulled out a cigar. Sitting on the table's edge, he lit up, and puffed smoke rings in the air.

"Hero, you're gonna play a big part in my caper." He chomped down on the cheap stogie. "We'll wholesale the Benz's to those two dealer blokes up in Brisbane. I been told

my cars will finally clear customs in three days, the lazy bastards. So, I'll go ahead and book five car carriers tonight to transport 'em outta' here Monday."

Fatty leaned forward with an evil glare. With a confidential whisper, he continued, "But they won't make it. Nah! Instead, they're gonna end at a chop shop up north in Ipswich with my greasy wop mate from Italy. Alright so far?"

The men nodded.

"Okay, the trucks will be hijacked at the Clybucca Truckstop past Kempsey.. by my drivers.." He pointed to Hero. "Your blokes, mate. It'll happen at night while the drivers are goffin' off. I got me a lead driver in mind who'll make sure that happens. Hero's people will whack 'em over the heads and rob 'em. You know, rough them up a bit." He shadow boxed a few punches for effect. "The attack has to be believable, just so these truckers stay in the clear. Now, everyone expects the trucks to head north up the Pacific Highway. But, Hero and his crew will piss off in a different direction.. west on the Oxley, then inland through Bendemeer and Armidale, and up the New England to Warwick.."

A native of the region where Fatty intended to travel, Hero vividly pictured the convoy enter the quiet, rural town of Bendemeer in the wee hours. Eerily devoid of life, a chill was in the air. Beside the road, a blue heeler, tied to a parked pickup truck, barked at his passing headlights. Otherwise, it was dead.

"..then the trucks'll head up the Cunningham and arrive at the chop-shop in Ipswich at about three in the morning." Fatty ashed his cigar along the desk. "Gentlemen, that gives us until eight, maybe nine o'clock before all hell breaks loose."

Fatty wore a deadpan expression. "Make no mistake. When you work out what those cars are worth to a professional stripper like my wog mate, we're talkin' easily sixteen million. Plus whatever we can rifle from insurance. That's a heap of dough for forty brand new Mercs, most of 'em convertibles. When those trucks don't lob into Brisbane, you can bet yer arses the cops will be all over the Pacific Highway like stink on shit." He studied his men. "Well, that's the plan. You blokes in?"

They were speechless. Quite a plot. Such audacity! How in the world did he think he could get away with it? Their minds ran wild with doubt and questions. It was up to Fatty to fill in the blanks. As resourceful and tenacious as he was, both had the utmost confidence that he would. The lure of a huge paycheck was too overwhelming and they nodded.

"Good." Fatty looked at his watch. "It's already three. Hero, I want you to come with me. I'll take your car, Johnny. Julie's on board. My deckhand will take the boat back to the house. Ride back and wait for me there."

Fatty and Hero marched for Johnny's BMW, while Johnny trotted back to the cruiser. Fatty arrived at the car and tapped the remote. A thought angered him.

"Fuckin' Rowan owes me two hundred grand, Hero. Plus bloody interest! Gave the little prick 'til four o'clock today to pay up. If he don't turn up in an hour, that moron will be beggin' for a bullet to the head. Mark my words!"

THIRTY NINE [PAYMENT]

FATTY MOTORED THROUGH LEAFY streets and into the main strip of cafes that comprised Erskineville. There, an eclectic collection of storefronts, with windows full of hippie beads, second-hand clothes, and exhortations to join the Cat Protection Society. He narrowly missed a woman pushing a pram across the street. Rowan's death was on his mind.

Up the highway, he was comforted to be back in familiar territory. He crossed the double lines, and tore under an open roller door and onto the floor of Dealz Auto Auctions. He slammed on the brakes, jumped from the car, marched towards a hidden stairwell in the corner of the showroom, and went upstairs.

Walking into his office, he flopped into the leather chair, and tossed the keys on his blotter, while Hero made for the sofa. Both men lounged without a flicker of movement. Finally, Fatty swivelled around and glanced at the clock hanging above Hero's head. There was a little time left.

Feeling the after-effects of his flight, Hero rose and walked over to the bar. He lifted a decanter from the tray, removed the stopper, and poured himself a generous shot. A fruity aroma filled the air.

"Hey Jim, wanna scotch?"

Fatty stared at the clock. It ticked towards four o'clock. The sound of ice cubes clinking in Hero's glass brought him around.

"Yeah, mate. Neat."

Hero walked a drink over. Fatty took a healthy swig. He stared at the almost empty glass, perplexed. The refracting light through the shiny cubes and thick crystal mesmerised him. Hero returned to the sofa. Fatty slammed the glass down on the desk. The loud whack startled Hero. That the crystal didn't shatter into a thousand pieces amazed them both. It wouldn't have mattered to Fatty. He turned and stared at the giant fish tank behind the desk and regained his composure. In his peripheral, he noted the time: 4:03 p.m, and sighed heavily.

"That bloody Rowan's gonna be the death of me yet, Hero. I should'a known he'd do this." He snatched the keys up. "Right, then, let's go find the bastard, shall we."

He grabbed a scuffed up baseball bat from behind the desk and rose. Nicks, scars, and bloodstains along its wooden length betrayed its cruel purpose. Fatty adjusted his pants and marched for the door. A mean snarl thwarted any chance of civility as he slapped the big piece of oak into his palm. Money now wasn't the issue. This was personal!

Fatty stormed across the showroom whilst talking angrily on his cell phone with one of Rowan's colleagues. Annoyed that he wasn't getting the appropriate answers, he swung the bat about, one-handed. He wanted to split heads. Anyone's head at this point! He got behind the wheel of the BMW, chucked the bat behind him, and dialled another number.

"Norm? Jim. You know where Rowan's at?" His blood pressure skyrocketed. "What! You don't know? Whad'ya mean you don't know? Hell, you work with him.. Nah, I already tried his cell. No answer. He's late for our meetin'. I'm out lookin' for him now."

