

Gary Kelly

Dickson Bottoms in...

THE FINK CURSE



...for Cody

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THE FINK CURSE

sequel to

The Inevitable Murder of Horace Fink

Revised edition

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Chapter 1

Following the murder of Horace Fink, the normally sedate and uneventful Manning Valley now had to its questionable credit 13 possible murderers, each of whom was present at the scene – Tony Spiropoulos’s honey shed - when Horace was shot dead. The only certainty was that one of those people was guilty. Which one? That remained open to wild and rampant speculation.

The coroner’s inquiry concluded the obvious; that Horace Fink was killed by a bullet to the brain from a Smith and Wesson pistol by a person or persons unknown. There were no eye witnesses who saw the actual firing of the weapon, only the result. The case remained open to further investigation.

One of those present at the murder scene was constable Clive Farrell who was suspended from duty pending the outcome of the coroner’s investigation, as well as the findings of a police internal inquiry into why he refrained from taking any action that might have prevented the crime.

Practically every citizen of the Manning Valley had an opinion as to who killed Horace Fink as well as their motive for doing so. National news media and even international media pounced on the story and its continuing repercussions. One Sydney newspaper emblazoned its front page with the headline: **THE FINK CURSE.**

Indeed, it was a curse; the major concern for each of those 13 persons present at the killing scene was to prove their innocence. There had been no court case to determine the identity of the murderer, and the likelihood of there ever being a court case seemed exceedingly remote... unless, of course, the murderer — he or she — confessed.

According to detectives Rocque and Rowles the person with the most compelling reason to shoot Horace Fink was Dickson Bottoms, especially after Fink admitted that he was the young robber, 13 years ago, who killed Dickson's parents in a bungled robbery. Dickson had also concluded with almost certainty that Fink was the arsonist responsible for the beach house fire. However, like everyone else's suspicions, those of Rocque and Rowles lacked hard evidence.

To further complicate matters, Dickson was required by the conditions of Fink's last will and testament to prove his innocence if he were to receive the proceeds of Fink's estate. "If I were to contest the will's provisions," he said to his mate Mick Morris, "it would cost a fortune in legal fees, and I might lose. A legal bloke I know said that those conditions are a load of old codswallop anyway, and that they wouldn't stand up in court. But I'm not in a position to take that risk."

On a positive note, the insurance company agreed to cover repairs to the damage caused by the house fire. Dickson oversaw the work to ensure that the house was returned as closely as possible to the original structure. "I don't want a new house," he insisted, "I want my old one back."

For the time being, while repairs were underway, Dickson and Mick bunked in the garage 'flat' at the side of the beach house. Facilities such as kitchen and bathroom, which had remained relatively unscathed by the flames, remained available for normal use inside the main structure.

Nonetheless, the cloud of suspicion that hung over the heads of each of the 13 people present at the Horace Fink murder scene, in particular Dickson Bottoms, prevented any chance of life returning to normal.

One morning, as young red-haired Paul delivered the newspaper on his bicycle run, Dickson, in an attempt to relieve his frustration and satisfy his curiosity, took the opportunity to ask his little friend a direct question in sign. “Do you think I killed Horace Fink?”

“Did you?” the boy replied, also in sign, then presented his hands palm side out facing Dickson to prevent him from answering. “No! I don’t want to know. If you did, you’re my hero. If you didn’t, you’re still my hero.”

Dickson took a deep breath and sighed, deciding not to pursue the matter further. He waved goodbye to his little mate and watched him pedal down the road. Then the blue-eyed shaggy blond returned to the kitchen where Mick broke eggs into a frypan.

“Still on the front page,” Dickson noted after unrolling the paper and spreading it on the table. “And they’re still calling it the Fink Curse.”

“Let’s not talk about it.”

“Why not? Everyone else is. You made coffee yet?”

“No.”

“Okay, I’ll do it.” Dickson took the jug, filled it with water and plugged it into the power. “I don’t understand why you refuse to talk about the case. Or maybe I do. Mick? Do you think I shot Fink?”

“You had every reason to, mate. And if you did, I don’t blame you at all. That asshole shot your mom and dad, and he murdered Doris. He deserved to be shot.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“Does it matter? The piece of shit is dead, that’s what matters.”

“How do I know it wasn’t you who shot Fink?”

“Because I didn’t, that’s why. I had no real reason to. Listen, Dicko, the reason I don’t wanna talk about this Fink thing is because it starts an argument, and that’s the last thing we need.” Mick removed the pan from the heat, and placed the fried eggs onto toast. “You know what I really think? I think there’s four million smackeroonies waiting for your sticky paws... that’s what really matters, not who shot Horace Fink.”

Dickson finished making the two coffees while Mick took the eggs and toast to the table. Once the boys were seated, Dickson announced his considered reply: “I get the feeling a courtroom would make no difference to my innocence... according to you and everyone else I’m guilty anyway. Even Rocque and Rowles think so. I saw it in their eyes when they questioned me. And just now Paul said... well, not directly, but I’m sure he thinks I shot Fink. There’s only one way to clear my name.”

“Find the killer? Yeah, right, like how? And besides, mate, we’re out of a job. Who the hell is gonna hire a couple of private flatfoots suspected of murder?”

“That’s precisely why I need to find the killer.”

“I? What happened to ‘we’? What happened to Dicko and Micko?”

At 8am, the construction team arrived to work on repairs to the house, which provided the two boys with an opportunity to surf until midday. Upon their return, and after showering under the front yard hose, Dickson inspected the builders’ progress and spoke to the foreman, a rough and ready bloke in his late thirties with hands that could choke a gorilla. “It’s coming along pretty well,” the blond noted. “Not a bad job.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t pull the whole thing down and build a new house.”

“I prefer this one.”

“That’s thinking with the heart, mate, not the head. But... it’s your house. By the way, how’s it going with the Fink case? I hear he was the one who set fire to this place. Must have been stark raving loony, that bloke. I don’t blame you for...” Suddenly, the foreman turned his attention to one of the workers and told him to dump the old timber. “Don’t re-use that stuff, mate, there’s a stack of new four-be-tvos on the back of the truck.”

“You don’t blame me for what?”

“Huh? Sorry, mate, I lost the bloody plot,” the foreman chuckled. “It’s gone clean out of my head. Anyway, everyone I speak to says good riddance to that Fink asshole. Whoever shot the bastard should be knighted, that’s what they’re saying.”

“And what are you saying?”

“Me? I’ll tell you... if I find out who pulled that trigger, I’ll be the first to shake his hand, that’s what I’m saying.” The big man hesitated momentarily, expecting Dickson to offer his hand, before returning to work.

Later that afternoon, a new computer and software arrived courtesy of the insurance company. Dickson decided to set up the new machine in the garage ‘flat’ for the time being to avoid potential damage from sawdust and plaster dust that littered most areas of the main house.

As if recent events were not problematical enough, starting from scratch with a new computer, installing programs and trying to remember e-mail addresses and other information pushed Dickson to the brink of a nervous breakdown. “I dunno what keeps me going,” he complained to Mick as he re-booted the machine. “If it’s not one bloody thing it’s another. All my files are gone, all my documents, the reports for Doris... everything.”

“Not everything, mate. All those files are still in your brain; and mine. I’ll help you put all that stuff back together. Hey, things will be back to normal before you know it. And this time, let’s keep the backup disks in a safe place.” Mick studied his friend’s glum face before resuming the convo: “Hey, Dicko, how about we take a holiday... go some place... get away from all this shit for a while?”

“And then what? Come back here to the same old shit? No, Mick, nice idea but no. There’s a bunch of stuff I gotta sort out before I can relax. One of those people at the farm shed that night shot Fink, and I gotta find out who.”

“With respect, Sherlock, if the cops can’t do it what makes you think you can?”

“I got a super smart partner.” A smile slowly spread over Dickson’s face, and then became a giggle. A moment later, the two lads burst into hearty laughter.

Chapter 2

As beach house renovations continued, Dickson and Mick worked in the garage ‘flat’ on rewriting various Word files, relying on their own memory of events that took place during their time with Doris Fink. Both boys found it a surprisingly interesting and fascinating experience, one that rejuvenated certain observations and imbued them with a fresh perspective given the benefit of hindsight.

“Dickson?” The voice was the foreman’s calling from the open garage door. “You’ve got visitors, mate. There’s a camera crew out front.”

Dickson and Mick quickly exited the garage and met a young woman at the gate. Behind her, a cameraman and sound operator had already begun recording. “Dickson Bottoms?” she asked as a boom mic hovered above Dickson’s head. “I wonder if we could have a word with you? I’m Norma Erskine from North Coast News.”

“I’ve seen you on the tele. What’s this about?”

“The Fink Curse, as it’s called... how are you coping?”

“Fine, just fine,” Dickson mocked. “As you can see, things are quite normal here except, of course, for all the building and the presence of a camera crew. It almost borders on the mundane; stupefyingly boring. Now, Ms. Erskine, if you’ll pardon me, I have important things to do.”

“Mr. Bottoms,” the interviewer insisted, “there are thousands, perhaps millions, of people interested in this case...”

“I’ll tell you what they’re interested in, Norma, they’re interested in who killed Horace Fink. Fact is, they know as much as I do. Go talk to the police, not me. Now turn that bloody camera off and piss off out of

here.” And with that, Dickson turned on his bare heels and stormed back to the garage, leaving a bewildered Mick still standing before the camera.

“You must be Mick Morris,” the interviewer said. “Your friend seems very upset.”

“Oh, really? I reckon you must’ve graduated from journo school with honors,” Mick snapped, then joined his mate inside the garage, pulling the door closed behind him. “That’s gonna look bad on the news tonight, Dicko. We blew it. I think we need a public relations advisor.”

“Have they gone?”

Mick peeked through a crack in the door. “No, she’s talking to the foreman.”

“Shit.”

Once the TV crew had departed, Dickson approached the foreman and asked what he’d said to Norma Erskine. “A bunch of stuff... can’t remember all of it,” he answered as he checked his wristwatch. “Anyway, mate, it’ll be on the news tonight. I gotta tell everyone to watch it, hahaha! I’m famous!” The foreman then shouted to the builders that it was knock-off time. “Back tomorrow morning, Dickson, and lemme know what you think of my star performance on tele tonight, hahaha!”

Within five minutes, the crew had gone, leaving Dickson and Mick alone at the beach house to enjoy the return of sanity and much welcome peace. They inspected the building’s interior and the work completed thus far. “It’s looking pretty good,” the shaggy blond concluded. “Not quite what it was, but pretty close. I wish I could say the same for life itself.”

“What’s for dinner?”

“Some things never change,” Dickson laughed. “We’ve just been through WWII and Mick the walking

stomach wants to know what's for dinner. You're bloody hopeless, you know that?"

"How about I ride into town and get pizza?"

"Be back by six for the news."

"No worries."

Moments after the pizza box was opened, the kitchen filled with the tantalizing aroma of cheese, pepperoni, chilli and various other toppings as well as garlic bread. "I got double everything," Mick announced as Dickson turned on the television. "Do you want me to set the table?"

"That means washing up. Grab two paper towels, that'll do... and two beers."

"I hope you never get invited to dinner at Government House."

Following the regular news introductions, the lead story - as the boys anticipated - was The Fink Curse. "Jeez, was I that aggro?" Dickson commented as he watched his interview. "I look like I wanna kill someone."

"I guess that's what they wanted."

However, what really interested the boys was the interview with the foreman. "How well do you know Dickson Bottoms?" Norma Eskine inquired.

"Well enough... he keeps an eye on the work here, and we've spoken a few times. He's a top young bloke."

"You're aware of the Fink case?"

"Yeah, isn't everyone?"

"Do you have an opinion on the matter?"

"In what way?"

"Who do you think shot Horace Fink?"

"I dunno... but as I said to Dickson earlier today, if I find out who did, I'll be first to shake his hand."

"Dickson's hand?"

“Could be.”

“It wouldn’t bother you if that hand was the hand of a killer?”

“It wouldn’t bother me if the Reverend Tom Samuels was the one who did it, or the damn Pope for that matter. Whoever pulled the trigger did the world a favor, if you ask me, and I’ve yet to meet anyone who doesn’t think so. And let me tell you something, missy, I wouldn’t be here with my crew working on this house if I thought young Dickson was a crook. He’s anything but a crook; he’s a top young bloke. Trust me, I’m a good judge of character.”

The TV news story had no sooner ended when Dickson’s cell phone rang. It was Cody. “You were so cool, man, so damn cool! Outtasight! You’re gonna have chicks everywhere! You’re gonna be a super star!”

“Settle down, Code, for Christ sake.”

“Were you shirtless on purpose?”

“No, I didn’t think... I was mad as hell.”

“When can I get your autograph?”

“Shut up, Code, you bloody lunatic. I’ll catch you later.” And with that Dickson ended the call only to answer another almost immediately.

“Tom? How are you going, mate? Sorry, Rev... that slipped out.”

“You mean ‘mate’? I bet you say that to all the priests. I just saw the interview on North Coast news. Are you familiar with Banjo Patterson?”

“The poet? Sort of... Why?”

“He was hard and tough and wiry—just the sort that won’t say die—there was courage in his quick impatient tread; and he bore the badge of gameness in his bright and fiery eye, and the proud and lofty carriage of his head.”

“The Man from Snowy River?”

“Yes, and that verse came to mind when I saw you on television. Are you eating something?”

“Pizza.”

“There’s something else I need to say to you, Dickson... *You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; and if any one would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well; and if any one forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.*”

“What’s that in Aussie English?”

“Don’t let them get you down, Dickson. By ‘them’ I mean your detractors and critics. Rise above their scorn, my boy, and have faith in yourself.”

“It’s not easy, Rev.”

“Nothing worthwhile ever is. Will I see you boys in church this Sunday? There’s something I need to discuss with you... I’d rather not talk about it over the phone.”

“Yes, Tom... actually I think I need a bit of religion right now... Tom Samuels’ style, that is. See you Sunday.”

Dickson took another slice of pizza as Mick concluded: “Sounds like we’re going to church.”

“I’m doing it for you.”

“Yeah, right. So what did Tom have to say?”

“...and he bore the badge of gameness in his bright and fiery eye, and the proud and lofty carriage of his head. He also told me to turn the other cheek.”

“He saw the interview, right? You were a bit aggro, you know.”

“And you weren’t?”

Renovations proceeded well during the rest of the week, but the job remained far from completion.

According to the foreman, work would continue for at least another two weeks and probably three.

On Sunday morning, the lads parked their Suzukis outside Our Lady of the Rosary church in Albert Street and proceeded inside, accompanied by numerous stares from curious onlookers.

“Matthew 7:1-5,” Reverend Tom Samuels boomed from the pulpit.

"Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again. And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull the mote out of thine eye; and behold, a beam is in thine own eye? Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast the mote out of thy brother's eye.'

“And now, brethren, let me quote from Leviticus 19:15-17: ‘Ye shall do no unrighteousness in judgment: thou shalt not respect the person of the poor, nor honour the person of the mighty: but in righteousness shalt thou judge thy neighbor. Thou shalt not go up and down as a talebearer among thy people: neither shalt thou stand against the blood of thy neighbor: I am the Lord. Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart: thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbor, and not suffer sin upon him.’”

Later, in the presbytery kitchen, Tom made tea as usual. “And what did you boys think of my sermon today?”

“I thought thoust deliverance was stupendeth.”

“Don’t be cheeky.” Tom took the silver teapot to the table and began pouring. “What did you really think?”

“I don’t understand why you guys use all that oldy worldy English.”

“Would you prefer Latin? Besides, if you’re going to put the wind up the congregation, you need theatrical oomph. Can you imagine my saying, ‘No worries, cob, stick to your guns’ instead of ‘This above all: to thine own self be true’?”

“Hamlet.”

“Act I, Scene III. I’m surprised by the breadth of your knowledge at such a tender age, Dickson. Anyway,” the Rev. continued as he sat at the table, “I’m sure you get my point.”

“Was this morning’s sermon for my benefit?”

“And mine, and everyone else’s who was at the farm shed that night. Help yourself to the Iced Vo Vos and Tim Tams, gentlemen. And now, the reason I asked you here this morning; I received a call the other day from the office of Focus...”

“The current affairs program?”

“Yes. They called me because they couldn’t find your telephone number listed, and hoped that I might be of assistance in contacting you.”

“About what?”

“An interview.”

“On Focus? Whoa, Tom... it’s bad enough already after that piece on North Coast News the other night. I can’t go anywhere without attracting stares.”

“You’ve always gotten stares,” Mick laughed, “it’s just that you didn’t notice before.”

“And they’ll pay you,” Tom added with a smile.

“You mean checkbook journalism?”

“They call it an appearance fee. They didn’t say how much but I suspect it will be... substantial. Given that you boys are ‘between jobs’ at the moment, it’s worth considering. Don’t you think?”

Chapter 3

“You got a new job,” Dickson declared to Mick in all seriousness as the boys removed their helmets back at the beach house. “You’re now my official media manager.”

“I am?”

“Let’s go for a surf, then we’ll have lunch and talk about this Focus thing.”

At 1:30, the pair sat on the front verandah, eating roast beef and salad sandwiches washed down with cans of Victoria Bitter. Three hours of surfing had cleared the mental cobwebs and given the lads a chance to think the Focus situation through. “I don’t really want to do it,” Dickson began, “but the money will sure come in handy.”

“How much are you gonna ask for?”

“Speak to my media manager.”

“Who? Me? Dicko, what the hell do I know about negotiating deals with a top rating TV program?”

“You’re a fast learner, mate.”

“Yeah, right. What do they normally pay for interviews?”

“How long is a piece of string? It depends on the string, right? It depends on how badly they want the story. If they phoned the Rev. to track me down, I guess they must want me pretty bad.”

“What kinda numbers are you thinking? How many zeros?”

“Check out a box of Fruit Loops,” Dickson laughed. “No, seriously, mate, I figure if you, as my media manager, speak to the program producer you can use that pound of soup between your Germaine Greers to gauge how desperate they are. If I talk to the guy, I won’t have the same advantage you have as the middle man.”

“So... like maybe ten thousand or something?”

“You’re fired.”

“You can’t fire me yet, I haven’t even started for Christ sake!”

“Mate, listen to me, the higher the asking price the more the flexibility you have... you can always come down but you can’t go up.”

“You’re right, Dicko. I gotta think big... big, big, big. But how big is BIG?” Mick took a bite of his sandwich and studied a few surfers catching rides.

“Hey, listen, I figure I’ll just talk to the guy and not even mention money. I’ll let him do that. If it’s some bloody piddling amount I’ll stall and tell him I gotta discuss it with you. Yeah? That’ll buy me some time. Jeez, there’s so much to consider. And what about clothing? You can’t go into a studio dressed like that, in board shorts and flip flops.”