You better find him, mate, or you'll be force-feedin' that son of a bitch baby food through a wired jaw at the hospital if he ever he comes out of his bloody coma!"

FORTY [A NO SHOW]

FATTY DROVE LIKE A man possessed, booting the accelerator through Abbotsford on his way to Sydney Rowers. He remembered the little snake frequented the swank riverfront club most Friday afternoons.

Hero, in the passenger chair, felt uneasy about Fatty's reckless rate of speed through a residential area. He clutched the ceiling strap firmly while the car swerved in and out of moving traffic. A child darting out from any one of a hundred cars parked along the curb wouldn't have stood a chance. He looked out the window and blocked the thought. Glimpses of Canada Bay and the afternoon sun dipping towards the western horizon were but a blur through breaks between quaint waterfront homes. A digital Sinatra melody sounded from the back seat. Fatty gave Hero the thumb to answer it.

"Hello?" Hero smirked and handed the cell phone over. "Guess who?"

He grabbed the phone and barked into it like a pit bull, "Yeah, who's this?" He recognised the voice instantly. His eyes changed into terrifying slits. "Rowan, where in the *hell* are you?"

The BMW entered the roundabout at Blackwall Point Road. Its rear end abruptly thumped the tight three-sixty. A little oversteer and the German tourer was off in the other direction. With excellent responsiveness, it sped through the Hampden Road intersection and ran the red.

Exactly fourteen minutes later, the Bavarian tourer sped into Haberfield. It crossed the double lines in defiance to a chorus of loud toots, squealing brakes, and swearing from those cut off. Fatty kicked the accelerator. The whine of its throaty V8 reverberated off the side of the building as it rocketed up the laneway. He went sideways through the back gate and raced up the incline of the parking lot. Rowan stood inside the auction showroom beside his prized white '58 Silver Cloud. A cruel leer crossed Fatty's face as he barrelled onto the showroom floor, determined to play out his plan.

With fear in his eyes, Rowan watched the BMW bear mercilessly down on him. He dove out of the way, exposing his pride and joy to certain destruction. A deafening squeal bounced about the walls as the two-ton German sedan slid to a halt, mere inches from the classic's sterling grille section. Rowan picked himself off the floor as Fatty jumped out.

"Oh God," exclaimed Rowan, horror-struck at the sight of Fatty laughing hysterically. He felt insanely at peril. He pulled a comb from behind a handkerchief in his lapel and nervously straightened the few remaining strands of hair. The outcome of this matter depended on Fatty's mood. His chances didn't look good. He felt thankful that he wasn't dead already.

Fatty snarled. With the baseball bat concealed behind his back, he began a slow death march. He savoured every precious moment that he held Rowan in suspense. He anticipated Rowan's gutless reaction, how he would surely run at sighting the bat. No, Fatty wanted to see him grovel and squirm like the dog he was. When he got within range, he pulled it out.

Rowan fell apart. His angst-ridden eyes slid toward the open roller doors and envisioned freedom of the pedestrian walk beyond. If he and Fatty both moved for it now, they would arrive together. All kinds of thoughts began to run through his head.

With a cagey smirk, Hero leaned against the BMW. Rowan saw him, and all hope vanished. He knew there was no place to run. He dropped to his knees and prayed for clemency.

"Jim, no, no! I've got your money, mate."

Fatty took a few practice swings above his cowering quarry.

"Why are you late?" Fatty knelt down, met him eye to eye, and grabbed his neck. "And don't call me mate. I'm not your bloody mate."

"T-the bank—"

"Yeah, what about the bank?" He tightened his grip.

"Jim, I... I can't breathe."

"That's the idea, you little jack-off. GO ON!"

"Jim... t-the bank stalled. They d-didn't have enough money in the safe, so they made me wait. I left downtown at three-thirty, I swear."

Fatty let go, stood up, and folded his arms across his chest. He was inclined to hear the rest.

Rowan rose to his feet and brushed off his pinstripe suit.

"C'mon mate, I ain't got all day!"

"Jim, the t-traffic was heavy coming over here. I'm sorry." He pointed at his Rolls. "The money's in the boot."

Fatty pushed past Rowan and strode to his car. He tried the trunk, but it was locked. Fingers snapped.

"The keys, dickhead."

Rowan forced a smile and tossed them over. "Sorry, Jim. It's the b-black key."

Opening the lid, Fatty grinned at two shiny black satchels sitting on the mat. He tested their weight. His mouth crimped evilly at one corner as he dropped them to the floor and popped the locks. A beautiful sight, he thought. His eyes gleamed at the stacks of crisp fifties and hundreds piled to the brim. The amount looked to be all there, plus another hundred thousand in interest he demanded.

Rowan saw Fatty's mood lighten and smiled. "Jim, it's all there."

Fatty stared intently at him, scheming payback for the years of anguish the little dweeb had caused him. Loan sharks like Fatty could never let one go. It'd be bad for business. A wave of hatred inflamed his senses.

Rowan gulped at the raging fire he saw in Fatty's eyes. "What? That's what you wanted, right, Jim?"

Fatty assumed an arrogant stance. He smirked and breathed heavily. His expression revealed utter disdain for Braddock. The signs were all there. Fatty was ready to explode.

Rowan was petrified. Like the foretelling of a cataclysmic event, he knew he couldn't reason with this extreme man, a foe known widely to be dangerous and unpredictable.

“C’mon, Jim. So I was a little late. You got your money, friend. Now we’re square, right?”

Fatty glanced over at Hero, who looked quite bored with it all. Fatty snapped his fingers. The baseball bat sailed his way. Catching the slugger in mid-air, Fatty gazed into Rowan’s beady eyes. He gloated over his power to control another human, slapping the bat into his hand.

Rowan dropped to his knees while Fatty wielded a few practice shots like a batsman coming to plate. Satisfied, he parked the bat over Rowan’s head. Like a medieval executor, he ranged the shot, then slowly lifted it.

Rowan shielded his head with his arms. Tears streamed down his face.

“N-no, Jim. Please, not that.”

Fatty felt adrenaline surge through his arms. How he despised spineless, grovelling cowards. Real men took their lumps! All Rowan could do was mumble a final prayer. Fatty’s reptilian brain would normally impel his taut muscles to thrust downward and end Rowan’s life. Instead, Fatty relaxed his grip. His failure to act posed a quandary. If he did not strike, it would be bad news. His reputation stood to suffer. Within an hour, word on the street would be, “Graden’s gone soft.” Yet, he feared to strike, worried about punishment in the afterlife. Fatty, though not a religious man, believed that. Wholeheartedly! Superstition controlled, to a certain extent, his actions, almost as much as the seven deadly sins did. The baseball bat rested on his shoulder while he thought.

Bugger! I gotta do somethin’.

He eyed the Silver Cloud. Reflexively, he launched into the roof with a barrage of powerful blows, pulverizing the Blatchley-designed carriage. A series of dull thuds resonated about the showroom. The noise stirred Rowan’s attention. He opened his eyes and watched the escalating attack on his prized possession. The back glass popped from the rubber seals, struck the lid, and shattered into a thousand pieces. He shielded his face for fear of flying splinters.

“Let’s just call that interest, Rowan.” He kicked him smartly in the arse. “Now piss off.”

Rowan scurried to his feet and dashed around to the driver’s door. With trembling hands, he tried every key in the lock. Finally, he found the correct one and jumped in.

Hero guffawed at the little man’s jitters. Fatty stared with a menacing scowl and clenched fists as Rowan tried to start the engine.

“And don’t hit the BMW, you little bastard.”

Rowan struggled with the column shifter and tried to jiggle it free. Finally it unlocked, and he was able to crank over the classic’s inline-six. It fired. He engaged reverse and backed out of the showroom. Kangarooing the accelerator as he gathered speed, he headed for escape and the refuge of Parramatta Road behind.

Fatty and Hero watched with keen interest as the Rolls shot backwards like a bullet. Arms crossed, both looked like two peas in a pod standing together. They anticipated imminent disaster, a sure bet cinched by the way Rowan sped from them. Prospects of the spectacle appealed to Fatty’s passion particularly.

“Watch ol’ screwball, Hero! This ought’a be worth the price of admission.”

The Rolls careened out under the roller doors and sailed over the curb. Entering the late afternoon traffic, its engine died in the outer lane. Drivers swerved wildly to avoid it, protesting with their horns. Rowan finally restarted the car and clicked it into drive. He crept away. A rusted out Holden panel-van, with surfboards bungee-corded to the roof, slammed into the back. The impact propelled the white classic with a vibrant burst of acceleration. The front wheels thumped over the gutter, and the car mounted the footpath. Sideswiping a light pole, it crashed into the wall. Steam rose from the broken radiator. The once-elegant Rolls in flawless condition finished its ride a crumpled mass of junk. Gone were the classy, contoured lines that flowed from the roof. The rear deck buckled upward and was smashed in a good two feet.

Hunched over the wheel, Rowan came to. Shaking his head, a powerful migraine racked from a nasty bruise to his forehead. He felt blood trickle from his nose. Bruised and shaken, with minor cuts over his face and hands, he wasn't seriously injured. When he tried to open the door, it was wedged stuck. He laid his shoe into the door and struggled to spring it open.

Fatty threw back his head, bursting into a deep, throaty, derisive laugh. He cackled until his face turned purple and he choked. Way over the top, his excessively offensive uproar recompensed a lifetime of insult and injury. He slapped Hero hard on the back.

"See. Told you it'd be good, Hero. Bloody idiot! He couldn't organise a screw in a brothel with a fist full of fifties."

Fatty grabbed the black satchels from the ground.

"Screw Rowan," he growled in a firm undertone. "I'll send him a bill for the damage his Roller did to my building. Time we got outta here."

He used the clicker on the key-chain to open the doors. He set the bags inside.

"I reckon we've had enough fun for one day, don't you think?"

Hero snapped out of his wild fascination with Rowan's luckless predicament. An ambulance and two police cars arrived on the scene.

Fatty reached into his pocket. "Hero, here's a coupla hundred. Go hail a cab and head to my house. I gotta go meet someone and get these cars sold, pronto. Anyone asks, I'll be a coupla hours."

FORTY ONE [THICK AS THIEVES]

FATTY WALKED INTO THE swank America's Cup Bar inside the downtown Hilton. It was a pretty decent early evening crowd, mostly Friday night workers who had knocked off. In the far corner, a gorgeous woman with long brown hair and dressed in a tight red leather full-length outfit sat alone. Fatty strode over.

"Evenin' Marilynn." He pushed into the booth and kissed her. "You look scrumptious as ever."

She sipped her martini. “Thanks, Jim.”

They sat without speaking. She stared down at her drink. All he could do was ogle her curvature. He slipped his arm around her shoulders, and she lay her head against him. They felt united by a peculiar, earnest, warm air.

“Marilynn, need you to call yer hubby. Rod approached me a month ago and expressed interest in takin’ half my Benzes in storage. I told him to bugger off. Now I need all forty of ‘em gone. I already got one of his competitors in banana-land takin’ half. I’ll give Rod the same — cost less holdback, and another four percent if he signs the check in twenty-four hours. That’s a quick two hundred grand for his trouble and all of ‘em convertibles, like he wanted.”

She reached for her mobile. “I’ll try him. Think he’s at the gym.” She would do almost anything for Jim Graden.

Rod answered. Marilynn spoke for several minutes while the waiter served drinks. She nodded her head. “Rod said he’ll fax you a P.O. tomorrow morning. He’s asking how you’d like the four million dollar check written.”

Fatty twirled her hair. “Make it out to Australian Finance.”