“Who said anything about a studio?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Why not a location shoot? If it was good enough for North Coast News it’s good enough for Focus. I don’t wanna go to Sydney all dressed up like some store dummy and be intimidated by all those lights and cameras in a studio with some aggro guy firing questions at me. I prefer my own turf.”

“Yeah,” Mick agreed as he pondered the scenario slowly and carefully. “Remember what Cody said? About you looking awesome on the telly, and being a superstar? That’s it, mate! Dicko the sex symbol! Woohoo! I got it! We do the interview right here in your own territory, right here on the verandah, bronzed and shirtless, looking like a million bucks. Hmmm, a million, now that sounds like a nice even sum. Yeah?”

“Calm down, Mick, you’re getting carried away, big time.”

“Think about it, dumbass, millions of girls around the world moistening their panties at the sight of Mr. Aussie Hunk! Hah, hah! Wow, think of the publicity, think of the offers from... well, I dunno, from Hollywood or whatever! Hey, Dicko, check out the facts... suddenly Focus tries to track you down. Why? My bet is they saw you on the local news. They’re thinking viewers, mate, they’re thinking ratings, they’re thinking screaming girls! Maybe guys as well, haha! Doesn’t Focus have a sister program in the States? I’m sure it does. Yes! That’s it! Bonanza!”

After breakfast next morning, the builders were back on the job of repairing the beach house. Mick closed the kitchen door to muffle the noise, and then phoned the production office of Focus. He explained the situation to the receptionist while Dickson sat opposite at the kitchen table. He’d been reading the morning paper but paused to listen to his mate. “Just a moment, Mr. Morris, I’ll put you through to Edward Bedford.”

Mick cupped his hand over the cell phone: “They’re putting me through to Ed Bedford. Straight to the top, mate! Woohoo!”

“Ed Bedford speaking.”

“Good morning, Mr. Bedford. This is Mr. Dickson Bottoms’ office. I’m Mick Morris, Mr. Bottoms’ media manager. I believe your program is interested in interviewing my client.”

“Is Dickson there?”

“Uh... I’m afraid Mr. Bottoms is... rather busy at the moment.”

“Tell him to call me when he’s free. Bye.”

A surprised and disillusioned Mick ended the call and looked at his friend; “He hung up! The bastard hung up! Who the hell does he think he is? He asked for you to call him back when you’re free.”

“Give me the phone.” Dickson pressed redial and waited for an answer.

“Good morning, Focus Productions Office, this is Mandy speaking.”

“This is Dickson Bottoms. Ed Bedford is expecting my call.”

“Just a moment, Mr. Bottoms.”

“Hello, Ed Bedford here.”

“Dickson Bottoms. I believe you want to speak to me.”

“Ah, yes, Dickson, how are you?”

“Fine thanks.”

“Good, now let me get straight to the point. I’d like you to appear on Focus for an in-depth interview regarding the Fink case, better known as the Fink Curse.”

“You’ll need to speak to my media manager, Mr. Mick Morris. He’s handling all media offers.”

“All? Who are the others?”

“I’m not at liberty to say, Mr. Bedford... it’s all confidential. Being in the media business, I’m sure you understand. I appointed Mr. Morris when interest from various media sources became too much for me to handle alone.” Dickson gave Bedford his cell phone number and asked him to call Mr. Morris after lunch. “He’s a busy man, Mr. Bedford, but I’m sure he will be happy to speak with you. Bye for now.” And with that, Dickson ended the call.

“After lunch?” Mick gasped. “What do you mean after lunch? I’m here now!”

“Ed doesn’t know that.”

“But how could you... how could you tell such a whopper?”

“I don’t like the pompous way he treats my staff.”

“Staff? STAFF? We’re partners! Anyway, I reckon you’ve bitten off more than you can chew, Dicko. How the hell am I gonna convince Bedford that you’re the hottest thing in the news since nine eleven? It’s all one gigantic fib!”

“Convince yourself, Mick, and you’ll convince Bedford.”

“Yeah, right... that’s IF he returns the call.”

“He will. Meantime, the builders are making too much bloody racket so let’s catch a wave!”

Some hours later, as the boys showered under the front yard hose, Dickson’s cell phone rang. “You better take the call, Mick. It could be Bedford.”

“I’m all wet! And dressed in boardies! That’s no way to conduct big business!”

“Change the rules, mate. Go for it.”

Mick took the phone from the canvas chair on the verandah and pressed the receive button. “Dickson Bottoms’ office, Mick Morris speaking.”

“Bedford here, sorry about this morning, I didn’t mean to be so abrupt. By the way, what’s that noise in the background? Sounds like seagulls. Is that a beach?”

“Yeah, the office is right on the beach. Dickson and I are just back from... uh, that is, I’m just back from... negotiations.”

“Let me be frank, Mick... may I call you Mick?”

“Sure.”

“I want the Fink Curse story, and I want it direct from Dickson. You let me know what you’ve been offered by whoever the hell you’ve been negotiating with and I’ll top it.”

“Top it? Uh... well, Ed... may I call you Ed?”

“Sure.”

“Negotiations are still underway... no firm figure has been finalized, so...”

“\$100,000... and that’s my final offer.”

“Right.” Mick’s brown eyes bulged and his jaw dropped. “\$100,000, is that what you said?”

“Yes.”

“Uh... okay, I mean, yes... that is, uh... you understand, of course, that I’ll need to speak to Dickson about your offer. Perhaps I could call back later...”

Mick’s attention was distracted by Dickson waving his arms and mouthing something from under the shower.

“Uh, yes, as I was saying, Ed, perhaps I could call back...” Mick finally understood what his mate was mouthing, “...tomorrow morning... after I’ve had a chance to speak to Dickson.”

“Okay, tomorrow morning, first thing. I expect to hear from you then. Bye.”

Mick ended the call, replaced the phone on the chair, and turned to Dickson. “Are you crazy?” he demanded. “Did you hear what I said? \$100,000? That’s your box of Fruit Loops, mate! What if Bedford changes his mind?”

“He won’t. He’s more worried about me changing mine.”

“Yours? You don’t have a mind, mate! The bloody thing’s gone AWOL. One... hundred... thousand... bucks! Hear me?”

“I hear you, I hear you.”

“Listen, how come I’m supposed to be your media manager but you’re the one who’s doing all the bloody managing?”

“Think of it as training on the job.” Dickson stepped from under the hose, grabbed a towel and dried his shaggy blond locks, an act that caused his biceps to bulge like footballs. “I’m not trying to usurp your position, Mick, I’m just trying to make you understand

that you're the one with the negotiating power here, not Bedford. \$100,000 is chicken feed to him, and it's not even his money."

"I can't tell you how nervous I am, Dicko. I won't sleep a wink tonight. I need a drink. A scotch or something."

"Bring me one, too. Let's celebrate!"

Just before knock-off time, the building foreman took the lads on a tour of inspection. All interior linings were complete except for some finishing touches and painting. All floors and ceilings were also close to being finished. "It's the newness that I find a little odd," Dickson admitted, "and the smell."

"Hang around for another 50 years, mate, and you won't notice it," the foreman grinned.

"I suppose I'll get used to it. I wonder what Gran would say about it. You know, all this new work is a bit like trying to visualize Gran as a young girl."

"She was once, Dickson, and there was a time when this whole house was brand new. Anyway, we'll be back tomorrow morning. I reckon the whole job will be finished in about a week. By the way, any news about the Fink Curse?"

"Not really," Dickson lied before Mick could spill the beans about Focus. "Nothing's changed."

Within 10 minutes, the workmen had packed up and left. "I've got an idea," Mick said as he grabbed Dickson's phone and punched in a number.

"Who are you calling? Not Bedford, I hope."

Mick shook his head, and then answered the voice. "Cody, how ya goin' mate? Hey, listen, you know the other day when you were telling Dicko about being a superstar and all that shit?"

"Yeah... is he still mad at me?"

"No, he's a pussy cat. Anyway, I got to thinking... if you wanted to interview him for your

news program on TV, what kinda appearance fee would you offer him?"

"I don't have a TV show."

"Pretend you do, dickhead. Humor me... how much would you offer?"

"Like in bucks? Jeez, I dunno... maybe half a mill or whatever."

"Whoa! Half a million?"

"You said pretend, so I'm pretending. Okay?"

"Okay, okay, settle. Thanks, mate, you wanna speak to the blond hunk? He's standing here next to me."

"What was all that about?" Cody asked as Dickson took the phone.

"Not sure, Code... I think Mick has flipped his lid or something." The pair carried on with small talk for a while until Cody excused himself.

"Gotta beetle, Dickson... homework... stacks of the damn stuff. I'll check ya later."

"Bye."

Chapter 4

Dickson's curiosity finally won the day. "I'm gonna regret asking you this, Mick," he mumbled with a certain reluctance, "but what was that phone call to Cody all about?"

"Simple. You told Bedford a whopper – and I mean a helluva whopper - so I'm down-sizing the damn thing. When I tell him I received a bigger offer than his, I won't be lying. Yeah? Anyway, I feel better now. Speaking of which, let's get outta this house for a while... you know, like have dinner at the pub."

"Too many stares, mate, we're celebrities; we attract too much attention from gawkers."

"No worries... we can go incognito like the movie stars do. We could dress up as girls."

"You idiot!" Dickson laughed. "Then the bloody guys would hit on us."

"Wouldn't bother me."

"It would when they got an eyeful of your willie."

"I wasn't thinking of an eyeful."

"You're disgusting. Besides, I got enough to contend with... with you, I mean." Both boys cracked up at the jokes and enjoyed the welcome relief. "It's so good to laugh, Mick... we haven't been doing much of that lately. Yeah, I admit, you got a point; stuff the gawkers, let's rock over to the pub for a steak. Better not ride, though, not if we down a few ales. Let's walk."

As the boys entered the pub bistro, populated by a modest early-week crowd, the large TV screen showed Norma Erskine delivering the latest report on the Horace Fink story. Almost immediately, all eyes were on Mick and Dickson. "Bad idea," Dickson quickly reasoned, "let's go back home."

“Get used to it, mate. It’ll be worse after the Focus program. You find a table, I’ll get the beers.”

Dickson chose a corner table and sat with his back to the other patrons. When Mick arrived with two schooners of VB, he chastised his friend. “Don’t let the bastards get to you, Dicko. Sit on the other side of the table and face the room... stare the assholes down if they bother you.”

Dickson elected not to argue as he changed chairs; realizing that Mick had a valid point. There was nothing to gain by hiding from reality.

The lads had no sooner taken their first sip from the pure white half-inch head of beer when a patron approached; an older man in his early sixties with a shock of white hair. “Pardon me,” he began politely, directing his attention to Dickson, “but I’d like to shake your hand. I’m George Kelty. I watched the TV news just now.” The man extended his hand, which Dickson accepted in silent puzzlement as the man continued. “I can’t abide that newsreader’s affectation, damn it, she emphasizes the noun instead of the adjective, and she insists on ending each sentence with an upward inflection... she drives me to distraction... it’s infuriating! It’s a robot read... nobody speaks like that normally.”

“You’re a newsreader?”

“I was. Uh... anyway, Dickson, I’m sorry to disturb you. Please accept my sincere apology for my inexcusable and impulsive behavior.”

The man was about to retreat when Dickson asked him to wait. “Mr. Kelty? Just a moment, please... may I ask why you wanted to shake my hand?”

“I’m into firm handshakes,” the man smiled as he paused to face Dickson again. “And yours gets a 10... maybe 11. It’s just something I needed to know.”

“Strange bloke,” Mick commented after the man returned to his table. “He did us a favor, though, now everyone’s looking at him, hahaha!”

“I wonder what he meant by 10... or maybe 11.”

“Jeez, you can be thick sometimes, Dicko! Yeah, ‘Thicko Dicko’. Ha! My dad says you can tell a lot about a man by the way he shakes his hand. He says it’s a test of character.”

“So why would that old bloke wanna test my character?”

“Don’t ask me, ask him.”

Two juicy rump steaks sizzled on the nearby grill as the boys heaped pasta salad onto their heavy white earthenware plates. Once the rumps were done to medium rare, Mick took the steak-laden plates and cutlery back to their table while Dickson ordered two more schooners at the bar.

“How’s it goin’, mate?” the barman asked as he tilted a glass under the beer tap and watched the amber liquid slowly rise toward the brim.

“Pretty good, thanks.”

“I mean with the Fink thing.”

Dickson shrugged and placed a five dollar note and a 2-dollar gold coin on the counter. “Bugged if I know, mate. Read the papers.”

“It must be a pain in the butt.” The barman sat two beers on a terry-towelling mat. “Keep the two bucks, mate, it’s happy hour.”

“I wish.”

As the boys ate their meal, their conversation – predictably – focused on what might happen during negotiations with Ed Bedford next morning. “I’m not feeling too confident,” Mick admitted. “No complaints about the steak, though, it’s bloody awesome.”

“I’m sure the cow appreciates your approval.”

“This Bedford bloke has probably done this kinda thing a hundred times. But me? Well, you know the answer to that already.”

“There was a first time for him too, you know.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Are you gonna tell him about Cody’s half a mill?”

“No, I mean not specifically. I’ll just say I’ve had a better offer.”

“What if he tells you to accept it?”

“Shit, Dicko, don’t say things like that.”

Dickson’s reply was a shrug and a brief rise of his blond eyebrows before a morsel of rump disappeared between his lips.

After a long thoughtful pause, Mick spoke again: “By the way, Dicko, you haven’t mentioned my cut... like how much this new job is worth.”

“I figure you and I split anything over 100 grand 50-50.”

“What if 100 thou is the max Bedford offers?”

“60-40. So that’s 60-40 up to 100 and 50-50 on top of that.”

“Lemme see, if I can get Bedford up to 200, then my share is... bloody hell! That’s 90 thousand!”

“Now you’re thinking, Mick. Greed is good, yeah? Remember that movie?”

“It’s not greed, Dicko, it’s something to aim for... there’s an ethical difference.”

Dickson almost choked on a piece of steak as he burst into a hearty laugh. “Yeah, right,” he said between coughs and giggles.

After donating a few dollars to the pub pokies and losing, the lads decided to walk home. Mick checked his watch as they neared the dirt road that led to the beach house. “9 o’clock. Do you think it’s a bit late to phone the Rev.?”

“What for?”

“He’s been around, that old guy. Maybe he can help me sort out a few things in my head.”

“Not even he could do that,” Dickson laughed. “Things like what?”

“How to handle Bedford. Tom’s a priest, right? So he’s obviously had experience at negotiation type thingies with all kinds of people. Can I borrow your phone?” Dickson obliged and, in the darkness, Mick used the phone’s illuminated screen to find Tom’s number in the memory. “G’day, Tom, it’s Mick Morris. Is it too late for a quick chat over the phone?”

“I’m in my night shirt about to retire. I have a 6am mass tomorrow. Is it important?”

Mick explained the situation with Bedford and what had occurred lately in terms of negotiations with Focus. “Dicko and I are walking home from the pub... we had dinner there. We’re on the dirt road right now. Anyway, I’m just wondering if you can give me some tips or whatever before I call Bedford in the morning.”

“I see. What do you think you have to sell?”

“Dickson, of course.”

“And what do you think - given the present climate of the Fink matter - that Dickson is worth?”

“That’s what I’m asking you, Rev.”

“Don’t ask me, Mick, ask yourself.”

“You’ve lost me.”

“Unless you have a firm idea of what you are selling, and what it’s worth to the buyer, then you’re at a disadvantage. You see, my friend, Bedford knows what Dickson is worth to his program. He’s already done the number crunching. That gives him an advantage. In his mind, he will have allocated the maximum he’s prepared to spend on Dickson’s story. You, on the other hand, have no firm idea of what you’re asking for in dollar terms, and what minimum

you're prepared to settle for. The other matter is this; if Bedford rejects your demand, whatever that may be, because it exceeds his budget, what then?"

"You're not making this easy, Rev."

"Who said anything about easy? Let me put it this way: if you like, I'm a salesman for God. I sell the Catholic religion. Is that correct?"

"Yes, Rev., of course."

"Wrong... well, partially wrong. I sell the Reverend Tom Samuels; I sell myself; I sell what I believe in. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Rev., I do!"

"So, what you're really selling to Bedford is Mick Morris and your belief in Dickson."

"Thanks a bunch, Rev., you've given me something positive to think about before I make that call in the morning. Would you like a word with Dicko? He's right here."

Upon arrival home, Dickson made two Irish coffees which the boys consumed on the front verandah. The night sky was clear and starry, with just a few isolated patches of altocumulus cloud that promised a sunny new day on the morrow.

Chapter 5

The tantalizing aroma of sizzling bacon filled the kitchen. Dickson broke four eggs into a second pan, added butter and milk, and stirred them with a wooden spoon. “Mmmmmm,” Mick shouted as he emerged from the bathroom; with a towel draped around his narrow waist. “I’m starving,” he added, and entered the kitchen.

“You’re always starving. Don’t forget the toast.”

Mick obeyed and attended to the toaster. “The builders will be here shortly, dammit. How’s a bloke supposed to negotiate big business with all that bloody racket going on?”

“It adds to the atmosphere.”

“It does? Wait a sec, you’re right, Dicko. Atmosphere! Yeah, it adds to the atmosphere!” Once the toast was buttered, Mick turned off the stove hotplate and took the pan of bacon to the sink where he used tongs to place the pieces on two plates. Dickson then spooned over the scrambled eggs. As the boys seated themselves at the table, Mick continued: “Atmosphere... that’s what I’m selling. Yeah? This joint beats the hell out of some sterile TV studio.”

“Are you feeling confident?”

“Sort of... scared shitless, to be honest, but at least there’s a bunch of stuff in my head. I mean, I sort of know what my spiel’s gonna be. Ya know, it’s kinda like when a boxer enters the ring for a title fight. He knows his opponent because he’s watched video of the guy and understands his technique. I don’t have that advantage with Bedford. I don’t know the bloke from a bar of soap.”

“You’ve seen him on TV.”

“Not the same thing.”

“Think about it, Mick; the guy interviews a person, right? He knows what answers he wants so he manipulates the circumstances in order to get the person to fess up. Think of it this way, Bedford will use his negotiating skill to lead you into a situation where he has the power to force you into a corner. He’s done this kinda thing a thousand times. He knows what he wants, and he knows how to control the convo to suit himself.”

“So what’s your point?”

“Don’t take your eyes off the ball, mate. Don’t lose sight of what YOU want. Don’t lose sight of the goal post. Sorry about the mixed metaphors, but you know what I mean.”

“But I don’t even KNOW what I want, dammit! Well, I kind of do, but not really.”

“Then decide what you want before you make the call. You got one shot at this, Mick, don’t blow it.”