She passed his wishes on, sent a kiss through the phone, then hung up.

Fatty proposed a toast. “Well Marilynn, here’s to our deal.”

She patted him lightly on the leg. “No, dear. Here’s to us.”

Fatty sat silently and pondered her meaning. Finally, he sculled his and slid the empty aside.

“Somethin’s been troubling me.”

She sidled closer. “Let me guess. It’s your son, isn’t it, baby.”

He stared glumly at the table and nodded. “Mitch ran out of leads. The Bronco was stolen, and the cops never found any fingerprints. My private dick couldn’t find those old people that ran up to me after the car exploded. Like a UFO took ‘em. Haven’t been seen since. It’s as if whoever was behind my boy’s death didn’t exist. And the bloody cops don’t wanna help. Hell, my barrister’s still tryin’ to get the police report, but they’re givin’ him a bloody hard time. Sayin’ its part of a current investigation.”

“What about the truck?”

“What do you mean?”

“The Bronco. What happened to it?”

“Dunno. Probably went through an insurance auction. Anyway, I don’t wanna talk about it. I’m still hot ‘bout that car blowin’ up outside the auction a few days ago.”

“Yes, that was tragic. Luckily, no one was hurt. Have you heard any more?”

“Bloody Harry Edwards and his band of uniforms came knockin’.”

“Hmm, that name sounds familiar. But where?”

“Yeah, well he didn’t mind sayin’ that he and his mob are keepin’ tabs on me. Hell, he’s probably got me watched right now.”

A man in a brown suit sat alone at the bar. Sipping his water, he wasn’t a figment of Fatty’s paranoia. Fatty watched him steal an occasional look in his direction. He wrote notes on a small pad, then tucked it away in the top pocket of his shirt. He continued with his water, trying to keep low key.

An hour later, Fatty drove into the pebbled driveway of his Vaucluse mansion, unaware that a cargo van with heavily tinted glass was parked down the street. The air of his villa had something Mediterranean about it. He entered through the front door, went into the den, and found Johnny on the sofa watching television. Fatty looked around.

“Where’s Hero and the girls?”

Johnny muted the big screen. “Oh hey, Jim. Hero’s up the road with Rachel at the local boozier gettin’ drunk, and I think Julie’s walkin’ ‘bout the house somewhere. Try upstairs.”

Julie made herself comfortable inside Fatty’s office. Sitting at his desk, she sifted through the drawers. She was getting paid very well to find something on him. Anything! The lifestyle she enjoyed, the luxuries she craved, all cost money. Lots of it. Humming to herself, she figured there was a whole lot more she could have. After all, she deserved it. Even if she did earn it on her back or by playing the spy. She would have to be careful though. One thing she knew, Jim Graden was no fool. With one long pink nail, she opened a file just a bit to peek, to see whether there was anything interesting inside. Nothing but a bunch of faxes and boring correspondence. Certainly nothing private, illegal, or valuable. Her lips formed a pout. She was short of time now. Already she knew Jim Graden wouldn’t stay interested in her for long, no matter how good a lay she was.

Fatty opened the door. “Julie, what are you doin’ in here?”

Julie rose from the chair, taken off guard. She stayed cool so as not to draw suspicion. A professional in every sense, her expression bore a child-like trust. She felt her heart pound like a drum while moisture pooled between her legs. God, the man got her off. He was better than any of the men she had ever done for money. Even more than wealth, she craved sex like a coke addict hungered for the drug.

“Oh, waiting for you,” she said in an innocent voice. She covertly slid the drawer shut with her knee. *God! That was a bugger of a close call*, she thought. Coyly, she blew him a kiss and smiled brilliantly, showing the gleaming white teeth that had cost her parents a fortune. After their deaths, she had gone through the inheritance in less than five years. Now, she had to earn it her own way. Why not screwing her way to the top?

“The Tyson fight is startin’ soon on pay-per-view. Wouldn’t want to miss it, would we?”

“No, of course not, sweetie,” she replied, and accompanied him below. He put his arm around her slender waist. She nuzzled against him like a kitten. She thought the purr was a nice touch as well.

They walked into the den together. Johnny lounged on the couch, his eyes glued to the big screen. A bout between angry midget wrestlers piqued his interest. He burst into laughter as one of the ‘mini-men’ slammed his challenger to the canvas.

Julie watched Johnny bawl in mirth. Inside her mind, she still plotted revenge for him. No man ever turned Julie Moss down the way he had on the voyage home today. Hell, she was bored to tears with ‘Jim baby’ who had shown more interest in his boat than her. It pissed her off. Rach had already popped her own cork up on deck for Jim’s amusement. She wanted a man to top her off. Jim was too busy. All she asked Johnny for was a little

casual sex. She remembered the arsehole shaking his head and uttering, “Nope. Don’t piss in the boss’s pool.”

As Johnny’s eyes met hers, she froze him with her glare. *Dickless wonder*, she pondered. *Probably couldn’t find it to cut if off*. The idea of it made her smile like a vicious, feral cat.

The phone rang. Johnny reached for it.

“Jim, it’s for you.”

Fatty took the portable. “Yeah, Graden.”

In her suite at the Double Bay Stamford, Marilyn l lounged in her satin teddy on the sofa.

“Jim, I knew I remembered that name you mentioned back at the Regency. Harry Edwards, the policeman, right? I’d already caught a cab when the bomb went off at your auction house, so I didn’t get to see his face that Wednesday. By the time I got back, he’d already left. But I remember the name.”

In the van parked down the street, two men wearing headsets eavesdropped on Fatty’s conversation.

“..Harry was a detective back then. My late husband, Don Mayberry, had a run-in with him a few years back, just before his death. Harry apparently tried to extort some money. Or something like that. Don never said. Then a couple of weeks later, as our chauffeur left Don’s office in Chatswood and was headed back to the condo, the car blew up. Don should have been in the Bentley. Luckily, he sent George home due to a last minute meeting. I’ve been ever so grateful. But poor George, the sweet dear. Honest as the day was long, he was. And he fostered three Asian girls, too. Now, Jim, your scare a few days ago.. Don’t you think it odd that this cop isn’t far away whenever a bomb goes off?”