The builders arrived at 8am and got down to business. Dickson and Mick decided to surf for an hour to clear the cerebral cobwebs and get the adrenalin pumping. At 9:30, on the front verandah, Mick took Dickson’s phone, settled into one of the old canvas chairs, and dialled the Focus office.

“Ed Bedford here.”

“Mick.”

“Morris?”

“Yeah.”

“What’s that noise in the background?”

“Renovations. I guess you heard about the arson attempt by Horace Fink.”

“Arson?”

“Yeah, but the insurance company came to the party and everything’s cool.”

“I take it you’re using a cell phone. Maybe you could take a short walk to get away from the noise.”

“It’s not that bad. Besides, I’m watching Dickson under the shower.”

“Shower?”

“The hose in the front yard. We’re just back from a surf. We often surf after breakfast... kinda like our own private beach. Man, you should see that blond surfer god under the shower hose... talk about muscles. Dicko’s got muscles on his muscles. Fair dinkum, Ed, he can’t move an inch without something rippling... they look awesome when he’s all wet and shiny... the deep tan is a bonus as well. Actually, one of the great things about living in this beach house is being a fair way out of town. It’s far enough away to keep the fans from bothering us too much.”

“Fans?”

“Hundreds of them. Dicko can’t go anywhere without causing a riot.”

“All very interesting, Mick, but I think it’s time to get down to business.”

“Sure. Uh, one quick question, Ed, do you organize the catering or should we?”

“Catering?”

“For the location shoot. I was thinking you could start with Dickson coming out of the surf and running up the beach in his hip-hugging wet boardies, clinging to his crotch, surfboard under his arm, and looking stunning, of course. And that would give you an excuse to do the interview with him shirtless and tanned and all that kinda thing.”

“Location? I plan to do a studio interview.”

“What? With respect, Ed, how boring! Why wouldn’t you take advantage of this piece of Paradise? And I mean Paradise... it’s stunning... the beach, the white sand, the blue ocean, and a surfer god to boot... two, actually, if I’m also in shot.”

“We do our own on-site catering.”

“Cool, that saves Dicko and me all the hassle.”

“Listen, Mick, um... I might have to rethink this thing. I'll call back in an hour. Oh, by the way, the fee...”

“I gotta tell the truth, Ed. We've had a better offer. That doesn't necessarily mean we'll accept it, of course, but it's something to consider.”

“I'll phone back in an hour.”

Mick ended the call and then let out a ‘woohoo’ so loud it brought some of the building crew out onto the verandah to see what the fuss was all about.

A half hour later, the cell phone rang again. Anticipating Bedford, Mick answered the call. It was Simon Swan.

“Mick? I just got a call from Focus, the current affairs program. They want me to do a shoot of you blokes. I wasn't supposed to tell you until later, but I've got another job this afternoon. Are you okay for tomorrow morning? Early... say about 7? I got another job at 11.”

“Whoa, hold it a second, Simon. A shoot? What for?”

“Focus promos. They want footage they can use to promote the interview with Dickson a week or so in advance. You *do* know about the interview, right?”

“Well, sort of... we haven't finalized the deal yet.”

“According to Focus it's all signed, sealed and... almost delivered. Gotta rush... see you blokes tomorrow, 7am sharp.”

“What was that all about?” Dickson asked as Mick ended the call.

“Simon Swan, the local stringer. He'll be here at 7am tomorrow for a shoot. He says Focus wants footage to use as promos in advance of the interview.”

“The interview?”

“Yeah, looks like we got ourselves a deal, mate. Woohoo! Simon said he wasn’t supposed to let us know yet... I guess it’s all still hush-hush before Bedford calls back. I better not mention Simon’s call. Wow! This is like a whirlwind, Dicko! It’s all happening!”

“Yeah... that’s what worries me. Goodbye private life. Have you considered the repercussions, Mick? The publicity? The fame? The stares? The harassment?”

“The money?”

“And that’s another thing; there are 13 suspects. I’m only one. How will they feel about me getting all this loot and attention?”

“Speaking of loot, how far can I push Bedford?”

When the phone finally rang again, Mick shook his mate’s hand before answering. “Wish me luck,” he said, then pressed the receive button. “Mick speaking.”

“Ed. How’s it going?”

“Pretty cool.”

“I’ve spoken with a few colleagues. Your description of the location shoot this morning put an entirely new perspective on this story. Now, about the appearance fee... what have you been offered by the competition?”

“I’m not at liberty to say.”

“If you wish to accept another offer, tell me now.”

“My preference, and Dickson’s, is to go with Focus. We like the program and we respect you as an interviewer; you have integrity and class.”

“Thank you.”

“So, money is not the be all and end all. However, it is important.”

“Of course. Okay, so here’s the deal. Tops, \$250,000 and not a penny more. Moreover, that fee buys not only this interview, but others in the event that

the Fink investigation by police results in fresh evidence. In other words, we want Dickson's exclusivity for 24 months, lock stock and barrel. He is not to speak to other media without permission from Focus. How does that stand with you?"

"I'll discuss it with Dickson and call you back."

"No you won't, Mick. You'll give me your answer now or the deal is off."

"Can you spare a minute while I chat with him?"

"One minute."

Unbeknown to Bedford, a moment ago, Dickson had answered an urgent call from Nature and was busy in the loo. Mick placed his hand over the phone mouthpiece and gazed at the horizon. 'This is the biggie,' he said to himself, 'this is it, mate. Time to bite the bullet, time to accept full responsibility and make a decision. It's all up to me now.' Mick returned the phone to his ear. "Okay, deal."

"Good. You'll get a call from a local stringer in Taree, Simon Swan. He'll organize a time with you for a shoot... material we can use for promos. Do you have a lawyer?"

"Yeah, Goldstein, Nicholls and Blogg... Abraham Goldstein."

"Tell him to expect a contract from us today, express courier. We need it signed and returned by tomorrow. Understood?"

"Understood."

"The interview with Dickson will take place next Friday in time for editing, assembly and broadcast this coming Sunday. Any problems?"

"No problem."

"The crew and I will be there at 10am. We'll arrive by chopper."

“Tons of room here for a landing... miles of beach, no worries.”

“Fine. Get in touch with your lawyer and make sure that contract is returned express by tomorrow. I’ll be in touch. If you have any questions, contact this office by phone or email.”

“Thanks, Ed, see you Friday.”

“Bye.”

Chapter 6

In order to descend as rapidly as possible from cloud nine and return to reality, the boys decided to spend the next few hours surfing; an activity both exhilarating and challenging that reinforced their close bond with nature, and that reminded them to beware of the sometimes artificial and heady world of human beings.

Shortly after 1pm, as Dickson took his turn to shower in the front yard, a magpie drank from a puddle that formed in a depression about six feet away. Mick entered the house and returned a few seconds later with small handful of mince steak, part of which he tossed to the bird and the remainder of which he broke up and scattered on the verandah.

“You’ve done it now,” Dickson warned as he towed his blond locks. “We’ll never get rid of that thing.”

“Magpies are cool. I reckon this bloke brought us luck.”

“Yeah, right. It’s a magpie, not Merlin. Anyway, how do you know it’s a bloke?”

“Males have whiter markings than females. But I could be wrong.”

The bird, measuring about 18 inches in length, with a stocky build, hesitated for some time before it finally summoned the nerve to approach the remaining steak. “Don’t move, Dicko.” The boys stayed motionless while the bird, keeping one wary red eye fixed on the lads, gobbled the crumbs of beef. Satisfied there were no more freebies, it flew away.

“Check out the beak, Mick. That thing could do some serious damage... they swoop on people during nesting season, you know.”

“Chill out, Dicko, spring’s months away.”

“Remind me to wear my helmet.”

As the boys dined on ham and salad rolls for lunch, Dickson answered a call on his cell phone. It was from Abe Goldstein. He'd received the contract from Focus and wanted to see his new clients immediately. Shortly afterwards, the boys parked their two Suzukis out front of the offices of Goldstein, Nicholls and Blogg, solicitors, and went inside.

“Good afternoon, my friends,” Abe smiled as he offered the boys a seat, one each of two green vinyl chairs on the opposite side of his antique desk. He rose from his buttoned leather high-back chair and shook their hands. “Welcome to the family of Goldstein, Nicholls and Blogg. It's a pleasure to have you join us.” Once everyone was seated, he continued. “Speed is of the essence according to Edward Bedford. He insists on having this contract signed and expedited as soon as possible. I've read the document and, I must say, I'm not entirely happy with it. To quote the vernacular, if you choose to sign it as it stands, Bedford has you by the proverbial short and curlies for 24 months. On the other hand, if you do, it's worth a quarter of a million dollars to you... not an insubstantial sum.”

“I... that is, Mick, agreed to the contract over the phone while I was... elsewhere.”

“Well, I gather that if the contract is not signed today, and couriered to the Focus Production Office immediately, then the deal is off. Is that correct?”

“Correct.”

“Normally, I would advise a client to take the necessary time to carefully peruse a legally binding agreement such as this, and suggest and/or insist upon certain amendments before signing. How do you feel about that?”

“Like you said, Abe, if we don't sign then the deal is off. We have no choice.”

“Which is precisely why I feel very uncomfortable about going ahead without proper analysis and scrutiny. However, I do empathise with your position. If you are willing to sacrifice any further media interest outside of Focus Productions for a period of 24 months, then accept the offer. If not, don’t.”

“We’ll take it.”

Next day, Simon Swan arrived just before 7am as promised, and immediately assumed Steven Spielberg mode. “Had breakfast yet?”

“Nope.”

“Good, we’ll do the kitchen first.”

“How should we dress?”

“Just as you are, shorts, shirtless and bare feet.”

“What’ll we say?”

“Anything – doesn’t matter. Just carry on as you normally do. Talk about surfing or whatever.”

The boys helped Simon set up the lighting, then obeyed instructions; going about the business of frying bacon and eggs, making toast, pouring fruit juice and, finally, eating at the table.

Next came the beach shoot. Simon mounted his camera on a tripod just out of reach of the water’s edge, and filmed the boys as they jogged from the house, carrying their boards toward the surf. “Okay, let’s do that again.” Simon moved the camera closer to the house, then repeated the scene from behind and captured the surfers paddling through the break to the backline. That was followed by various shots of them riding waves. Twenty minutes later, Simon signalled the boys to return to the beach in five, which allowed him sufficient time to set up once again on the verandah. From there, he filmed the boys running up the beach toward the house, dumping their boards, then showering under the front yard hose.

“Okay, almost a wrap,” Simon said. “Just a few more shots of you guys with the bikes and helmets... a few head shots.”

Shortly afterwards, it was all over. Then the building crew arrived as Simon drove off. “What’s the story with Swan Video Productions?” the foreman asked.

“Just some surfing footage and stuff.”

“You blokes doing a surfing movie or something?”

“Yeah... sort of.”

“Lemme know when it’s on. By the way,” he said as he produced an autograph book and pen, “you wanna put your Monika in there for me? Uh, actually, it’s not for me, haha, it’s for my niece. She saw you on tele and went ballistic. You know how kids are.”

Mick looked on, obviously a little miffed at not having been asked for his autograph. But that minor dent in his vanity disappeared when Dickson handed the book to him after signing it. “You want mine too?” Mick asked the foreman, uncertain as to whether or not he should ask the question.

“More the merrier, mate! Anyway, my missus thinks you’re the better looking one, haha!”

“She does?”

“Yeah, but don’t ask me what I think, haha! I’m staying right outta that one.”

The next person to arrive was the carpet layer, to take measurements of the rooms undergoing renovation. Maurie was a likable enough and jovial bloke, with a handlebar moustache that warranted inclusion in the Guinness Book of Records. However, the invasion of so many tradesmen all at once proved too hectic for Dickson and Mick, who decided to flee the chaos and pay a visit to aunt Flo.

Following the obligatory ritual of tea and scones with jam and cream, Dickson broke the news about his forthcoming appearance on Focus.

“I can understand the money side of it,” Flo agreed as she poured more tea, “but the program is not called Focus for nothing you know. I think it’s dangerous.”

“How do you mean?”

“There are 13 people who had the opportunity to shoot Horace Fink. Why would Ed Bedford single out just one? I think Bedford is hoping to crucify you; to point the finger of blame at Dickson Bottoms.”

“I don’t agree,” Mick interrupted on his mate’s behalf, albeit unsolicited, “I think Bedford has a nose for a good story. Dicko has the looks and the charm. Besides, Dicko is also the sole beneficiary of Fink’s will. Obviously, he has the greatest need to prove his innocence. On top of that, I assume that Bedford knows that we were hired by Doris to investigate Horace before the murder. She was the one who said that his murder was inevitable. What she didn’t know, of course, was that she would also be a victim. So, it makes sense that Bedford would single out Dicko as the most logical interviewee, the person with the best story to tell.”

“You present your case admirably, Mick, but remember... I’ve been around a long time and I know what makes people like Bedford tick. He’s not after a story, he’s after sensationalism; he wants to crack the case, not to simply talk about it. Why do you think he offered you so much money? That’s a small fortune! Take my word for it, my dears, Bedford will want his pound of flesh. And it’ll be Dickson’s hide that provides it.”

After leaving Flo’s villa, Dickson suggested they take a ride to Barrington Tops National Park. “I

need to get away from all the crap, Mick, at least for a few hours.” On the way, they bought a picnic lunch of sandwiches and drinks at a take-away store. Upon arrival at the park, they took the Barrington Trail which winds its way through lush rainforest, waterfalls, creeks and camping areas to the foot of Mount Barrington and Careys Peak; one of the highest points in the park at over 1500 meters. There, they found a small clearing by a creek where they parked their bikes, spread a blanket and ate their lunch.

“This is the real world,” Dickson declared, “it’s so peaceful and together. It makes you feel part of it, like you belong here with the rest of nature.”

“Yeah, right... no television, no kitchen, no music, no roof, no bed... besides, it snows out here in winter.”

“Well, it’ll do for now. It’s like the whole Fink thing doesn’t exist out here... just some bad dream.”

“You know better, Dicko. Anyways, it’s not like this whole thing is gonna last forever. And we’ll be rich!”

“That kind of money is not rich, Mick. It’s a lot of money, but it’s not rich.”

“It’s a start. You know what I reckon, mate? I reckon we should capitalize on this whole Focus thing. After all the exposure, and that includes overseas, we should form a plan to market Dickson Bottoms to the world. Yeah?”

“Like what?”

“I dunno... a book maybe, or a movie or something like that. And don’t forget, you’ll be a famous super sleuth like James Bond or whoever, only better looking.”

“Cut the crap.”

“I’m serious! You underestimate yourself, Dicko, and it pisses me off sometimes. You got this

whole superstar thing handed to you on a platter and you can't see it. What's the matter with you?"

"I'm on the inside looking out, mate. I don't see it like you do."

"Okay, that's not a problem, just leave it to me... your media manager. I'll take care of business while you just look pretty."

"You're crazy, you know that? They should put you in a padded cell."

Chapter 7

The moment Dickson answered his phone, he recognized Cody's voice right away. "You were fucking awesome, awesome, awesome, Dickson! So was Mick! Wow, you guys rock something serious!"

"No need to swear, Code."

"Yes there is! I was blown away, dammit! Where are you?"

"At home... just finished dinner."

"Did you see the Focus promo on tele?"

"Yep."

"Is that all you can say? Yep? YEP? For crying out loud, you were fucking awesome!"

"You said that already."

"It's true! I can't wait for Sunday to see the program."

"Actually, the interview will be Friday."

"Tomorrow? Where?"

"Here, at the house."

"What time? I wanna be there!"

"I don't think that's a good idea, Cody. I'm kinda nervous about this whole thing as it is."

"No worries, Dickson... I'll stay outta the way, promise... I'll be on the beach. What time?"

"The crew arrives at 10am by chopper."

"Chopper? Bloody hell! You're a superstar!"

"Listen, Cody, settle down, okay? This is serious and I'm bloody nervous. I can't tell you how nervous. Stop treating this thing like some kinda circus."

"Sorry, mate, I didn't mean to get so carried away hehehe."

"And don't tell anybody about the interview here or the chopper. The last thing I need is an audience, at least not a live one here at the house."

“No worries, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“By the way, is anyone living in the house next door?”

“Nope, it’s for sale... quite a few lookers, but I think they’re just curious about Horace and Doris. I still hop the fence and use the pool when no one’s around, though. Anyway, catch you tomorrow... and say g’day to Mick for me.”

Dickson ended the call and passed on Cody’s message to Mick. “No more calls tonight, Mick,” he explained as he switched off the phone. “I need to clear my head about this Focus thing.”

“Turn it back on – I’ll take the calls and tell whoever it is that you’re unavailable.”

“Cool... I’ll take a walk along the beach... by myself, mate, I need to be alone for a while.”

The soles of Dickson’s bare feet left behind a series of impressions in the damp sand as the confused lad wandered along the beach. He was almost oblivious to his surroundings; he was instead deep in thought about his life, and how its many twists and turns seemed beyond his control.

“What is all this crap about free will?” he asked himself. “What free will? Life is like those waves— they have no control over what happens either. They’re washed ashore by an invisible force, one after the other, day and night, year after year. First it was my folks, killed by Fink. Then Doris came into my life and changed everything... turned it into a Pandora’s Box. Now it’s Ed Bedford. I might as well have a ring through my nose with a rope attached to it for all the good free will is supposed to do. It’s a load of absolute crap.”

Upon Dickson’s return to the house, after an absence of 90 minutes, Mick informed him of the callers. “Tom phoned and said he was praying for you.

He said if you need to speak to him before the interview tomorrow, give him a call about 9am. Tony Spiropoulos wished you luck and Clive Farrell the cop said if Bedford asks any questions about him to make no comment. He sounded pretty serious. Paul's mom Maureen Parker wishes you good luck, and says Paul is rooting for you. And there was a call from Fogsy. He said he's sorry he got you into all this shit."

"It wasn't his fault."

"That's what I told him but he wanted to apologize anyway. Hey, Dicko, are you feeling okay?"

"Yeah, I'm okay. I just wish it was over and things could return to normal."

"You want a coffee or something?"

"Thanks, but I'm gonna turn in. I need all the sleep I can get... not that I expect to get much."

For breakfast, Dickson settled for two cups of tea. He wasn't hungry. Mick, on the other hand, ate heartily as usual. "You'll be right, mate," he said.

"Bedford is only human you know. You're as smart as he is, no worries, probably smarter. If he throws you a curly one, think before you speak or just say 'no comment'."

"To say 'no comment' is the same as saying 'I have something to hide'."

"Politicians use it all the time."

"My point exactly."

When the building crew arrived at 8, Dickson informed the foreman of the television shoot due at about 10. "I'd appreciate it if you guys could just carry on normally. I don't want it to look like a circus."