Fatty strode over to the window and looked out at the harbour. The water glistened magically in the evening lights.

“Yeah, it all starts to make sense. Edwards, I found out, had spent time in Special Forces as a mine expert, so he knows explosives. But I didn’t think much of it yesterday when Mitch told me. Now you’re tellin’ me this. Shit, sounds like I got a bloody great problem. God, I hate bloody bent coppers.”

Marilynn reached for a handkerchief.

“Jim, I loved Don,” she sobbed. “They found him a few weeks later face down in the Yarra River. Shot. More than once.” She wiped her eyes, took a moment to compose herself, then continued. “After his funeral, I found a large manila envelope in our safety deposit box. It contained, among other documents, a bank statement. The account holders were Don and a company I didn’t recognise. I gave it to the police.”

Fatty slapped his forehead.

“Oh no you didn’t! Tell me you got it back.”

Marilynn blotted her cheeks and eyes.

“No, they never gave it back, Jim. Thankfully, I’m more than a pretty face. I did make copies of everything.... Oh, I held back a packet of photographs. Lots of them. Poor

quality. Very embarrassing, really. Two men... in bed together. All sorts of sick perversions. A man much older, bald, and tall... you know, lanky. He... uh, he looked the dominant one, tied to the bed. The other, a middle-aged man wore a woman's wig and a studded collar about his neck. It looked as though he enjoyed pain. His right arm distinctly showed a knife tattoo. I don't know. It was a dagger of sorts, upside down, with wings over the top. I remember the close up. He, um, was on top, drilling the older man every which way. How can men... *do* that, Jim? I-I mean, it's unnatural. Thank God Don wasn't in any of the pictures. I would have just died. Can't imagine why he had them."

Fatty watched Johnny on the couch surfing channels on the big screen. Julie was over at the bar, flicking through a magazine, bored. Fatty paused and thought about the tattoo.

"That dagger means SAS, Marilyn. He's a commando. Like a US SEAL. Brutal! You've seen my tattoo. Same thing. I need that envelope." He listened to her explain more. "It's in Brisbane, you say? When can you get it to me? By Monday? Good. Quicker the better. Oh, and I wouldn't worry 'bout ol' Don bein' a bloody poof. Not likely. Didn't wanna tell you this before, but I took him to a few strip joints and a massage parlour on his bachelor night. He was jumpin' everywhere, sorry to say, luv."

Fatty hung up the phone, walked over, and grabbed Julie's hand.

"Business, darling?"

"Yeah."

Fatty turned to Johnny. "Turn off the lights when you turn in." He tickled Julie's palm, horny. She smiled and cuddled closer. "Jules and I are goin' ta bed. We'll catch the fight upstairs. Tell Hero he's welcome to one of the rooms downstairs when he gets back in. Oh, and call Taffy tonight. I want the house swept for bugs tomorrow. It's been a coupla months since he's checked the joint for listenin' devices. Tell him to do the office at the auction and the Merc store while he's at it. Can't be too careful with what we got comin' up. I'll call Crompton in the mornin' and set up a meet for Monday. I already sold the cars."

Far to the south of town, at his Miranda home, Harry Edwards entertained Rowan by the pool.

"Still keeping the pressure on Graden's dealerships, Rowan?"

In business attire, Rowan lazed in the banana chair, stirring his Mai Tai.

"Yes, Harry. My brother's doing an excellent job over at the Commission. He's bombarded him with almost a half million in fines this year already. Don't know how he's going to survive."

Harry paced about the pool, swirling the Drambuie in his balloon glass.

"Good. Keep the heat on him, Rowan. My blokes are stakin' him out, listening for anything remotely smelly."

He stared down at the underwater lights sparkling through the ripple of the pool.

"I want this guy's nuts for what he did. Busted me down to a bloody patrolman?"

FORTY TWO [THE CARS ARE LOADED]

MONDAY DAWNED, Chilly And overcast. Clumps of puffy rain clouds gathered over the docks at White Bay and diffused the early sun's struggling rays. In the tranquil holding yard, an engine cranked over. The driver of a new SL revved the motor, higher and higher. Another engine started.. then another.. and another. Hot on each other's tail, the Benz convertibles sprinted about the perimeter, precision-driven in single file. They raced through the open gate, hit the ramp of an idling transporter with a collective thud, and made the steep climb to the upper decks. A section of the holding yard awoke. More luxury roadsters negotiated the tight turns and sped toward the waiting longhaulers. In all, forty brand-new cars, a mix of V8 and V12 SL's worth nearly \$11 million, lined up to be transported.

Johnny and the dock foreman, a fierce, hard-nosed Fijian, stood by the main gate. In hardhat and overalls, the foreman glanced over the paperwork, confirmed everything was in order, and handed the clipboard back to Johnny. They shook hands, and he disappeared. Johnny saw the time shown on the wharf clock: 9:55 a.m.

Downtown, Fatty, looking spiffy in a dark grey Armani suit, pushed through the doors of Chifley Plaza. He entered the lobby and headed for his ten o'clock appointment with the chairman of Australian Finance. Quick-stepping his way across the polished marble floor, he clutched a shiny black Vuitton briefcase made of crocodile. Approaching a bank of elevators, he nodded to an elderly guard sitting on a stool, then eyed an open door, stepped in, and pressed the top floor. He stood back and felt the car rapidly accelerate while the overhead display counted off the floors. The brass panel emitted a resonant, muted dinging. The elevator slowed, softly stopped, and the doors opened into a lavish atrium-style hallway. Fatty stepped out, swallowed to clear his ears, and eyed his watch: 9:57 a.m.