"I saw the Focus promo on tele last night. You blokes scrub up pretty well on the tube, mate. A young fella like you has a big future in showbiz, if you ask me. My missus thinks so too."

“Yeah, right. You wanna know the truth? I’m scared shitless.”

“Don’t gimme that crap. You see those waves out there? If you can tackle those, mate, you can tackle anything. Don’t let that Bedford bloke fool you. He’s all bluff. Treat him just like anyone else, that’s my advice.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it.”

“No worries, and good luck.”

At 9, Dickson phoned the Rev. “I just want you to know that I’m grateful for the prayers, Tom, and the fact that you’re in my corner. You’re a good man.”

“I called last night because I wanted to tell you not to worry about the cameras and all that glitzy television razzamatazz. Ignore it. Focus on Bedford – pardon the pun. Forget that he’s a television star and treat him just like you treat me or anyone else. Don’t be intimidated by his public persona. That’s just a load of old codswallop; he’s the same as you and me.”

“That’s pretty much what the building foreman said.”

“I suspect you have the pre-curtain jitters, just as all performers do... and you are a performer, Dickson, at least you are on this occasion. But, believe me, once you step onto that stage - so to speak - the jitters will vanish and you’ll be fine.”

“I hope you’re right, Tom.”

“I am right, Dickson, so don’t argue or I’ll frighten the daylights out of you with a bolt of lightning. Good luck my son.”

Just before 10, the faint sound of a distant chopper grew louder until the noise was reminiscent of the rapid-fire whoosh-whoosh soundtrack common to Hollywood war movies. The machine passed low over the roof of the beach house, vibrating windows. It tilted

backward, then slowly descended into a whirling cloud of sand and dust as it flattened all surrounding grasses.

Within minutes, the rotors had been silenced, and relative peace restored. Five men emerged from the aircraft and made their way toward the house. One of the men, Ed Bedford, carried a clipboard, the other four carried television equipment.

“Pleased to meet you, Dickson,” Bedford smiled as he gripped the shirtless teen’s hand.” The famous interviewer was dressed in an open-neck, long-sleeve blue shirt, slacks and black dress shoes. Then he faced Mick, “and pleased to meet you... you must be Mick Morris, negotiator extraordinaire. Had you planned on doing the shoot on the verandah? Looks ideal to me.”

Bedford turned his attention to the crew and discussed the arrangement of equipment. He then asked one of the two cameramen to shoot some wild footage of the builders and renovations to be used as cutaways during the final edit. The second cameraman took a range of wide shots of the beach and the house itself. “We also shot some aerial footage on approach,” Bedford explained to the boys, then checked his wrist watch. “And, of course, we have Simon Swan’s footage of you surfing and whatnot. That should be fine.”

“Could I see your list of questions?” Dickson asked, nodding at the clipboard.

“They’re just notes... names and events for reference. The questions are in my head. Are you nervous?”

“Yes.”

“That’s normal and natural. You’ll be fine when we get started, speaking of which...” Bedford returned his attention to the crew and began to organize the set up. “I hope these canvas chairs don’t collapse,” he laughed as he tested one.

Once everything was in readiness, with Bedford and Dickson sitting opposite each other - but angled slightly toward the beach - and Mick sitting beside his mate, Bedford began his introductory speech to camera. "Welcome to this week's Focus. I'm Edward Bedford. Tonight's program features Dickson Bottoms..." Bedford tried desperately to withhold his laughter but failed, and burst into an uncontrolled giggle. "Sorry, guys. We'll try that again." He turned to Dickson. "Do you have a middle name?"

"No, I don't."

"Okay." The host cleared his throat, faced camera and began again: "Welcome to this week's Focus. I'm Edward Bedford. Our guest on tonight's program is Dickson Bottoms, the teenage super sleuth who found himself embroiled in one of this year's top stories and most highly-publicized murder cases; the Fink Curse. Sitting next to Dickson is his friend and media manager, Mick Morris." Bedford turned his head to face the boys. "Welcome to the program, gentlemen."

"Glad to be here... I think."

"You live an idyllic lifestyle here at Old Bar Beach."

"Is that a question?"

"It is if you like."

"Well, it *was* idyllic before all this Fink business came along."

"How did you get involved?"

"Doris Fink hired us to investigate her husband. She said that his murder was inevitable."

"Do you know who murdered Horace Fink?"

"No."

"Do you have any ideas, any suspicions?"

Dickson shrugged. "It could be any of 13 people in the farm shed."

“Let’s just recap that for the benefit of our viewers. Fink invited all 13 of you to the Tony Spiropoulos farm that night, in the honey bottling shed. Is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“And what happened?”

Dickson described the events of that fateful night. When he finished, Bedford resumed his questioning.

“So Fink admitted having murdered your parents?”

“Yes.”

“That sounds to me like a pretty valid reason to seek revenge and to shoot Fink.”

“Yes.”

“Did you?”

“I wanted to... for a second. But I didn’t do it.”

“Who did?”

“I don’t know.”

“For all I know or anyone knows, I could be interviewing a killer. Is that the way other people react to you? Friends, relatives, strangers... people who live around this area?”

“I guess so.”

“You’re the sole beneficiary of Fink’s will. Why do you think he made that change to his will just hours before he died?”

“I’m not sure. I suspect it was the way his devious mind worked... he wanted me to suffer. He must’ve planned this whole bizarre thing... the shooting in a darkened shed, knowing that I could never prove my innocence unless the killer confessed. It’s like the story of the carrot tied to a stick... a carrot that the donkey can never reach.”

“Are you interested in that carrot?”

“Wouldn’t you be? Wouldn’t anyone be?”

“So the answer is yes?”

“I’ll tell you what the answer is; I wish I’d never heard of Fink. I need my life back much more than I need 4 million dollars.”

“You’re between a rock and a hard place. Have the police interviewed all 13 suspects?”

“Several times but it’s pointless and the cops know it. There were 13 people in that darkened shed, 14 if you include Fink, but no witnesses. How weird is that? There’s only one person who knows who shot Fink, and that’s the killer him or herself.”

“Constable Clive Farrell is an expert shot.”

“Yes, he is. We spent an afternoon with him at the rifle range.”

After a pause, Bedford encouraged Dickson to continue. “Yes, go on.”

“That’s it.”

“You don’t think Constable Farrell shot Fink?”

“No comment.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means no comment.”

“Is there something about Farrell you’d rather not talk about?”

“I hardly know him.”

“I see. Did Horace Fink attempt to burn this house down?”

“We think so.”

“He didn’t admit to it?”

“His car was seen in the area just after the fire started.”

“So you’re pretty sure he was guilty of arson?”

“Pretty sure, yes.”

“That’s another good reason to want to shoot him.”

“Yes, it is.”

“With respect, let me put this to you. It’s not necessarily my own viewpoint, but it could be the viewpoint of other people: You shot Horace Fink that night in the farm shed. You can’t admit guilt because, as the situation stands, you’re ineligible to collect the proceeds of Fink’s will unless you’re innocent. What do you say to that hypothesis?”

“I didn’t know about the will until afterwards.”

“Why would that make any difference? You had several reasons – some would argue very valid reasons – to shoot Fink, will or no will.”

“So did everyone else in that shed. They all hated Horace or, at the very least disliked him intensely. I know that for a fact because I spoke to them all during the previous few months. Besides, Horace murdered his own wife, Doris. She was well liked and respected, so there’s another good and valid reason – as you put it – to shoot Horace.”

“And what about you, Mick Morris? What do you think?”

“I agree with everything Dickson says. Dicko is no liar. Trust me, Dicko is the coolest.”

“You’re Dickson’s media manager?”

“Correct.”

“A shirtless media manager dressed only in board shorts?” Bedford asked with a cocked eyebrow and a cynical smile.

“Haven’t you heard? It’s the latest craze.” Mick’s comment prompted Dickson’s shoulders to bounce while he covered his mouth in an attempt to contain his mirth.

“Back to you, Dickson, what does the future hold for you? You’re young, fit, good looking, intelligent...”

“Now is not a good time to ask. There’s too much hassle. It’s not easy to think straight.”

“It wouldn’t have been easy to think straight that night in the shed either.”

“Too true, mate, and not just for me - not for any of those 13 people there. Can I ask you a question? Why me? Why interview me? Why not one of the others?”

“Why not you? You were personally involved with Doris Fink as her private investigator. You knew her well. You also knew Horace quite well. He made an offer to buy this house. You rejected his offer and, it seems to me, that rejection provided Fink with the means, the motive and the opportunity to destroy it. Apart from all that, you, for whatever reasons, have been singled out by the media as the primary recipient of attention. Why do you think that is?”

“I’ll answer that one,” Mick interjected. “Check out this dude. He’s awesome. People see him on the tele and go ballistic. Bloody hell, people see him the street and go ballistic. He’s got it, you know, IT.”

“You don’t agree, Mr. Morris, that Dickson had, and still has, probably the most compelling reasons to shoot Fink? And that that alone is sufficient reason to inspire such widespread public interest and speculation?”

“What are you saying? That Dickson is guilty?”

“No, that’s not what I’m saying, what I’m saying is simply this: most people think that Dickson had legitimate cause to pull that trigger. Moreover, most people think that Fink deserved to be shot. For God’s sake, even Fink thought that himself! I don’t believe there’s a court in the land that would convict Dickson of murder or even manslaughter for that matter, and I don’t believe there’s a single Australian with a modicum of decency who would condemn Dickson for pulling that trigger.”

Chapter 8

Not until after the interview did Dickson notice a small gathering of people on the beach in front of the house. The chopper had obviously attracted a lot of local attention. Cody was among the group and proceeded toward the house as the camera crew packed their gear. Bedford, meantime, congratulated the boys on a successful interview and shook their hands. "I'll be in touch," he said, then followed the crew back to the chopper.

"How did it go?" Cody asked.

"Terrible."

"How so?"

"Bedford made a statement at the end that confused me. It wasn't a question and I didn't know how to respond, damn it. He more or less suggested that I am guilty of shooting Fink. He didn't say so directly, but he sure as hell intimated it."

"Did you complain?"

"Like I said, I was confused... I wasn't thinking straight." Dickson glanced in the direction of the crowd. "I wish all those bloody ghouls would disappear."

Cody suggested the three boys catch a wave.

"By the time the chopper leaves and we get back to the house, the gawkers will be gone."

Two hours later, as the boys showered under the front yard hose, things had returned to normal. The crowd had dissipated and the building workers were going about their business as usual. "I'm starving," Mick complained. "Let's pig out on some Dickson specials with the lot." Before Cody could ask the obvious question, Mick added with a grin, "burgers, mate, Dickson specials. They rock."

As the lads ate their lunch, washed down with Cokes, on the front verandah, Cody sensed that the

atmosphere was somewhat tense. “I guess you guys are thinking about the interview. Nothing you can do about it now, though. Besides, I reckon things will turn out okay. Not that I could hear what was said, mind you... it’s just a feeling. I know you guys well enough to also know that... well, put it this way... my dad says that strength of character always wins through, no matter what. He says a person with a strong character can tackle anything life dishes out.”

Just then, a magpie landed a few feet way. Mick instinctively tossed a piece of his burger toward the bird. Cody followed suit, then Dickson. Mick stood, placed his burger on the canvas chair and ran inside the house. He was back in a few seconds with a handful of mince, which he broke into smaller pieces. He scattered them on the verandah floor, then resumed eating his lunch. “Looks like the same one that was here the other day,” he noted. “Let’s call him Maggie.”

“Maggie’s a girl’s name.”

“Maybe he’s gay.”

All three boys cracked up at the joke, but nonetheless conceded that Maggie was as good a name as any for a magpie.

“Looks like the same one that hangs around the Fink house,” Cody said. “Then again, they all look the same. They can talk, you know. I’ve heard that some people split the bird’s tongue to make them talk even better. They say it doesn’t hurt.”

“Yeah, right. Tell that to someone who’s had their tongue pierced.”

“If you befriend a magpie, they become really cheeky and even come inside the house to steal stuff when you’re not looking.”

“Now you tell us!”

Once the bird had eaten all the mince, it flew away. “How cool is that?” Dickson commented. “I wish

I could just fly away like that whenever I felt like it. I reckon there's nothing alive that's as free as a bird."

"Check that out!" Cody exclaimed excitedly as he pointed to the sky. All eyes followed his finger to the awesome sight of a flock of pelicans, about thirty of them, making their way to the Manning River. They resembled a formation of silver dirigibles glistening in the sunlight, riding the thermal current. Only when one or two banked - which revealed their black wing feathers and profile - did they become recognizable as pelicans. "So clumsy on land, so graceful in flight," Cody mused. "They're just the most amazing birds."

"It's funny," Mick said thoughtfully while observing the aerial ballet, "but a sight like that kinda makes what happened here today seem almost irrelevant... you know, like it doesn't really count in the great scheme of things."

"Speaking of which," Dickson said, "I think I need to go there."

"Where?"

"Anywhere. Once Focus goes to air on Sunday night, this place is gonna become a crazy house... a tourist attraction."

"Yeah!" Cody laughed, "like those Hollywood bus tours of the famous actors' houses, hehehe."

"It's okay for you to talk," Dickson rebuked, "you're not in bloody the hot seat."

"How about Sydney?" Mick suggested. "Let's treat ourselves to a couple of weeks in Sydney! The Gay Mardi Gras is on next week and I'd really love to see that! Whaddaya say, Dicko? We can afford it, and we deserve a break. Yeah?"

"You can't be serious, Mick. The Gay Mardi Gras? You've lost your marbles."

"Jeez, I wish I was going with you," Cody lamented. "That would be so damn cool! Hey, you guys

could strip down to your Speedos and march along with the parade! How awesome!”

“Would you?”

“Sure I would! I was in a gay club up at the Gold Coast once and a couple of strippers invited me on stage.”

“Guys?”

“Yeah, and they were hot! Hot, hot, hot!

Anyway, they started to strip me. I was like freaking out at first, big time, then the crowd started going ballistic, yelling and screaming for more. So I kinda got carried away and cracked a giant woody, hehehe. It was totally wicked – there I was totally starkers on stage and the audience went wild! When the show ended, I walked back to my table naked, with my woody bouncing around all over the place, and I didn’t give a rat’s ass. I was way too hyped to care. In fact, I was damn proud! When I got back to my table I put my shirt and boardies back on. My mates couldn’t get over it, hehehe. They thought I was crazy but they loved it.”

“I’d give my left nut to see that,” Dickson laughed.

“Too bad I don’t have the readies to go to Sydney with you otherwise I would.”

“You mean march naked in the Mardi Gras? You’re crazy! They’d lock you up and throw away the key, Code... for indecent exposure.”

“What’s indecent about it? My folks see me naked all the time and they don’t say anything.”

“Home is not Oxford Street, Cody, with half a million people lining the route.”

The spiky black mop decided it was time to leave. “Better check with Mark to see what homework we got for the weekend. I’m gonna be in deep enough crap anyway with my folks for taking a day off school. But it was worth it!”

Mick offered him a ride home on the back of his Suzuki. By the time he returned to the beach house, the building crew had knocked off for the day. “The foreman reckons it’ll be finished by Tuesday or Wednesday,” Dickson explained as the boys inspected the renovated rooms.

“Listen, Dicko, I’ve been thinking about this trip to Sydney. How about we shout Cody?”

“Not a good idea, Mick. He’s a minor for one thing, and he has school obligations for another. I hope you didn’t say anything to him about it.”

“No, but Cody’s a fun guy and...”

“You like him a lot, don’t you.”

“Yeah, he’s cool.”

Dickson led the way to the kitchen and grabbed two beers from the fridge, one of which he tossed to Mick. “How cool?”

“You mean am I attracted to him? Sure, I am. I’d be blind not to be. Listen, Dicko, I know what you’re thinking but it’s not gonna happen. For one thing, Cody already knows how I feel about you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean, or shouldn’t I ask?”

“It means I’m not interested in anyone else.”

“I was right... I shouldn’t have asked.”

“Cool – subject closed. What’s for dinner?”

“Now there’s a subject that’s never closed,”

Dickson laughed. “I dunno, mate, haven’t even thought about it.”

“How about I rock into town and grab a BBQ chicken?”

While Mick was gone, Dickson sat at the kitchen table and thought about the proposed trip to Sydney. After the turmoil of recent events, he would have preferred to be isolated from noise and crowds. On the other hand, he reckoned, perhaps a diversion such

as the Mardi Gras and being a tourist in the Big Smoke might help take his mind off his troubles. He was still undecided when Mick returned with the chicken.

“You just relax,” Mick said as he placed the food on the kitchen bench. “I got gravy, roast spuds and peas as well, and some garlic bread. Smells great! Not as good as your cooking, of course, but still pretty good.”

“Give me one good reason why we should go to Sydney.”

“I can give you hundreds, and not just the Mardi Gras. The zoo...”

“The zoo? Bloody hell, we got enough of a bloody zoo around here without going to Sydney.”

“It’ll do you good, mate,” Mick cracked as he mimicked a chimpanzee, “trust me. We can check out Manly and Bondi and maybe the northern beaches, take in a show at the Opera House, climb the Harbor Bridge, wander around Darling Harbor, catch a movie or two...”

“Where do you intend to stay?”

“You mean hotel?”

“They’ll be booked solid because of the Mardi Gras.”

“Okay, so we stay at a Kings Cross backpacker joint or a Darlinghurst pub or whatever. You want a leg or breast?”

“Leg. Listen, Mick, is it hard for you? I mean, feeling the way you do about me and not... you know, being able to express it?”

“I don’t want this to sound cheap or gross, Dicko,” Mick replied as he carried the plates of food to the table, “but just being with you and enjoying your company is way way better than having sex with someone else. Not that I’ve actually done anything with anyone but... well, that’s the way I figure it.”

“Doesn’t seem fair.”

“My mom reckons there’s no such thing... as fair, I mean. She says fair is a human concept, that it doesn’t really exist.”

“And what do you think?” Dickson asked as a forkful of chicken and potato was poised to enter his mouth.

“I dunno, mate, I’m no philosopher or whatever, but I reckon something’s better than nothing, especially when that something beats anything else hands down.”

“Is Cody gay?”

“No, that is not gay gay, if you know what I mean. He doesn’t believe in labels.”

Chapter 9

Next day, Saturday, Dickson rented a campervan from a local dealer for 2 weeks. He then drove to Paul Parker's house. The young red-head was out surfing, so Dickson made arrangements with his mother, Maureen, to have her son check the beach house daily on his newspaper run. "Here's a spare key," Dickson said as he offered it to Maureen. "The builders should be finished by about mid week. I'll phone their office on Monday to let them know that Paul has the authority to look after the house while Mick and I are in Sydney."

"How long will you be away?"

"Two weeks. We're leaving today."

"Before the Focus interview?"

"That's why we're leaving today."

"I see."

Luckily for the boys, Lane Cove River Tourist Park had a late cancellation, which was its last available campervan site. The rest of the park - the closest to the Sydney CBD - was booked solid. After confirming the booking by phone, Dickson and Mick set off in the Toyota van for the trip to Sydney, traveling south along the expressway to Newcastle.

"I'm starving," Mick complained as they neared Swansea, a small town south of Newcastle. "Let's grab a burger or something."

"Cool - you can take over the wheel the rest of the way."

Two hours later, at the end of the expressway, they arrived at Hornsby where they turned left and followed the Pacific Highway through Sydney's dense north-western suburbia to Lane Cove.

“Robyn, a friend of Aunt Flo, used to live in Lane Cove,” Dickson said as Mick headed down the road to the park. “She called it ‘Lana Cove’.”

“Was she serious?”

“No, mate. She was always the joker – a real hoot. When she lived in Kogarah she called it ‘Koh-gaa-rah.’”

The park, in contrast to the huge city that surrounds it, is set in the midst of lush bushland and national park. After tending to business in the park office, Mick drove to the campervan site. There, they plugged in the power, set up the roll-out awning, arranged a couple of camping chairs on the lawn and grabbed a beer each.

“I dunno why people holiday in places like this,” Dickson remarked, “we’ve got more neighbors here than back home. Fact is, we don’t have any neighbors up at Old Bar.”

“What’ll we do tonight?”

Dressed in T-shirts, jeans and sneakers, the boys caught a bus to Chatswood, then traveled by train to Circular Quay. It was just on dusk when they arrived; the Harbor Bridge and Opera House were already lit while buskers performed around the waterfront. One of them played a didgeridoo. Some, wearing comic costumes, walked through the crowd on stilts which elevated them to a height of 10 feet or more. Several others drew large works of art on the pavement with colored chalk.

“It’s like a permanent party,” Dickson commented.

“Let’s check out The Rocks and find a pub.”

The boys chose the Lord Nelson in Kent Street, a 19th century building that oozed an abundance of charm and character. Inside, the smell of hops was immediately apparent. And no wonder, the pub is

famous for its beers brewed on the premises. Dickson and Mick ordered a cheese plate and two pints of ‘Three Sheets’ at the bar where they sat on stools.

“Best pub in Australia,” a man with a London accent volunteered, “and probably the whole world. You should try the pork pies, matey. Bloody beautiful – as good as back home!” The man collected two pints of ‘Nelson’s Blood’ from the bar, and took them back to a table occupied by a woman, presumably his wife.

“You wanna eat here?” Mick asked his mate.

“Not sure... there’s just so much choice in this whole town! It’s confusing. I wouldn’t mind Asian tucker; we rarely have that back home.”

The lads finished their beers and cheese, then took a short walk to George Street and the Orient Hotel. The place was packed to the rafters and a loud pop band made conversation impossible. In less than a minute, it dawned on both boys that this was a pick-up joint for singles. They ordered two beers (for which they almost had to take out a loan) and fled to the comparative sanctuary of the outdoor area where the atmosphere appeared much more relaxed.

Almost immediately, they were joined by two girls in their late teens. “You’re not getting away that easily,” the peroxide blonde smiled. Her friend’s hair was died pink with splashes of green. “Mind if we join you?”

“We’re gay,” Dickson replied quickly. “Sorry about that.”

“Oh, that’s not a problem at all!” the pink-haired girl gushed and winked. “We can fix that... we have before you know.”

“Not this time,” Dickson insisted in all seriousness. “We’re married.”

“Married? You mean... oh my God! To each other?”

“Fraid so, ladies. We’re on our honeymoon.”

“What a bloody waste,” miss Peroxide pouted before the two girls huffed their way back inside the main room.

Mick was obviously in a severe state of shock. “I don’t believe you said that, Dicko!”

“It worked didn’t it? Besides, I’m not in the mood for a pick-up, especially a cheap one. Let’s finish our beer and find somewhere quiet.”

“Gay? Married? You and me? Ha!” Mick dissolved into a fit of the giggles, inspiring Dickson to do likewise and spill some of his beer in the process.

The boys took a bus down George Street to Chinatown in Haymarket. There they found a small, uncrowded Vietnamese restaurant. “You are waiting for lady friend, yes?” the waiter asked.

“No.”

“Oh? Night on town? Find ladies later?”

“Sort of, yeah.” Dickson perused the drinks menu and ordered two small bottles of Hanoi beer.

“Very handsome boys,” the waiter continued with a wink, “get lots of ladies. You get too many you bring here.” Then he disappeared with the drinks order. Upon his return to the table, the boys ordered grilled shrimp paste on sugar cane sticks, followed by Vietnamese-style beef fondue and, for desert, banana in coconut sugar syrup.

After the meal, the lads walked along Park Street to William Street which led them to Darlinghurst Road and the infamous Kings Cross strip. “If I hear ‘you wanna girl, darling?’ one more time I’ll throttle someone,” Dickson bitched but was then unexpectedly accosted by a club spruiker. “Lots of horny girls inside, mate. Only 20 bucks for a good time.” The spruiker all but bundled the boys through the narrow doorway but they managed to escape his determined clutches.

When they reached the Alamein Fountain in Fitzroy Gardens at the end of the main strip, they noticed the Bourbon & Beefsteak bar opposite, and decided to call in for a beer. At the far end of the crowded main room a jazz trio played cool but unobtrusive music. “What’ll it be?” the bartender asked as the boys seated themselves on stools. “Have you guys been here before? You look kinda familiar.”

“First time.”

“New in town?”

“From up the coast.”

“Here for the Mardi Gras?”

“Sort of.”

“So what’ll it be? Beer? Bavarian, German, American, English, Irish, New Zealand, South African, Asian, Aussie, Russian...?”

“Russian sounds interesting.”

“Baltika?”

“Fine.”

“Allow me,” said a voice from behind as a hand placed a 50 dollar note on the counter. “Make that 3 Baltika and keep the change.” The boys turned to see a rather distinguished looking man, early fifties, with a touch of gray at the temples. He was casually but smartly dressed and wore a lightweight tan leather jacket, unzipped, over a pale yellow roll-top skivvy. “Ivor,” he continued, “Ivor Boiz. Pardon the pun. My parents are Ukrainian... former USSR and all that. I was just 5 years old when they arrived in Australia, so I consider myself a true blue Aussie.” The boys introduced themselves and shook the man’s hand. “May I join you?” he asked.

“Sure.”

Ivor grabbed a stool and positioned himself between the boys so as to form a half circle. “You’re not locals, I take it, you look far too healthy for that.”

“Old Bar near Taree.”

“Here for the Mardi Gras?”

“Blame Mick, he dragged me down here. It was all his idea.”

“You’ll love it, my friends; it’s a splendid theatrical experience, one of the world’s great spectacles. Will you be attending the sleaze ball?”

“What’s that?”

“You’ve not heard of the sleaze ball? It’s one of the festival’s main attractions,” Ivor explained, “if not THE main attraction. The woodwork squeaks and out come the freaks... decadence without limitation, uncompromising sensuality oozing from every pore... to quote the Sleaze Ball website.”

“Sorry, Ivor, doesn’t sound like our kinda scene.”

“Speak for yourself, Dicko.”

“Don’t listen to Mick, he’s joking.”

“Who says?”

“Now, now, boys, no bickering.”

“Will you be there, Ivor?”

“Of course! Wouldn’t miss it for the world! And it’s such a welcome contrast to staid old Canberra and the ANU.”

“You go to the Australian National University?”

“I’m a science teacher there. Career choices for a person of my ethnic heritage are limited... Cossack dancing, KGB, politics or science. I chose the latter. However, I’m sure you lads have a much more intriguing tale to tell. Do tell me about yourselves.”

During the course of the conversation, Ivor bought another round of beers, which prompted Dickson to privately question the man’s intent. When Mick admitted that he and his mate dabbled in private investigator work - an admission much to Dickson’s chagrin - Ivor revealed his secret. “Yes, to be honest I

did recognize both of you from the Focus promos on TV. That's why I offered to buy you a beer and ask to join you. I hope you don't think I'm being too forward."

The bartender overheard Ivor's comment: "Ah!" he said, "so that's where I've seen you guys before! Hey, cool to meet you... next round is on the house, mate."

Dickson quickly responded in a hushed tone: "Thanks, but for God's sake, please don't spread it around. We're trying to avoid all that public gaze crap. That's why we're here in Sydney."

"You should've chosen the Simpson Desert, mate," the bartender laughed. "Okay, no worries, mom's the word."

"So," Ivor continued, "how did the interview go?"

"Lousy."

"Did you admit or deny anything?"

"Watch it tomorrow night and make your own judgement."

"Sorry, Dickson, I didn't mean to touch a sensitive nerve. However, you can't blame people for being curious. And now if you'll pardon me, nature calls, I need to visit the little boys' room. Back in a minute."

Once Ivor was out of earshot, Dickson asked Mick if he thought Ivor was trying to hit on them.

"Probably."

"Let's get outta here before he gets back."

"Why? If he puts the hard word on you, you can always say no, you know. Besides, to get up and walk out while he's away would be unforgivably ingenuous. Anyway, for Pete's sake, what's the big deal?"

"I don't like his type."

“What type? The bloke buys us a few drinks and wants to chat. What’s wrong with that? Chill out, Dicko, you’re getting all paranoid about nothing.”

When Ivor returned and seated himself on his stool, Dickson decided to bring the situation to a rapid head. “Ivor,” he began, “tell me straight, are you trying to hit on us? Because, if you are, you’re wasting your time.”

“The answer to your first question is no. Secondly, I don’t consider your company to be a waste of time. Is there anything else you’d like to know?”

“Jeez, dammit, I feel so stupid. I’m sorry, Ivor... really... it’s just that, well, you know, Kings Cross and all that. It kinda makes me nervous.”

“If I were half as handsome as you, I’d be nervous too,” Ivor laughed. “No offence taken. Let me put it this way, Dickson, and you too Mick, if you leapt upon me from a chandelier and set about ripping my clothes off, I would offer very little resistance, if any at all. However, one-night stands are not my scene. Am I gay? Yes I am. Do I have a partner? No I don’t. Do I want one? No I don’t...”

“There’s no need to tell us your personal stuff,” Dickson interrupted.

“Yes, there is. Otherwise you’d be wondering privately. Am I lonely? No I’m not. I make a habit of doing this sort of thing; chatting to strangers whom I find interesting for whatever reason. To be perfectly frank, my friends, I resent the kind of paranoia displayed by some people who imagine that I must want something in return for my generosity; who become suspicious; who are cynical...”

“Whoa! Hang on, hang on, mate, I didn’t mean to upset you! I’m sorry.”

“So am I. I don’t mean to be rude but if you boys would like me to leave, just say so and I’ll vanish into thin air.”

Chapter 10

Shortly after 2am, Dickson and Mick decided to call it a night and head back to the campervan. “You’ll never get a taxi at this hour,” Ivor warned. “In any case, by the time you get to the head of the taxi queue, it’ll be sunrise. You’re welcome to share my room at the Crest Hotel – it’s just down the road.” The boys hesitated as they swapped indecisive glances, so Ivor took the initiative. “The room has a sleeper couch. You can have breakfast – my treat, shower and then take a train from Kings Cross station to Chatswood. You’ll feel a lot better after a good night’s sleep.”

“It’s very kind of you, Ivor, but...”

“It’s the sensible thing to do, Dickson, I won’t take no for an answer.”

Dickson and Mick had shared the same bed in the beach house ‘flat’ for some weeks, so sharing the same bed in a hotel room was no problem. Besides, the boys were bone tired as well as a little tipsy. The night passed without incident.

“I took the liberty of ordering breakfast for three,” Ivor announced as the lads yawned and stretched their way back to life at 7:30am. “Cereal, juice, eggs, sausage, toast, marmalade and tea. It’ll arrive any minute now.”

Both boys made a dash for the bathroom but Dickson was first to arrive. “Don’t be long, Dicko!” Mick yelled through the closed door. “I’m busting!”

“My, my,” Ivor commented as he eyed Mick’s tanned body, clad only in boxer shorts, “I knew you young fellows were fit and healthy but I hadn’t realized just how fit and healthy.”

“It’s the surfing – we don’t work out at a gym or anything like that.” Once again, Mick faced the

bathroom door to attend to more pressing matters.

“DICKO!”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” replied the voice from behind the door. The moment it opened, Mick squeezed past the blond in a desperate attempt to gain entry.

“I was just saying to your friend,” Ivor began but was immediately interrupted by Dickson.

“Yeah, I heard.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to sound... well, you know. What I fail to understand, Dickson, is why young people like yourself feel so uncomfortable about compliments.”

“It depends on who’s paying the compliment... and why.”

“The irony, Dickson, is that one of these days those compliments will no longer be forthcoming and you’ll miss them.”

Dickson was left to ponder Ivor’s comment as the older man attended a knock at the door. A moment later, a maid wheeled a trolley containing breakfast into the room and placed the food trays on a table. “Enjoy your breakfast,” she said as she ran her eyes up and down Dickson’s physique. Her attention was then diverted to Mick as he emerged from the bathroom. “My goodness,” she smiled, “some people have all the bloody luck.”

“Is that what you meant by who’s paying the compliment, Dickson?” Ivor asked with a grin as the girl left the room.

“Don’t worry about Dicko,” Mick intervened. “His knickers are continually in a bloody knot about that kinda stuff. Just ignore him. Mmmmm! Now there’s something I can’t ignore! Brekky! Smells awesome! I’m starving!”

“I have a feeling, Mick, that if we did ignore Dickson his knickers would be even more knotted than

they already are.” Once the trio had settled down to breakfast, Ivor continued. “You see, boys, I’m a scientist and lecturer. My hair is thinning, my waist has thickened, and my buns and tits have sagged. At your age, I was a bit of a looker myself, you know, albeit a tad hairy... blame my Ukrainian genes. Nonetheless, I was the recipient of considerable compliments about my looks. And now? May I say with due modesty that I am the recipient of compliments about my profession.”

“That’s different,” Dickson argued above the clatter of cutlery. “That’s not about sex.”

“Is Michelangelo’s David about sex?”

“No.”

“What is it about, do you think?”

“Art.”

“I rest my case. Meanwhile, what sort of compliments do you expect to get when you’re my age?”

Dickson chewed and swallowed a piece of sausage and egg, then shrugged before eagerly arming his fork with more food. “Never thought about it.”

“Maybe you should; you’re not going to be young and beautiful forever, you know. Do you have any plans?”

“I’m 18, Ivor – did you think about plans at my age?”

“Very much so. And what about you, Mick? Do you have plans for the future?”

“I reckon Dicko and I will be the 21st century’s version of Holmes and Watson. Yeah?”

Before leaving, the boys exchanged telephone numbers with Ivor and arranged to meet again on Monday night at the western corner of Oxford and Crown streets for the Mardi Gras parade.

Back at Lane Cove River Tourist Park, the lads hired a rowboat – one oar apiece - and took a leisurely

paddle along the tranquil river that casually meandered its way through dense natural bushland. “Bloody hell, Mick, coordinate the rowing, will you? We’re going around in circles, dammit! Just watch me. Raise the oar, lean forward as you place the oar behind you, dip, pull back... okay? Now follow my lead.”

“Don’t stress, Dicko, I’m trying, I’m trying!”

Later, they threw a couple of burgers on a riverside barbeque. “One of these days,” Mick bitched while using a flat stick to turn the sizzling food, “technology will invent meat that repels flies instead of attracting them... I can’t believe these things!”

Meanwhile, an unsympathetic Dickson prepared bread rolls and salad. “How would you like to spend the rest of the afternoon?”

“There are bicycles for hire in the park; we could take a trail ride through the bush. That’d be fun!”

“Sounds cool.”

It was late afternoon by the time the boys returned to the campervan where both were desperate for an ice cold beer from the van fridge. As they made themselves comfortable on the outdoor foldaway chairs under the awning, a middle age woman from a nearby caravan waved and said, “lovely weather”.

“Beautiful.”

“Where are you boys from?”

“Up the coast – Old Bar.”

“We’re from Orange – here for the Mardi Gras.”

“What Mardi Gras?”

“Really? You can’t be serious! You haven’t heard about the Mardi Gras?”

“Just kidding.”

“Oh,” she smiled. “Our son is in it, in the parade, that is. He’s in town at the moment, putting last minute touches to his costume. He’s gay, you know.” The lady’s comment cracked up both boys. After a

moment of temporary bewilderment, she recognized the obvious joke and shared the laughter. “Silly me! Would you like to join us for dinner; my husband and I? We’re having a BBQ. No need to bring anything... we have plenty of steaks, satay prawn sticks, sausages, salad... just come as you are. Say about 8 o’clock?”

“Great! Is 8:30 okay?”

“Fine, see you then.” The woman pointed to a nearby BBQ facility, one of many dotted around the park. “We’ll be over there. By the way, I’m Nell and my husband is Jack. He’s in the park shower block at the moment.”

“I’m Dickson and this is my mate, Mick. Pleased to meet you, Nell.”

The boys took a shower at the park amenities block after which they returned to the campervan to enjoy another beer. For a while, seated on their camp chairs under the awning, they watched the passing parade; fellow campers going to and fro, always offering a nod and a smile and a g’day as they walked by. “You don’t get that kinda friendliness in the city,” Mick noted. “Everyone’s too busy.”

“Focused, mate, focused. They’re not relaxed like people on holiday here in the park. It’s the atmosphere.”

“Well, what I wanna know is if people can be all friendly and nice like they are here, why do they resume their old grumpy ways when they return home? I mean, can you imagine Nell inviting us to join her and Jack for dinner if we’d met at a supermarket or on a railway station or whatever?”

Dickson laughed. “You’re getting too deep, mate. Hey, you’re asking me. What the hell do I know?”

“Just wondering.” Mick checked his watch. “Almost time for the 7 o’clock news, mate, then Focus.”

“I’m not sure I wanna watch it. I sure hope Jack and Nell don’t. If they do, that’s all we’ll hear about the whole damn night.”

At 8:25, Dickson and Mick, dressed in fresh T-shirts and shorts, but barefoot, wandered over to the BBQ where Jack and Nell were already busy cooking enough food to feed a small army. Following introductions, Dickson placed a cooler nearby. “VB stubbies,” he explained, “nice and cold. And two bottles of chardonnay.”

“How lovely!” Nell had already organized a nearby park table with a table cloth, eating utensils, bottles and jars of various sauces and condiments, bowls of salads, bread rolls, napkins, plates and glasses. “I like to do things right,” she confessed. “Roughing it is for boy scouts and girl guides, not this old girl.”