"Good. Couple minutes to spare."

He walked down the hallway towards an open foyer. Off to the side, he took pleasure in the sweeping, panoramic views of the harbour through a wall of plate glass. It was a breathtaking sight. He strolled up to reception. An attractive young blonde with a dignified manner spoke quietly on the phone.

Hmm, very bloody nice! he thought, and predictably felt a bulge in his pants. *Wouldn't mind chuckin' a leg over that.*

The pretty receptionist noted Fatty's suave, mannerly approach, and smiled perversely as though she read his thoughts. "Good morning, sir. You're here to see?"

"Jeff Crompton, your chairman. I'm his ten o'clock."

He watched her dial through, then headed across the polished wood floor to the waiting room. Plopping down in a leather sofa, he unbuttoned his jacket and dropped the briefcase to the side. He looked up at the double-high ceilings. Massive ornate chandeliers dangled down. On the walls were fine oils, and scattered throughout, priceless armoires and hand made furniture worthy of a Sotheby's auction. Everything oozed excess! And that postcard view of the harbour. Stratospheric!

"Jesus, these blokes know how to live."

Over at White Bay, Johnny stood at the gate and supervised the loading of the cars. The five car carriers were approaching eighty percent full. He peered anxiously at his Seiko watch: 10:10 a.m.

“C’mon, Jim, what’s takin’ you so long to call me?”

Fatty observed a conservatively dressed lady appear from a side door. A cheerful woman of early middle years, she walked up in a dignified manner.

“Hello Mr. Graden, I’m Judy Morris, Mr. Crompton’s assistant. The chairman will see you now.”

Fatty grabbed his briefcase and followed.

They entered a long hallway lined with exquisite Persian rugs. Fatty was impressed at its overpowering elegance. Portrait after portrait of past chairmen lined the cherry wood panelling, while, interspersed at twenty feet intervals, 19th century sofas of the Regency period jutted against the wall. He slowed to a stroll and studied each painting, the next more carefully than the last. He smirked at some of the condescending poses.

“What a bunch of frickin’ egotistical loafers. I’ve blown better heads off beers.”

Judy waited by two massive wood carved doors.

Fatty caught up.

“Sorry, Judy.”

“That’s quite all right, Mr. Graden.” She pushed open a door. “Everyone coming down this hallway for the last twenty years has done the same. You can go on in.”

Fatty walked through the doorway and was in awe. All about him, the world he stood in befitted the interior of a manor in the Hamptons than an office in downtown Sydney. It was pompous and narcissistic, a ‘statement’ which supported a man with a richly overinflated ego; someone powerful, influential, superior, pathological, an intellect. And bloody dangerous!

Fatty began his walk. The office seemed to stretch for miles in one direction. Admiring the rich American *Ivy League* decor, he glanced up. A mosaic-tiled cathedral ceiling with a tempered plastic dome touched the heavens. Through the shield, puffy clouds dawdled over the skyscraper.

“Strewth, someone’s full of bloody self importance. Got nibs on himself, I’ll bet.”

Fatty entered a rotunda. Its panels and cornices were made of solid black walnut and housed a grand library, stocked with anything to do with law and accounting. He reached the other side of the rotunda, and strolled into a gentleman’s study, furnished with leather Davenports, wing back chairs, and a fire place that crackled. Darkness moved to light, and he slowed his pace at the plate glass windows. He admired the view to the west. The Blue Mountains grew in the distance.

“I’m in the wrong business. I’d be as happy as a bastard on Father’s Day in this joint.”

“Good of you to come, Mr. Graden.”

Fatty turned in the direction of where the echoey sound had come. He saw a tall man waiting beside a large desk. Fatty walked over and extended his hand.

“G’day, Jeff. Good to see you, too.”

In a hand-tailored dark pinstripe suit, Jeff Crompton was an astute and calculating man. His attire reflected his staunch conservatism, a manner and polish that reflected the soundness of the financial institution he represented.

“Jim, appreciate you coming down here,” he said in a thick New Jersey accent. He pointed to an armchair by the desk. “Please, sit down.”

Fatty put down his briefcase and took a seat, while Jeff retired to his chair, robot-like. It was a magnificently elegant handcarved desk that he sat behind, befitting his hideously ostentatious taste for the finer things. It surpassed even Fatty’s flamboyance, which annoyed him. Crompton leaned back in his chair and took his time to evaluate his client’s demeanour. Fatty returned the bald headed banker’s staunch gaze, similarly direct and unfettered. An uneasy silence befell them. Fatty had done his homework on Crompton. He knew all about the yank’s past, the shady financial deals he had overseen. His past went back five years when he took over Australian Finance. He knew all about Crompton’s legendary reputation as a ruthless negotiator and corporate raider. The oppressive tyrant didn’t care how he got his results or who he trampled over in order to get the job done. Actually, Fatty preferred dealing with someone similar to himself: a rogue, a renegade.

The final few Benzes were loaded. The ramps were raised and locked into position. Sooty black plumes shot up into the mid-morning air from chrome smokestacks.

Johnny stood by the lead transporter. He stared at his watch: 10:20 a.m. He lifted his gaze to the docks and prayed for his mobile to ring so he could let the trucks loose and get on with his day. He couldn’t wait to slip back into bed with Rachel and get him some more of that little slut before he had to show up for work again.

A few minutes of silence passed and the megalomaniacal game continued, one promoter sizing up the other. Fatty eyed a monstrous oil of a man with a long grey beard and wrinkly visage standing in protection over the chairman’s head.

“Who’s the bloke in the painting, Jeff?”

“The Greek God ‘Chronos,’ Jim.”

A mellow smile crept across Crompton’s face. “So Jim, I hear your cars are being loaded on the trucks right now.”

“My Jeff, you do have good information.” He glanced at his watch. “Yes, the last few Benzes are being loaded as we speak.”

Jeff turned melancholy, but only briefly. “Sad business about Rod Holton, your guarantor. I’m glad you came to your senses and sold those cars. The board has approved your fifteen million dollar loan and skipped the guarantor clause. Of course, there is the matter of my fee.”

Fatty eyed him warily, then reached for his briefcase and set it on the desk. Crompton kept a watchful, mistrusting eye on Fatty while he popped the locks. When the lid opened, his eyes lit up at the sight. He counted the bundles of \$100 bills.

“Looks like a hundred thousand, as agreed, Jim.”

Fatty nodded.

With reticence, Jeff closed the lid and stuffed the case into a bottom drawer. He leaned back in his chair and resumed his unnerving stare. He had an afterthought and reached into another drawer.

“Jim, you’ll need to sign these papers.”

He reached for his spectacles, balanced them on his nose, and reviewed the contents of the folder. He handed it over. Fatty perused the contracts, put pen to paper in the highlighted spaces, and handed it back. Crompton removed his glasses and, again, resumed his resolute stare of him. After a long moment, the chairman rose and buttoned his jacket.

“Well Jim, I won’t keep you. Good luck.”

Both stared at each other. After a moment, Fatty shook his hand, turned, and walked away. Crompton sat down and unbuttoned his jacket, quiet and unmoved. His eyes stared blankly, following the car dealer negotiate his way through the study and rotunda, then out through the double doors.

The transporters were ready to roll. Anxious and bored, impatient drivers revved their massive Perkins powerplants. The loud crescendo reverberated about the dockside.

Johnny sat in the passenger seat of the lead truck. His arm draped across the open doorsill, he flicked ash out onto the pier from his cig and for the four hundredth time, peered at his watch. Time ticked past 10:42 a.m. He observed the wharf for something to do, which was busy with the loading of heavy trucks onto a container ship. A ring pierced the stillness.

“‘Bout bloody time.”

Fatty walked out of the building and along the sandstone concourse, headed back to his chauffeured ride, which was parked in a No Standing Zone. He pinned his cellular between his shoulder and ear while he ripped free his tie and opened the top button of his shirt. He slipped into the back seat, and his driver closed the door.

“Johnny, the deal’s set. Get those trucks movin’.”

Johnny breathed a sense of relief.

“I’m right on it.”

He hung up and looked over to Barry Stamish, who calmly read a Spider-Man comic. Many knew the trucker as “Bazza.” A meaty man with years of convoy experience, he wore a shirt cut off at the arms, and sported a huge bushy beard and tattoos. First impressions painted him a die hard rocker.

“Bazza, you and the boys roll,” Johnny said, and jumped down. “Have a good trip.”

Bazza sprang to life. Eyes ablaze, he blasted the air horn. In a show of solidarity, the others returned their leader’s salute. The Kenworths moved up the dock in close single file, headed for the gate house.

FORTY THREE [HIJACKERS MEET]

A GLORIOUS SPRING SKY spread a pale blue wash over the New England hinterland, bringing life to everything that it touched. The Macleay River slithered down lush grass covered elevations, and its gentle flow lapped fertile green banks on its way towards the Pacific. Through valleys full of dairy cows, the tidal influence of the sea became more apparent as the river decelerated, entering the small town of Kempsey. The community essentially just a pause along the Pacific Highway, an old steel bridge spanned the rippled blueness. Foot traffic, mostly runners competing in the annual Kempsey Marathon, held the bridge hostage today.

Beyond the bridge, nestled by the riverbank, was a quaint block of holiday flats. Surrounded by tall palms, the Park Drive Motel was once the destination of Sydney vacationers flocking north to escape the bustle of city life. Today, with a 'for sale' sign posted out front, it hoped for a prosperous buyer.

Hero's Toyota bus waited in the parking lot. Upstairs, in one of the flats, he held court, briefing a half-dozen of his men. The rough and ready lot lolled about the room's scant furnishings, semi-interested in the details of Fatty's caper. A few picked their noses while others carried on back-of-hand conversations.

"Well then, that's the plan. Any questions?" Hero looked about the room. He stole a look at the clock on the table near the bed. "It's now three-thirty. We got four hours before those transporters arrive at Clybucca."

He opened a briefcase on the bed and pulled out a handful of large envelopes. The men knew immediately that it was payday, and a noisy chatter enveloped the room.

"Hey, listen up you ladies," Hero shouted. The noise ebbed. "I'm payin' you guys half now, the other half when the job's done."

A time later, Hero's crew stood out on the patio. Facing the Macleay, they joked around, happy as larks. A sixth man stood alone.

Hero and Strappy stood on the slope at the river's edge, beneath a tall willow tree where creeping vines extended down into the water. Strappy kicked at speckled rocks loosely scattered around patches of shrubs, while Hero was worlds away. His brow wrinkled with doubt and suspicion.

"Whad'ya know about that new guy up there?"

"Which one, mate?"

"That Billy Burch bloke."

Up on the patio, Billy leaned against the railing, distant and unassuming, and sipped his drink. He heard a pitiful meow from somewhere in the vicinity of his left shoe and looked down. A skinny feline looked up at him with sad, pitiful eyes. He scooped it up.

"Bloody nuisance," he said, dropping the cat just as quickly when it bit him.

The cat flew down the stairwell. He retrieved his drink and crossed his arms. Defensively rocking and cradling himself, he was superstitious and believed the incident to be an unfortunate omen. Now, he feared that only bad could come out of it. He shifted

his weight, flustered and uncomfortable. Someone was watching him. A sneak peek down to the river confirmed his suspicions. Hero pointed in his direction.

“O-hh, shit.”

Strappy smiled. “No worries, a bookie mate vouches for him. Billy used to be a penciller. He’s apples.”

Hero sipped his beer. Strappy rolled his eyes skyward and, for the hundredth time this day, prayed for strength. He knew a slip-up on his part was just the sort of thing to give Hero, a sometimes contrary partner, ultimate enjoyment. He imagined the debriefing in Fatty’s office afterwards if this all blew up in his face. In fact, the image started to make him wince. He could almost smell the arrival of trouble. Hero’s scowl deepened, and Strappy saw it.