Once the food was cooked, placed on plates and arranged on the table, the foursome seated themselves on the wooden benches, Jack and Nell on one side of the table and the boys on the other. “Two, four, six, eight, bog in, don’t wait,” Jack said as he began to fill his paper plate. “Nell tells me you blokes are here for the Mardi Gras.”

“Not entirely,” Dickson answered. “We thought we’d get away for a while... checkout the big smoke for a few weeks.”

“Are you related?” Nell asked.

“Might as well be,” Mick laughed. “We share the same house and work together. We’re kinda like brothers.”

“So...?”

“No, Nell,” Dickson anticipated, “we’re not an item, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“Wouldn’t bother us if you were,” Jack intervened. “Would’ve once, but not now. Our son Steve is gay. Threw me for a loop when he told us a few years ago. It’s not the kinda thing a father expects, you know. Took a while to get used to it; not that you ever do; not really. Acceptance is the key. I sent him to a shrink at first then discovered that I was the one who needed a shrink, hahahahaha!”

Nell took advantage of the pause in conversation: “Jack’s problem was that Steve was school captain and a talented footballer. Steve was the last person in the world you would expect to be gay. He was – and still is – as rough and ready as any other boy his age.”

“How old is he now?” Dickson asked. “And, by the way, these satay prawns are absolutely wicked.”

“Steve is 19. He’s an electrician... second year apprentice and doing very well.”

“Who is he marching with?”

“In the Mardi Gras? He’s a solo entrant. He thought about marching with a group but then he decided to go it alone. ‘That’s how it was all along,’ he said to me, ‘being gay is something I had to deal with alone until I summoned the courage to out myself.’ I can’t begin to tell you how guilty I felt when he admitted to all his years of private inner struggle, anguish and turmoil at such a young age, keeping his problems to himself.”

“That’s how it affected me too,” Jack added as his eyes misted over. “That’s when it really struck me... the sheer enormity of Steve’s personal troubles... the fact that my own son was unwilling to share his problems with me, his own father for God’s sake, because of his fear of rejection. I was the typical macho male, you know, always referring to gays as poofers or

queers or faggots. Steve must've thought I'd be outraged if I knew."

"And were you?"

"No, funnily enough, not really. I was flabbergasted. I was shocked, lost for words – I thought it had to be some sort of sick joke... And then I started to wonder if it was my fault."

Nell's hand found Jack's and caressed it. "But that's all in the past now," she smiled. "We're very proud of our son."

"Couldn't be prouder," Jack added, then wiped a tear from his eye with the back of his hand.

Chapter 11

By the time the boys arrived at the corner of Oxford and Crown streets, thousands of people had already gathered. Broadcast cameras were mounted on several shop rooftops while men with over-the-shoulder steady-cams patrolled the roadway in readiness for the Mardi Gras parade, due to begin in about an hour.

“Don’t look now, Dicko, but I just spotted the Rev.”

“Tom Samuels? Where?” Dickson’s eyes searched the adjacent corner. “Oops! Too late, he just waved. He’s crossing the road on his way over here.”

“Well, I didn’t expect to see you here,” Tom beamed as he reached the spot where his friends stood, and shook their hands.

“Likewise, Rev., nice to see you. Are you with anyone?”

“Just little ol’ me. Okay, not so little. I hoped to be anonymous but, well, so much for that.”

“You almost are. You look so different dressed in jeans, sneakers and a T., Tom. But, alas, the chrome dome gave you away.”

“I don’t suppose you’re carrying a spare toupee,” the large man smiled. “By the way, did you listen to talk-back radio this morning?”

“Nope... to both your questions.”

“There were many calls from irate viewers of last night’s Focus program. Most were outraged at Bedford’s inference of your guilt, Dickson. The callers said, in essence, that you weren’t given sufficient opportunity to plead your case, and that Bedford railroaded you.”

At that moment, Ivor arrived. “Hello, friends,” he said, “glad you could make it. I thought you might

not show.” Without waiting for an introduction, Ivor offered his hand to Tom. “Hi, I’m Ivor, Ivor Boiz.”

“Tom Samuels. Dickson, Mick and I are from the same town... almost. I take it you’re here for the Mardi Gras?”

“Yes, that as well.”

“As well...?”

“As well as these two,” Ivor smiled and nodded toward the lads.

“Ah yes, I see. They’re also an unexpected bonus for me; I didn’t expect to see them here.”

Ivor turned to Dickson and asked if he had listened to talk-back radio that morning.

“Jeez, not you too! Tom was just telling us about it.”

“You have a lot of support out there, both of you, in fact. Elaine Jones and Long Jaws were absolutely scathing in their assessment of Bedford’s assertions.”

“Yeah, for all the bloody good it’ll do. What’s the point? No one really knows who shot Horace Fink.”

“It could have just as easily been me,” Tom Samuels offered. “I was there at the scene too you know.”

“C’mon, Rev, what the hell do you know about guns?” Mick asked. “If it had been you who fired the pistol, there’d be a hole in your shoe.”

The foursome were surrounded by all kinds of people representing every age group – grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles, sons and daughters - many waving multi-colored, bright striped flags of red, orange, yellow, green, blue and violet. The same rainbow colors adorned feathered hats and even actual hair! It was a joyous occasion embraced by an entire cross-section of society; gay, straight, undecided and who-the-bloody-hell-gives-a-damn.

As the first of the gaily decorated floats came into view, Dickson asked Tom if clergy was represented in the parade. “Not, per se,” the Rev. replied, “there are gay religious groups from various denominations but not the actual clergy representing itself. For one thing, the church hierarchy would be less than amused and for another, they’d need to include a bunch of leaping, prancing altar boys, which, no doubt, would damage an already tarnished reputation.”

Apart from floats that represented various official or unofficial institutions, there were many smaller groups on foot that represented nothing more than sheer uninhibited fun... clusters of young males dressed as girls (to the point of looking even more feminine than their sisters), girls dressed as men, dykes on bikes, lifesavers in traditional costume, carrying the SLSA flag, various individuals either dressed to the nines or barely dressed at all, and even some politicians. One Harley rider sported a massive Indian head-dress, whose hundreds of feathers, in typical gay colors, would surely have caused a bug-eyed Sitting Bull to become livid with envy.

“If I ever look like drowning,” Ivor remarked as the life savers marched by, “I want one of them!”

“Including CPR?” Tom asked dryly.

Among the floats were those that carried enormous caricatures of anti-gay lobbyists such as Fred Nile and other holier-than-thous, and which happily but nonetheless unmercifully lampooned them, much to the delight of the enthusiastic crowd.

“Fred forgets that he wasn’t around when God created Adam and Steve,” Tom joked.

“Speaking of Steve,” Mick yelled and pointed to Jack and Nell’s son, “here he comes!”

Steve was a handsome, muscular young man, with hair dyed pink, red, green and a number of other

colors. He was clad – albeit barely – in a costume made from an assortment of electrical components. His wrists and ankles were bound by colored wiring. Aloft, he held and waved lighted sparklers. As he danced by, the four friends, together with the rest of the crowd, broke into unrestrained laughter the moment they spotted his bare butt. A blinking, battery-powered red bulb protruded from between his cheeks. Painted across his buns, in bright rainbow colors, was the word “Sparkie”.

“I don’t understand it,” Dickson admitted with a shake of his head, “but I love it!”

When the last of the parade had passed, and the crowd began to slowly disperse, Dickson and friends soon discovered (to their annoyance) that all local pubs were packed to overflowing with high-spirited revellers. As an alternative, Ivor suggested they retire to his hotel room for a nightcap.

On their way to the Crest Hotel, the group walked along Darlinghurst Road, past Green Park, and saw a number of boys plying their trade. Tom Samuels made a sign of the cross, then recited the Lord’s Prayer in a hushed voice. Dickson and Mick, meanwhile, stared curiously at some of the boys and wondered how on earth they could stoop to such a low-life pursuit. “Where’s your patch, mate?” one of them asked Dickson, and nodded toward the older men. “Where did you get those dudes from?”

Before Dickson could respond, Ivor interrupted matter-of-factly, “You got it wrong, young fella, the lads are paying us.”

“Bullshit!” the boy mocked.

“It’s true, mate,” Dickson nodded, “but it’s cool... we got ‘em el cheapo.”

Too puzzled to comment, the boy made do with a scratch of his head as the foursome continued on their way to the Crest.

While his guests settled into the hotel room, Ivor phoned room service and ordered a plate of mixed savories and a pot of brewed coffee. “There’s cream and Irish whisky in the bar fridge,” he said as he replaced the phone, “in case anyone would like to add a little extra oomph to their coffee.”

For a while the conversation centered around the night’s parade and its various exuberant participants. In the meantime, however, Dickson was itching to ask Tom why he had prayed earlier when they passed by Green Park. Eventually, the opportunity presented itself.

“I pray for everyone, Dickson, including you.”

“What do you ask for?”

“Nothing in particular. I leave that to the good Lord.”

“And the kid at the park?”

“God’s not silly, Dickson.”

“I felt like giving that kid a piece of my mind, not to mention a bloody good hiding.”

“And what good would that do? The boy is not there because he wants to be. The only prostitutes condemned in the Bible are those who were priests and priestesses to false gods. Consider Mary Magdalene, the woman sinner who anointed Jesus’ feet with her tears and wiped them with the hairs of her head.”

“Maybe so, but what about the parade tonight?” Mick intervened. “What do you reckon God thinks about that?”

“God has a sense of humor, Mick,” the Rev. smiled. “If He didn’t, none of us would be here. And that includes Mr. Nile, the poor dear.”

“Isn’t that cruel?”

“Cruelty is a matter of perspective and interpretation, my son. Mr. Nile has no desire to be me and I have no wish to be him. God forbid! All of us are

here on this Earth to learn God's lesson but we don't all have the same teacher nor do we go to the same school... nor, for that matter, do we travel the same path. *As men approach me, so I receive them. All paths, Arjuna, lead to me.*"

"Sorry, Rev., doesn't make sense to me. How can we all be so different and yet equal in the eyes of God?"

"Ours is not to question why, Mick, ours is but to do and die."

"That's another way of saying you don't have a bloody clue, Rev! None of us do!"

"Which means...?"

"What?"

"We're all equal," Tom laughed. "Is there any more coffee left?"

"I'll order another pot," Ivor volunteered, and phoned room service.

The conversation then switched to the talk-back radio comments about Dickson's story on the Focus program. "It seems," Tom concluded, "that the vast majority of callers think you're innocent... both of you."

"How would they know?"

"They don't," Ivor proposed. "I'm sure they were influenced by your looks and healthy beach lifestyle. There's nothing remotely evil about you two boys that a camera might reveal. When they zoomed in for close-up head shots, you gave me the impression that you were more bewildered than anything else. I sensed the goodness in you, as I'm sure many others did, and even felt sympathy for your predicament; being harassed by Bedford's loaded questions. But even if some viewers do suspect that you shot Horace Fink, I'm sure they consider it justifiable homicide."

"Justifiable? And what do you think, Ivor?"

“I’m a scientist, Dickson, I deal with facts. The fact, in this case, is that I don’t know. Moreover, I don’t want to know.”

Chapter 12

From Kings Cross railway station, the boys traveled to Wynyard where they changed platforms and caught a train to Chatswood. Despite the late hour, many people continued to mill about, obviously due to the night's festivities. "I thought Ivor was going to the Sleaze Ball," Mick commented as they made their way to Chatswood taxi rank.

"He probably thought it was indiscreet to mention it while Tom was there."

"Tom wouldn't worry about that, he's been around too long. Do you think Tom is gay?"

"Who knows? Who cares? You know, Mick, I admit I wasn't too keen on going to the Mardi Gras at first. I thought it was gonna be packed with loony tunes, but I'm glad I did. It was totally awesome, Mick, an absolute buzz, and I really enjoyed it. That Steve bloke was a hoot. His costume cracks me up every time I think about it, hahaha."

"I can't wait to hear what Jack and Nell thought."

"And what about your folks, Mick? Do you think they would have watched the parade on tele?"

"Probably not."

"Are they homophobic?"

"Not that I'm aware of – they just didn't expect their own son to turn out gay. I guess they're still kinda shell shocked. By the way, I didn't tell them I'd be in Sydney for the parade... let alone with you."

"Give them time - they'll get used to the idea."

"Maybe. Will you?"

It was almost 2am when the boys retired to bed in the campervan, with their backs to each other. For a while, the only sound was the chirping of crickets.

"Dicko? Are you asleep?"

“Yes.”

“What’s gonna happen when you meet a girl and wanna settle down?”

“I’ll ask you to be my best man.” Mick failed to respond. Dickson waited several seconds before he added, “Well?” Then he heard the reason for the lack of response from his mate - muffled sobbing. “Oh, for fuck sake, Mick! Stop that! Jesus Christ, neither of us has a crystal ball, dammit! Don’t ask questions like that! Today is today, now is now; that’s all we got. Okay?”

“Night, Dicko. Sorry, mate.”

At 8am, after untangling himself from Mick’s sprawled legs and arms, Dickson grabbed a towel and his bag of toiletries and headed for the shower block. Mick was still asleep when he returned 15 minutes later. “Wakey, wakey, rise and shine you lazy bastard! Go take a shower, you smell disgusting; breakfast will be ready when you get back.”

Mick took a few moments of reluctance to stir, then lethargically obeyed his mate’s instructions. He paused at the van’s sliding door and asked sheepishly, “Are you still mad at me?”

“I will be if you don’t get your slack ass back here in 10 minutes.”

Marriage? Dickson asked himself as he broke eggs into the frying pan. What the hell brought that on? I’m 18 for crying out loud. Then he dismissed those thoughts in favor of planning the day’s activities.

Sydney Harbor Bridge is an Australian icon, famous all over the world; the longest single-span arch on the planet. In preparation for the ascent, Dickson and Mick were bundled together in the Bridge Climb building with a group of ten strangers, some from interstate and the rest from overseas. In a small room, they were asked to sign forms that exonerated Bridge

authorities from responsibility for accidental injury or death. Then each member of the group was breathalysed. “This is the first and last time I’m ever likely to pass one of these things,” fellow climber Patrick O’Shaunessey joked in a thick Irish brogue. “But don’t tell a single soul or it’ll ruin me reputation.”

After emptying their pockets, the group was taken to a change room where they each donned a jumpsuit over their regular clothes. Finally, they passed through a metal detector before being handed over to their guide, a cheerful young Aussie named Peter.

Peter instructed the group on how to fasten the tether, which would keep the climbers attached to the bridge and to each other at all times.

Before the climb, the group practiced on a replica of the bridge ladders. Then they were issued with military-style headphones. “It’s a little windy and noisy up there,” Peter said.

At the start of the climb, group members tethered themselves. Once secured, they could not change places. From the base of the southwest tower, the group snaked its way through narrow sandstone passages until it arrived at the ladders – four of them - used for the ascent to the beginning of the main arch.

From there, the climb to the top was gradual, rather like walking up stairs, albeit hundreds of them, with handrails on both sides of the walkway. The view was stunning to say the least and the group paused several times during the trek to admire its panoramic splendor. Landmarks included the Opera House, Circular Quay ferry terminal, the Botanic Gardens, and Pinchgut - one of a handful of harbor islands some of which were once used as penal settlements. Meanwhile, across the length and breadth of the sparkling blue harbor was an enormous but scattered flotilla of water craft heading this way and that – ships, ferries, sail

boats and various pleasure craft - leaving a criss-cross pattern of white wakes in their paths.

Behind the group was the spectacular city skyline in all its sunlit glory. Ahead lay the sprawling north shore with its eclectic mix of office towers, apartment buildings and homes. "It would have been a lot different in the early '30s," one climber commented. "The north shore would have been mostly bush when the old coathanger was being built back then."

Peter was the only person authorized to take digital photos of the scenery as well as photos of the climbers themselves. "We don't want anyone dropping a camera onto the deck," he explained. "I'll record the photos to disk when we get back, and you can all have a copy each."

As the climbers neared the top of the arch, they could see another group ahead of them, as well as the one behind. "This is like Pitt Street in peak hour," Dickson noted with amusement.

Having arrived at the summit, the group crossed the middle girder which marked the highest point of the climb - 440 feet (134 meters) - and which led to the west side arch for the return journey.

After descending the second series of ladders that took the climbers back to their starting point, the group detached itself from the tether and walked freely back to the Bridge Climb building. There, they cleaned their headphones, returned their climbing gear and received their climb certificate.

"How many times a day do you do this?"

Dickson asked Peter as he received his certificate and photo CD.

"Several, depending on the weather, of course."

"You must take it for granted, then."

“I’m used to it, true, but it’s not something any of us ever takes for granted, mate. I hope you enjoyed it.”

“Enjoyed it? It was awesome!”

At that point, O’Shaunessey piped up, “Excuse me, laddy, but I’d be desperately needin’ to settle me nerves, and I’d be much obliged if you could tell me the location of the nearest pub.”

Back at Lane Cover River Tourist Park, Jack and Nell introduced their son Steve to Dickson and Mick. “You were sensational,” Mick gushed as he shook the young man’s hand. “You look so different now... I hardly recognize you.”

Steve’s hair had been returned to its natural color, brown. He was dressed in a Newtown pub T and shorts. “I hope no one back in Orange does either,” he laughed. “A few friends knew it was me but I kept it kinda quiet. Orange doesn’t have a lot in common with Newtown or Darlinghurst.”

“Neither does Taree. Dicko and I live up the coast at Old Bar.”

“Will you join us again tonight for a BBQ?” Jack asked. “We’d love to have you, and I’m sure Steve will appreciate company his own age instead of us old fogies.”

“Love to!”

The three boys agreed to hit the park pool for the remainder of the afternoon. Steve was two years older at 20, but appeared much younger, perhaps 16 or 17. At the pool, Mick noted that their new friend had no underarm hair and only a small amount of fuzz on his face. Despite his cute looks, his demeanor revealed not a hint of his sexuality; on the contrary – he gave the impression that he was very much the masculine type. His physique was more wiry than muscular but

admirably well proportioned. His toothy and infectious grin was wider than a barn door.

“I’d kill for a tan like you guys have,” he said as he heaved himself out of the water and onto the deck, dripping wet. “I guess that’s part of the beach lifestyle package, huh?”

“Not much to do in Orange?”

“Yeah, tons, but no beach. There’s Lake Canobolas, though. I go skiing there and fishing sometimes. Actually, Orange is a pretty cool town but... well, you know... not much of a gay scene. By the way, I hope you guys are not offended or anything.”

“No,” Dickson was quick to say, “no worries, mate.” He expected Mick to volunteer his own sexual preference at that point but it failed to be forthcoming. Dickson wondered why but decided to refrain from further comment.