“C’mon, Hero. Relax.”

Hero continued his dubious stare of Billy, away from the others.

“Hero, you’re paranoid, mate, that’s what you are.”

“Yeah?” said Hero, faintly interested. “Better to be paranoid than bloody dead, Strap. Well, no matter. There’s nothin’ that can be done now. I’m short handed.” He looked at his watch. “Better go break up the party. It’s already four-thirty.”

Hero walked briskly up the embankment and clapped his hands.

“Right men, get your things. We’re movin’ out.”

His crew filed down the stairs. “Oh, and remember. I don’t want any mobile phones. Okay! No bloody phones.”

“Yeah, yeah,” the rabble muttered, and continued down the creaky stairwell. Most knew Hero and how paranoid he could be. They interpreted his comment as a request to drive carefully.

Hero foraged for the keys. He still felt uneasy as he approached the bus. There was no turning back now, regardless of what he thought about the newcomer in the group.

The five transporters were en route from Sydney. They would arrive very soon.

FORTY FOUR [CLYBUCCA FLATS]

THE SUN PLONKED ON the horizon a few hours later, like a heavy stage prop lowered on a wire. The towering western skies spread with a hundred different shades of colour: the glowing pinks, the deep purples, careless banners of pure crimson. Grey gum trees, scarred from a recent sweep of bushfires, cast long shadows across the Pacific Highway. The inland settlement of Clybucca Flats looked ruggedly beautiful in the passing of dusk. An obscure dot on the map, halfway between Sydney and Brisbane, Clybucca could loosely be termed a mid northern coast tourist attraction. In the diminishing light, a wild dog walked the shoulder. Sniffing out its dinner from the undergrowth, it barked every so often at phantom shapes in the forest as though it was touched in the head.

Up the highway was a truckstop. Open twenty-four hours, the 'servo' was a meeting place for interstate truckers anxious to break the haul between the two states. Parked in the gravel on the opposite side, Hero's bus sat, headlights off, facing towards Sydney.

Hero and his marauders, all in dark overalls, waited quietly inside. Some mulled the plan over in their minds, while Hero slumped over the wheel, sombre and distant. Their wait approached two hours. The waiting game played perniciously on his nerves.

"Strike me pink! Me bum's gone to sleep," Hero complained, grimacing a little as he rubbed his numbed posterior. Peering out at the barren roadway, he squinted at his watch with the aid of a small penlight. The time was 6:50 p.m.

Strappy, in the passenger seat, seemed more at ease. A few Sydney-bound cars whizzed by at a great rate. The explosive whoomp of displaced air buffeted the bus. The highway empty once more, a few black crows the size of alley cats swooped down on the carcass of a dead 'roo, and began to separate the fur from the fleshy parts.

"Stupid bloody things." He reminisced the hundreds of bird murders he'd masterminded over the years. He loathed anything with wings, especially crows. The 'wise guys' of the sky, as he called them, hung around highways, waiting to dine on easy road kill. Crows, as cunning as they were, knew precisely the path an approaching car would take. They stayed as close as possible to their meal, and moved no more out of their way than was absolutely necessary while they waited for the car to pass.

"Well, s'pose they're a little better than those stupid pigeons," he muttered. He recalled a couple of times when he watched drivers approach pigeons, a bird that usually stayed way too long in a vehicle's path, forcing speeding drivers to slow all way down.

"Now those condors up in Redcliffe are an absolute trip to watch." During a recent visit to their protected habitat, he hoped to shoot a couple with his pistol. Drivers, there, would have to slow well down for condors walking the empty highway. On the endangered species list, they were pretty clever, but so bloody big that it took them ages to take off. On the ground, they'd hop up and down and flap their giant wings like some 19th century crackpot, trying to get his flying machine to work. Strappy was certainly one weird bastard when it came to watching birds get splattered. He knew it.

Hero felt on the verge of a meltdown. "Damn!" he spat, and slapped the steering wheel in disgust. He hated to wait for anything. Deep down, he knew he couldn't control something as unpredictable as truck timetables, and cooled his festering mood. He let out a heady sigh and gazed down the empty highway, praying the car carriers would arrive now. His prayers were answered. A tap came on his shoulder from someone in back and he turned. The man pointed his finger down the road.

"B-boss. Look!"

Hero peered out of the window. A look of comfort consumed his tired face.

"You bloody little rippa!"

Five transporters entered into the truckstop in a steady procession. Their drivers edged heavy rigs onto the parking lot. Their cargo of vehicles rocked this way and that as they went. The Kenworths entered a dimly lit area to the side of a restaurant, which was empty, and drew to a halt. Parked abreast of each other in a long row, they extinguished their headlights. The sound of brakes releasing filled the air.

Hero pulled a ski mask over his head, and cranked the engine.

“Right boys. Show time.”

He peered over at the trucks a second time.

“All clear. Okay, you blokes know the drill. Remember, quickly and quietly with these yobbos. We’re on a strict timetable, okay. We gotta be outta here in twenty minutes. No ifs, ands or buts.”

His crew nodded.

“Good’o. Strappy and I will drive the lead truck. The rest of you pick one, but I want Stan behind me.”

One of the trucks flashed its headlights at the bus.

“Right boys,” said Hero, “that’s our signal. Let’s get this thing done for Jim.”

Hero slipped the Toyota into gear and crossed the four-lane blacktop. Headlights off, it glided into the driveway and crept around the perimeter of the truckstop, careful not to bring attention to their presence. He pulled up behind the restaurant where an overhead streetlamp cast a miniscule amount of light, and turned off his engine. A misty rain began to sprinkle on the windshield as he cased the surrounding blackness. He waited in the shadows for the truckers to make the next move.

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