“Have you guys been to Orange?”

“Nope. Why?”

“Nothing... it’s just that you look kind of familiar. I guess I must have you mixed up with someone else.”

It wasn’t until the boys had showered and returned to the campervan to change into fresh clothes that Dickson asked Mick why he didn’t take the opportunity to tell Steve he was gay.

“It might’ve sounded like I was interested. It didn’t feel right.”

“Aren’t you? Interested, that is?”

“I’d be lying if I said no. That wasn’t a football sock jammed down the front of his Speedos, you know.”

“I don’t understand you, Mick. Steve admitted he was interested in the gay scene.”

“Go figure.”

“You mean you’re not?”

“Go to the top of the class, Dicko.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“Do you go to singles bars?”

“What kind of question is that? You know I don’t.” There was a pause while Dickson pulled on his shorts. Then the penny dropped. “Oh, right... I see. But I thought all gays were supposed to be promiscuous.”

“You listen to too much crap, Dicko.”

Chapter 13

After a quick dash to the nearest pub to replenish supplies of beer and wine, and buy a bag of crushed ice for the Esky, Dickson and Mick joined their park neighbors for the 8pm BBQ.

“Flies are gone,” Jack smiled, “now all we gotta worry about is the damn mozzies.” He handed the boys a bottle of roll-on insect repellent. “Put some of this on.” Then he returned to his cooking duties. “Char grilled yabbies with zucchini, eggplant and red capsicum,” he explained as the food sizzled and spat on the hotplate.

Steve helped his mom with the salad leaves, seasonings and bread rolls. Dickson and Mick served the drinks. Meanwhile, the main topics of conversation centered on the Mardi Gras and the Harbor Bridge climb. “By the way,” Jack laughed, “I warned Steve about repeating his Mardi Gras performance down the main street of Orange.”

“C’mon, dad, you know I wouldn’t do that. Sheesh!”

The yabbies – freshwater crayfish that resemble small lobsters – were split before being grilled with the vegetables, and finished with a dash of balsamic vinegar. The sweet flesh is mostly in the tail; the meaty claws being a delicious bonus with a separate and distinctive flavor.

“Dickson? Do you know those people camped in the white motor home just over there?” Nell asked. “They keep looking over here.”

“Nope, never seen them before.”

“I think I know why they’re staring,” Steve said, “I figured out where I’ve seen you guys before. Sunday evening I was at a friend’s house in Newtown, and the tele was on.”

“Ah! Busted.”

“Yeah, it was the Focus program.”

Jack: “Focus? So you’re the guys who created all the fuss on talkback radio the other morning? Well! Stone the bloody crows and strike me pink! And here you are at our BBQ in living color! You guys have caused quite a ruckus you know.”

Nell: “Jack!”

Jack: “What?”

Nell: “Maybe our guests don’t want to talk about it.”

“Nonsense, Nell.” Jack then turned his attention to the boys. “Right, fellas? You’re famous!”

“Well,” Dickson began, “to be honest, we did kinda come here to Sydney to avoid all the local attention back home.”

“Oh, I’m sorry... I didn’t realize...”

The conversation fell silent and the atmosphere turned rather awkward as Jack, with Nell’s assistance, filled the plates with food and distributed them.

Dickson - of necessity he felt - eventually broke the silence with obvious resignation. “Okay, now that the cat’s out of the bag, I suppose it doesn’t matter - and too bad if it does. Feel free to satisfy your curiosity.”

Despite Dickson’s offer, Jack, Nell and Steve remained reticent. “I guess you can’t stop people from being curious,” Jack said at last, “but, by the same token, I understand your side of the situation as well... I mean, getting away from home to avoid the glare of publicity.”

“Fact is, Jack, it’s not over and it won’t be until the fat lady sings.”

“You mean until the killer confesses?”

“Something like that.”

“Do you suspect anyone in particular?” Steve asked.

“What good would that do? I tell you what I do suspect, though, that nobody on this planet could cook yabbies as good as these. Bloody sensational!”

“Too bloody right,” Mick agreed. “Outtasight!”

“Well, it’s not you or Mick who shot Fink,” Steve continued despite the diversion. “You blokes aren’t the type.”

“Everyone’s the type, mate... think about it. All it takes is the right circumstances and sufficient motivation. Everyone in that honey shed, at least to some degree, had a reason to kill Horace. And somebody did.”

“Somebody who knew enough about Smith and Wessons to do the job,” Jack reasoned. “That should narrow it down a bit.”

“Maybe.”

“Do you know anything about guns?”

“Enough to know which end to point... that’s about it.”

“From what I know of the case,” Nell intervened, “which is not all that much, I admit – and don’t get me wrong, I’m not accusing anyone here - I think whoever pulled that trigger is not a criminal; not the type to go around shooting people willy nilly. The circumstances of this particular case are extremely unusual – unique. The authorities should just drop it and forget it.”

“That’s not the way the law works, darling,” her husband solemnly advised. “The law is the law. Sooner or later, the truth will emerge.”

“And when it does,” Mick said with a grin, “my mate here will be rich! I take it you guys already know about Fink’s last will and testament, right? Dicko is the sole beneficiary if he proves his innocence.”

“How bizarre,” Nell added. “That man must have been crazy, not to mention evil.”

Jack, Nell and Steve returned to Orange next day, no doubt with stories to tell of having met the two leading lads from The Fink Curse saga.

The remainder of Dickson and Mick’s vacation in Sydney was spent following the obligatory tourist itinerary; lunch at the top of Centerpoint tower, various daytrips to Manly, Bondi, Whale, Maroubra, Cronulla and other beaches where they hired surfboards, a couple of nights at the movies in George Street, one night and a few too many beers at the Coogee Bay Hotel, and another (slightly more adventurous night) sightseeing Oxford Street.

“Forget it, Mick,” Dickson insisted as the pair stood outside a club, “I don’t care what you say, there is no way in the wide world you’ll get me inside that joint. I am NOT going in there!”

“Mate, you can’t visit Sydney without a visit to the Midnight Shift! It’s the in place, man, all the rage, everybody who’s anybody goes there!”

“Let’s find some nice quiet place... maybe the Exchange Hotel.”

“I checked... too many hets.”

“You mean straights? Cool, let’s go there.”

“No, no, no, Dicko! Where’s your sense of adventure?” Then Mick sighed and threw his hands into the air. “Okay, okay... you go to the Exchange and I’ll go to the Midnight Shift.”

“You can’t do that, Mick. You won’t be safe.”

“Hey, that’s no biggie. I’ll be in there screaming my little virgin ass off, being raped by some hairy monster clad in studded leather, while you sip on your nice quiet beer at the Exchange.” And with that, Mick joined the queue at the Shift entrance. “Well, don’t just

stand there, Dicko! Off you go to the Exchange like a good little boy. You'll be safe there."

"Having a little tiff, are we?" grinned a leathered, moustached bloke queued in front of Mick. His appearance was rough and scary but he had a voice like Michael Jackson's.

"What's it like in there?" Dickson asked the bloke. "I mean really."

"For you, darling? A lot different to what it is for me," he laughed. "C'mon, honey, join the queue, don't be such a wuss."

Inside the low-lit main room, the noise was deafening, and the boys needed to shout to converse. They headed straight to the bar and ordered a beer each. "Welcome back," the bartender smiled.

"First time," Dickson replied. "But thanks anyway."

"Oh? I've seen you before... somewhere. Anyway, have a great night."

"Thank God there are some girls here," Dickson noted as the pair took their beers to a table.

"Sorry to break the news, Dicko. They're not girls. Keep an eye on my beer for me, mate, I gotta take a leak."

"Don't you DARE leave me here alone!"

"It's probably worse in the loo," Mick laughed. "You'll be right, mate... I won't be long. Keep your legs together."

When Dickson summoned the courage to actually raise his eyes from his glass and look around the room, he was relieved to discover that, apart from a few smiles and winks directed his way, most of the crowd was busy with friends and conversation. However, he was indeed relieved and grateful to see the eventual return of his mate to the table. "What's it like in there?"

“The loo? No drama.”

“You’re kidding... this place is ALL drama! Let’s finish the beer and split.”

“There’s nothing to worry about, Dicko. It’s a fantasy, just a bit of harmless fun. Relax, for Christ sake!”

Shortly afterward, Dickson reluctantly followed his mate upstairs for some dancing. Constantly flashing lights, the intense and relentless drive of loud rap and hip hop music, and the sight of writhing, twisting bodies on the dance floor soon captured Dickson’s imagination. He and his mate danced with the best and began to attract increasing attention from other dancers as well as bystanders. “Shirts off! Shirts off!” they yelled repeatedly, and the boys obliged. The enthusiastic crowd formed a circle around the tanned, athletic performers; clapping, whistling and cheering them on until the boys were exhausted.

With muscular torsos sweating profusely, and shirts tucked into the backs of their jeans, Dickson and Mick returned to the downstairs bar to order more beer. “On the house,” the bartender smiled. “And thanks for improving the interior décor.”

By this stage, it had dawned on Dickson that he was not in danger of being molested; that the crowd was friendly and well behaved. “You’re right, Mick. It is a fantasy. My only problem was paranoia.”

“You okay now?”

“Yeah, mate, this place is pretty damn cool.”

For the next hour or so, the boys played pool as a team against two other guys; one leathered and the other in outrageous drag. “Do you ride a Harley or something?” Mick asked the leathered guy.

“A what? Ha! You’re joking, honey! One of those butch things? Way too scary for me. I drive a Suzuki Swift... pink. All this,” he added, pointing to his

leather outfit, “is show, honey... all damn show. I work in a shoe shop.”

“And your...?”

“That’s my other half... he’s a hairdresser. Are you gorgeous things an item?”

“No... best mates.”

“Yes of course, darling,” the bloke mocked as he lined up his next shot, “pull the other one.”

Chapter 14

Paul's flurry of fingers clearly expressed his utter delight at seeing his friends back in Old Bar. "You must tell me everything about Sydney," he said in sign, "I want to know all about the stuff you did, including the grown up stuff."

It was late afternoon by the time Dickson and Mick had returned the rented Toyota campervan, collected their Suzukis and called in to see their young red-headed mate. Maureen, Paul's mother, insisted that the boys stay for coffee and cake. "I baked it specially," she said as she handed Dickson the keys to the beach house.

According to Paul, quite a few curious visitors had paid attention to the house for the first few days after Focus went to air. "But then - I guess when they realized you guys were away - the numbers dwindled. There's still a few hanging around but it's pretty much back to normal now."

"Did you speak to them?"

"Some... I told them I was your friend and that you didn't do it... shoot Fink, I mean."

"I better learn sign," Mick intruded. "What's he saying?"

For his mate's benefit, Dickson translated Paul's busy fingers as the boy related the events of the past two weeks. "There was one kid - about 16 or so - who asked about you. His name is Maaka Te Tikiwawa, he's Maori."

"Does he do sign?"

"No, I had to lip read. He said he needs to speak to you about something important. I told him you'd be back in town this weekend, and gave him your cell phone number."

"Did he say what it was about?"

“No, he said it was a private matter... strictly personal.”

Dickson and Mick made an appointment with Paul to go surfing after school the next day. “We’ll tell you all about Sydney then. Okay?”

“Not too much about the adult stuff,” Maureen laughed. “I don’t want him growing up too fast! He’s as tall as me already!”

Upon arrival at the beach house, the boys entered the building and saw, much to Dickson’s relief and pleasure, that renovation work had been completed. The blond headed straight down the hall and entered his bedroom. “Woohoo, my own room! Wow! New carpet, new paint, new furniture... it looks great!”

“I’ll miss your farts in bed.”

“Shuddup, Mick. I don’t fart in bed.”

“Wanna bet?”

Dickson then entered the kitchen where he gathered an envelope placed on the table. He noted that it was signed by the building foreman. Inside was a note which he read aloud. “He says if I have any complaints to get in touch. Then he goes on to wish us luck with the Focus thing. He says Bedford is an asshole and not to let his crap get to us.”

Mick grabbed two beers from the fridge and tossed one to his mate. “Let’s go out to the verandah and soak up that view, Dicko. It’s soooo good to be home again... home with my best mate. Yeah? By the way, you better turn your cell phone back on and check for messages.”

As the boys sat on the canvas chairs, Dickson scrolled through the phone messages. “Jesus! Bedford phoned almost every day! He wants me to return his call urgently.”

“It’s late Sunday, mate, do it tomorrow.”

“Cody phoned... no surprise... and Tom, Clive...”

“Bumper Farrell? What does he want?”

“Dunno... says he’ll call later. Simon Swan, Bob Down and Ian Ajit. Ian wants to wet a line with us again.”

“You need a secretary.”

“Got one.” *Smirk*

“They want to speak to YOU, dumb dumb.”

“Not now... I just wanna relax, Mick. Sydney was fun but... no way could I live there... too frantic. I’m a good ol’ country boy, mate. This is the life for me... lots of space, the beach, fresh air...”

“And me.”

“Bugger off.”

“I wonder what that Maaka thingy whatever-his-name-is wants... the Maori bloke. Didn’t Fogsy say that there was a Maori kid at the hotel in Auckland when Horace was attacked?”

“Could be something, could be nothing.

Meantime, I better phone Aunt Flo just to let her know we’re home safe and sound... and that you didn’t elope with some tacky drag queen.”

The pair settled for pizza and an early night. After an early-morning surf, they were eating breakfast on the verandah when Dickson answered a call on his cell phone. “G’day, Edward... yeah, my phone was switched off for two weeks while we were in Sydney. Sorry about that.”

“I suppose you’re aware of the negative feedback about the program on talk radio.”

“I didn’t hear it myself, but I certainly heard about it. I suppose you’re upset.”

“Not in the least, Dickson! It’s a bonus... albeit not unexpected. However, we have to move quickly to take advantage of the public mood. I want to do another

interview as soon as possible. By the way, have you been approached by any other media?"

"No, I've been out of touch."

"If you bothered to read the fine print of the contract, your responsibility is to stay in touch, or at least be reachable. Don't let it happen again."

"I don't like your attitude, Edward."

"You don't have to. I want you in Sydney next Friday for a second interview."

"Forget Sydney, I've had enough of that town for a while. Simon Swan has a studio in Taree – we can do a live link."

"Live? Listen to me, Dickson, the interview will be pre-recorded in order to edit the segment to time. That's it, non-negotiable."

"So who's negotiating? I'll be at Swan's studio 7:15pm Sunday. I'll leave you to organize the set up and technical details with Simon. That's it, Edward, non-negotiable." Then the line went dead. "Oops, I think Bedford is mad at me, Mick. Come to think of it, I better check with Abe Goldstein just to make sure I'm within my legal rights."

"My hero!"

"Cut the crap."

Goldstein returned Dickson's call after an hour to say that, although Dickson was obliged to attend a maximum of 15 interviews per year for two years, at the sole discretion of Edward Bedford, detail in relation to location and whether or not the interview would be live or pre-recorded were unclear. "In other words, Dickson, I am prepared to argue your case if Bedford chooses to spit the dummy. If you like, I can draft a letter to that effect and fax it to the Focus office."

With the matter settled, the boys set off to Aunt Flo's villa to pay a visit. "I forgot to tell you on the phone last night," she began as she led her guests to the

kitchen, “that I was just five years old when I walked across the Harbor Bridge with my father and mother. It was Saturday, March 19, 1932.”

“You remember that day all those years ago?”

“That was one day I’ll never forget,” she laughed. “The crowd was enormous! I was dressed in my Sunday best, with pig tails and pink bows. My school shoes were polished to a mirror shine. I remember that Jack Lang fellow, the Premier... a big man, rather scary as I recall. And also that de Groot fellow who stole Lang’s thunder. De Groot rode up on his horse and cut the ribbon with his sword before Lang had a chance to perform the opening ceremony. De Groot was incensed by Lang’s refusal to invite a member of British Royalty to do the honors, and chose himself instead.”

“I’ve seen the news footage a couple of times, Flo. Those were exciting days.”

“New South Wales was on the brink of civil war, young man. I think ‘exciting’ is not the appropriate word. People were worried; deeply worried. The New Guard, of which de Groot was a member, was determined to defeat the elected government, even if it meant war. But, as it happened, the opening of the Bridge captured so much favorable public attention that the New Guard just sort of faded into the background and eventually disappeared.”

Flo paused to serve tea and scones with jam and cream as the boys seated themselves at the table. “But all that silly kerfuffle with de Groot failed to dampen the magic of the Bridge opening day. It was Sydney’s biggest party; a truly wonderful event. I remember walking across that mighty structure and wondering how on earth anything so impossibly huge could be built by mere mortals... keep in mind that I was a little

five-year-old girl. You can imagine how thrilled and overawed I was.”

“You should write a book, Flo.”

“Oh, my God, I wouldn’t know where to start. Anyway, I’m dying to know about the Mardi Gras. Tell me all about it!”

For the next 30 minutes, the boys took turns to describe the events of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, much to Flo’s amusement and delight. “I wish I’d been there,” she lamented. “I saw highlights on television but it’s not the same. And quite frankly, I’d kill for some of those outfits the boys wear. They’re just so gorgeous! But you know - and I’m not sure I should say this because you’ll think I’m awful - it’s just that I can’t ignore the mental image of those boys’ wobbly bits tucked away out of sight behind those magnificent frocks.”

“You’re blushing, aunt Flo.”

“That’s because I have male company. If I were sitting with a bunch of hens we’d be cackling ourselves silly. Actually, I can’t for the life of me make sense of people like Fred Nile and his homophobia, and all that poppycock he rattles on about: ‘God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve’. So who created Steve? Is there no Steve? If you ask me, the Bible was written by men. Nothing personal, my dears. But if you were female you’d realize how ludicrous the whole thing is... not to mention sexist.”

“That’s dangerous ground, Flo, you’re inviting a bolt of lightning to strike you.”

“If that’s the case, why aren’t you two precious little darlings fleeing for your lives?”

Chapter 15

Mandy, the receptionist at Focus Productions, called Dickson to confirm the live interview. “We’ve arranged with Simon Swan to have everything ready at 7:15pm this Sunday. The interview will take place shortly after 7:30. The line is booked from 7:15 to 8:00pm. Mr. Bedford has asked that you be dressed in your usual surfing attire.”

“What about Mick?”

“He’s welcome to be there, but Mr. Bedford has no plans at this stage to interview Mr. Morris.”

The next call, predictably, was from Simon who suggested that Dickson arrive at the studio by 7pm. “I’ve got a makeup girl coming. I also want to set up the camera, lighting and backdrop well in advance. That okay with you?”

“No worries, mate, see you then.”

When the blond ended the call, Mick suggested that he play the part of Bedford and act out a couple of ‘practice’ interviews with Dickson “just to loosen you up a bit.”

“You’re not Bedford, Mick. You don’t know what questions he’ll ask. I might go into that interview with a head full of irrelevant expectations. No, I think it’s better if I go in cold. Apart from anything else, I’ll appear more natural. I certainly don’t want to appear contrived or defensive.”

“If you notice politicians when they’re interviewed, and they’re asked a curly one, they respond with something like “the issue, Fred, is really about such and such...” So they rabbit on about something else and avoid the question.”

“I don’t wanna do that either, Mick. I have nothing to hide and that’s the way I want the interview to look.”

Following a late-afternoon surf with Paul, the boys returned to the front yard shower hose to find Maggie Magpie sniffing around for a handout. Mick was happy to oblige. While Paul showered, he dashed into the kitchen, grabbed a handful of mince and scattered it on the verandah. “Who shot Horace Fink?” he said, and repeated the question a number of times.

“What the hell are you doing?” Dickson quizzed as he took his turn to shower.

“Maybe he knows something.”

“Yeah, right. He’s a bird, mate... a bird. And what kind of brains to birds have?”

“Don’t underestimate magpies, Dicko. They’re smart. Think about it... who knows where our feathered friend goes... probably all over town. Maybe he heard something somewhere. They’re great mimics, you know. Anyway, what’s for dinner?”

“Burgers.”

“With the lot? And chips?”

“Is there any other kind?”

Following Mick’s turn to shower, the trio downed a Coke each on the front verandah while Paul listened intently to the stories the older boys told about their Sydney adventures, including the Mardi Gras. “How do you know if you’re gay?” the red-head asked at one point.

“Easy! You walk funny like Mick does.”

“Mick doesn’t walk funny.”

“So there’s your answer.”

“You guys are pulling my chain. Stop treating me like a 15 year-old.”

“But you are a 15 year-old. Anyway, if you wanna know about that kinda stuff you should talk to your mom.”

“She knows bugger all about that kinda stuff.”

“Listen mate, in all seriousness, if you ever have a problem with... well, whatever, and you need to discuss it, Mick and I are your friends. Always remember that, okay? You’re welcome here any time.”

“Cool! Anyway, guys, it’s getting late and I gotta jet. Thanks heaps for the convo! Catch you later.”

Tom Samuels phoned just as the lads finished their evening meal to say that he saw a promo on TV for next Sunday’s Focus program. “It’s obviously a reaction to the negative feedback on radio,” he reasoned. “I hope you’re well prepared, Dickson.”

“As prepared as I’ll ever be. I have nothing to fear, Tom.”

“Except fear itself. You’re a braver man than I, Gunga Din. Mind you, you’re young and invincible... youth has no fear. Did I mention that I went to Taronga Park zoo while I was in Sydney? It occurred to me that there were no monkeys outside of the enclosures... except for human monkeys, of course.”

“What are you talking about? Monkeys don’t go to the zoo to see other monkeys, Rev.”

“Oh, yes they do, my boy. Indeed, they do. When Billy Shakespeare said that all the world is a stage he meant that all the world is a zoo. Remember those people lining Oxford Street for the Mardi Gras, Dickson? Don’t you see? Human monkeys watching other human monkeys? We’re the only species that does such a thing, you know. That’s why we invented the theater... and some might even say the pulpit. We have an insatiable appetite for wanting to know what everyone else is doing.”

“I never thought of it quite like that.”

“Leave the weird stuff to me, Dickson. I get paid for it. Anyway, I just wanted to wish you luck for next Sunday... I’ll be praying for you. Give my regards to Mick.”

“Thanks for the call, Rev... and the prayers.
Bye.”

Dickson was in the loo when the phone rang again. Mick answered. “Dickson’s busy at the moment... won’t be long, though. Can I take a message or would you like to wait?”

“I’ll wait, thanks.”

“Do I detect a Kiwi accent?”

“Yes, but this is a local call. I’m at my uncle’s house at Wallabi Point.”

“It’s for you, Dicko,” Mick said as he handed the phone to his mate. “A young Enn Zedder bloke.”

“Hello?”

“Hi, Dickson Bottoms?”

“Speaking.”

“You don’t know me. I’m Maaka Te Tikiwawa from Auckland but I’m calling from Wallabi Point, at my uncle’s house. I was at the hotel when Horace Fink was assaulted.”

“I see. So what are you trying to tell me, Maaka? That you did it?”

“No, but I know who did.”

“You saw it happen?”

“Yes.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“The cops in Auckland have questioned me. I’m pretty sure they think I did it but they can’t prove anything. Hey, man, if it’s okay with you, I’d rather talk to you in person and not over the phone. I was wondering...”

“Do you know where my house is?”

“Yeah, I went there after the Focus program a few weeks ago hoping to see you. There was a red-headed kid there, deaf, and he gave me your number.”

“Does your uncle know about any of this? Does he know you’re talking to me now?”

“He knows about the cops and their questions, but that’s all. He doesn’t know I’m speaking to you. He’s in the bathroom. I don’t wanna speak to anyone but you.”

“How about I pick you up at your uncle’s house tomorrow...”

“No, no, no. You mustn’t come here, not to the house. I’ll wait for you on Saltwater Road near the water treatment works... say, 10 tomorrow morning?”

When Dickson ended the call, he looked sympathetically at Mick’s curious expression: “The thick plottens, mate. That was Maaka Te Tikiwawa. He says he knows who assaulted Horace in Auckland.”

“Who? Maaka himself?”

“No, he says it wasn’t him. He wants to speak to me in person. I’ve arranged to collect him tomorrow morning.”

“You don’t need to be a genius to figure that one out, Dicko. It’s gotta be Fogsy.”

“Fogsy said the assault had already taken place when he arrived at the scene, and that he split right away. Then he saw a Maori boy... remember? I don’t think we should jump to any conclusions yet. We need more facts. Besides, you’re forgetting about Ian Ajit, he was also in New Zealand at the same time, you know. And in any case, for all we know the assaulter may have been none of the above.”

As the boys discussed the latest development, Cody phoned. “Hey, Dickson! What’s up! Or am I being too personal, hehehe.”

“Good to hear your voice, Code. What’s been happening?”

“The usual. I missed you guys. How about I rock over there tomorrow afternoon after school for a wave? Can I bring Mark?”

“I haven’t answered the first question yet.”

“So?”

“Yeah, sure, mate, rock on over. It’ll be cool to see you and Mark again... and we can teach you a thing or two about surfing.”

“Yeah, right... like who’s gonna teach who? Catch you about 3:30.”

As usual early next morning, Dickson waited at the back gate when Paul delivered the paper. “Did you know him?” the younger boy asked in sign.

“Who?” Then Dickson checked the front page headline. ‘SERGE VODKINSKI SUICIDE’. “No, I didn’t really know him... met him once or twice... he worked at Mitre 10.”

“He was at the honey shed when Fink was shot, right? I read the story already... he gassed himself in his garage. Do you think he did it? – shoot Fink, I mean.”

“Maybe, maybe not...” Dickson shrugged. “I guess we’ll never know for sure.”

Mick was showering when Dickson placed the newspaper on the kitchen table, and set about fixing breakfast of sausage and eggs. His mate arrived a minute later, with a towel wrapped around his waist. “Well, well, well, whaddaya know. Sir Gay has called it a day,” he said as he scanned the front page. “Did he leave a note or something?”

“I haven’t read the whole story yet. You wanna take care of the toast and coffee?”

“Sure.”

As the pair sat down to breakfast, Dickson read the rest of the Vodkinski story: “Yeah, he did leave a note but the cops haven’t disclosed the details yet.”

“He was madly in love with Doris... maybe he was depressed about her death or something. Hey, Dicko, I just thought of something. Horace murdered Doris, right? Does it make sense to you that Serge

wanted revenge, and shot Horace when he got the chance?”

“If circumstantial evidence was admissible in court, mate, we’d all be charged. I must admit, though, I’m curious about what was in that suicide note.”

“Maybe we could ask Rocque and Rowles.”

Chapter 16

Just before 10am, Dickson's Suzuki arrived at the turn off to the water treatment facility not far from Wallabi Point. No one else was there. However, further down the road, a lone figure on foot approached. Rather than wait, Dickson rode the short distance to meet with the person. "Maaka?" he asked as his bike rolled to a halt. The stocky, black-haired youth was dark skinned and of obvious Maori appearance. He was dressed in a black T, knee-length shorts and flip-flops, which revealed lighter colored skin on the soles of his feet.

"Dickson? I recognize you from the TV. Thanks for coming."

"Put this on." Dickson handed the boy a spare helmet. "And take a seat behind me. Hang on to my waist."

When introduced to Mick, Maaka greeted both boys with a hongi, the traditional Maori pressing of noses. The hosts then took their guest on a guided tour of the beach house, after which the three sat on the verandah where they drank coffee. Almost immediately, Dickson sensed the boy's uncertainty: "Don't worry about Mick, Maaka, we're partners as well as mates. We share everything."

"Everything?"

"Almost," Mick added with a grin.

"This is an awesome house. I envy you guys."

The boy sipped his coffee, took a deep breath, stared at horizon for a few moments and then continued. "I saw you on TV and I needed to speak with you."

"About Horace Fink?"

"Yes, and the other two."

"The other two?"

"A man and a blond guy about my age. He had a mole on his top lip."

“We know about the boy, or at least I think we do. Tell us about the man.”

“Tall and slim, black hair, balding on top – you know, like a monk – and he looked kinda Indian. Horace asked me to leave...”

“Leave? You were in Horace’s hotel room?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

Maaka stared between his legs at the verandah floorboards in silence while he nervously fingered his coffee mug.

“Okay, Maaka, I think I know why. No worries. If you don’t want to speak about it, that’s okay. Anyway, what happened then?”

“Horace said he had a business meeting with some bloke and asked me to leave...”

“The tall slim guy?”

“I think so. When I left the room I saw the tall guy coming up the hall toward me. I turned around after he passed by and saw him knock on Horace’s door. Then I split. I wandered around town for about an hour, just killing time like Horace asked me to, then I went back to the hotel. The door of his room was ajar. I saw the body on the floor, face down. I heard a voice, a young voice – a teen, so I split again and went down to the street. That’s when I saw the young guy coming out of the hotel. He was sweating and agitated.”

“He said you were as well.”

“Me? You know him?”

“He said you looked very anxious and disturbed. Tell me, Maaka, are the Auckland police aware of all this?”

“No. I told them I saw nothing... that Horace was fine when I left the hotel.”

“So why are you telling me this now?”

“I don’t know,” the Maori boy shrugged as if in despair. “I have to tell someone. I saw you on TV and you seemed cool, you know? I thought maybe you would understand. I don’t want trouble. I’m in enough trouble as it is back home. When my family found out I was a rent boy they freaked big time and kicked me out. They said I brought shame on the family name and all our relatives.”

“I’m sorry, but you said you know who assaulted Horace.”

“It was the kid.”

“How do you know it wasn’t the tall guy?”

“Because the kid was freaking big time. I’m Maori and Maoris know about fear. Have you seen our haka?”

“With the tongues and all the shouting?”

“It’s meant to frighten the enemy... we do it at football matches. You wanna see?”

“Not just now.”

“Anyway, this kid was freaking big time.”

“That doesn’t prove a thing, mate. People freak when they see something like that. He probably thought Horace was dead.” Dickson then turned to Mick and asked him to fetch the Doris dossier with photos of Horace’s potential murderers. “I want to show it to Maaka.”

Mick dashed into the house and returned in a minute with the dossier, which he handed to Maaka.

“Do you recognize anyone?” Dickson asked.

As expected, Maaka pointed to the picture of Ian Ajit. “That’s him; but I don’t see the kid anywhere.”

“He’s not in the dossier. We know him, though... straight blond hair, 15, mole on the upper lip...”

“Are you gonna tell the cops about me?”

“No. What you’ve told us, Maaka, is in confidence... it stays right here. So don’t worry, okay? Tell me about your uncle.”

“He’s not my uncle. I met him in Auckland. He was a client. I thought he was a total weirdo at first ‘cause he didn’t wanna do anything except talk. He likes me... you know, like a father/son thingy. He said if I ever needed help or whatever just to get in touch. So, here I am. He thinks I’m in town looking for a job. He doesn’t know I’m here.”

“Do you trust him?”

“Yeah, I do, but not enough to trust him with all this shit. It’s way too heavy. He’d wanna deal with the cops. He’s like super straight; an older guy who sees me as the son he never had. Don’t get me wrong, I like him. He’s cool, but he doesn’t understand young people, let alone someone like me.”

“Is he Maori?”

“Part.”

“And what about your family back in New Zealand?”

“What family? They disowned me. I don’t have family. Te korekore.”

“They won’t feel like that forever, Maaka. Once this whole Fink mess is sorted, they’ll want you back. You’ll see.”

“It’s not just the Fink thing.”

“Why did you do it... sell yourself? Drugs?”

“I don’t do drugs.”

“Then why?”

“My father is very strict. I wanted to know what it was like to... I dunno... to be noticed, I guess – aroha. Sounds dumb, huh?”

“No.”

“Horace was the first. Then I met Reg, that’s the guy at Wallabi. He told me that I would never find

aroha by being a rent boy. He said the same thing applied to him; that what he was looking for was also not available from rent boys. He said he wanted a son, someone to care for. He wants to be my guardian - tuakana.”

“I take it he’s not married.”

“He was. She died when he was 21. She was giving birth but both the mother and child didn’t make it. He’s 45 now... drives tour buses.”

“Okay, so where does all that leave us?”

Dickson asked, rhetorically. “According to you, it was either Ajit or Fogsy who assaulted Horace. Then again, you didn’t see it happen, so it could have been someone else. And none of that helps to explain who shot Horace at the honey shed.”

“I’m sorry, I thought I could help.”

“No, no, no, Maaka, don’t be sorry. Mick and I appreciate your information. At least it confirms what we suspected about Horace and his so-called ‘business’ trips. Did he treat you badly?”

“Not really.”

“How did he find you?”

“At the beat. He stopped his car beside me and asked me to get in. He said, ‘How much?’ I didn’t know what to say. I’d never had a client before, so I told him we could talk about that later.”

“And did you?”

“He gave me \$100 at the hotel. Then he answered a call on the phone and told me he had an unexpected meeting. He asked me to come back in an hour.”

“Does Reg give you money?”

“He pays the bills and gives me an allowance. We sleep in separate rooms, if that’s what you wanna know. There’s no sex.”

“What about affection?”

“Oh, yeah,” Maaka laughed, “manaakitanga, plenty of that. He’s like a real dad in that way. He’s cool.”

“How long have you lived there?”

“A month.”

“Friends?”

“Not yet.”

“You have now.”

“You guys? Hey, that’s totally cool, man, kia ora! That’s really awesome!”

“And there’s more to come. How do you think Reg will feel about that?”

“I dunno.”

“Is he possessive?”

“I’m not sure... I don’t know him that well yet.”

“Maybe we should meet him. What do you call those Maori feast thingies?”

“You mean hangi? I can help you with that, so can Reg. He knows all about hangis. So where are you thinking of... here?”

“Why not?”

As the boys chatted, there was a knock at the back door, which Mick elected to answer. When he returned to the verandah, he notified Dickson that detectives Rocque and Rowles were waiting in the kitchen. “Maaka, you’d better hightail it outta here, mate. Go for a walk along the beach, and come back later when the coast is clear.”

“Good morning, gentlemen,” Dickson said as he entered the kitchen. “What can I do for you? Coffee?”

“No, thanks. We won’t be here long. I take it you’re aware of Serge Vodkinski’s death?”

“Read about it in this morning’s paper.”

“He left a note.”

“So I believe.”

“What I’m about to reveal, Dickson, is highly confidential... we’re hoping you may be able to shed a little light on the matter. Please don’t share this information with Focus or anyone else for that matter.”

“Is Mick okay?”

“You’ll tell him anyway – sure. But it doesn’t leave this room – agree?”

“Agree.”

Chapter 17

Detective sergeant Rowles handed Dickson a sheet of paper. “This is a photocopy of the note Serge Vodkinski wrote in his own hand,” the stony-faced man explained, then waited until Dickson finished reading. “Well?”

“Well what? He says he’s glad Horace is dead, and that Fink didn’t deserve to live after killing his wife. That’s not surprising.”

“Do you think Vodkinski shot Horace?”

“Your guess is as good as mine, sergeant,”

Dickson shrugged as he returned the paper. “Anyway, from what that note says, Serge gassed himself because he couldn’t live with the nightmares of Doris’s last moments – visualizing her being stung by all those hundreds of bees.”

“He also says that you were having an affair with Doris.”

“I read that part... it’s absurd.”

“Is it? We understand that she visited you often, and that she stayed over. She was a very attractive woman.”

“Yes, she was, and we were good friends, but our relationship was strictly business.”

“I can vouch for that,” Mick interjected.

“Strictly business.”

Rowles ignored Mick’s comment and continued: “Why do you think Vodkinski insisted that you and Doris were having an affair?”

“He was crazy jealous. Doris told us that herself. She said he was infatuated. It was common knowledge.”

“How much did you like Doris?”

“Very much... like I said, we were friends. She was great.”

“Given your affection - shall we say - for Doris, and the fact that Horace admitted to having caused her death as well as the deaths of your parents, do you think it’s reasonable to assume that, of all the people at the honey shed that night on the farm, you, Mr. Bottoms, had the most compelling reasons to pull that trigger?”

“What are you saying, sergeant? You sound like a prosecution lawyer. Are you accusing me?”

“My job is to investigate this case, and to consider all possibilities. You were absent for two weeks recently. I suggest to you very strongly, Mr. Bottoms, and to you too Mr. Morris, that you keep us informed of your whereabouts in future.”

Once the unmarked police car was out of sight, Maaka returned to the house. “They were cops, right? I can smell a cop a mile away.”

“They were here about the Fink case, and Vodkinski’s suicide... nothing to do with you. So what happens now, Maaka? Where do you go from here? Do you plan to stay in Oz?”

“Reg wants me to go to school. He wants me to apply for permanent residence.”

“And?”

“I haven’t decided.”

“Okay, first things first; you need friends, you need to feel like you belong. When does Reg expect you home?”

“He’s driving a bus to Melbourne; he won’t be back until tomorrow. He’ll phone, though, and if I’m not there he’ll worry.”

“No problem, here’s the deal. You phone his office and ask them to let him know you’re here, safe and sound. Okay? You can give them my number. Meantime, I want you to meet some friends of ours, they’ll be here later this afternoon. Do you ride a board?”

“A little.”

“Cool, you can borrow my old stick.”

By the time the guys returned from the surf to shower, Cody and Mark had arrived. Following introductions, Maggie the magpie decided to join the group. Mick immediately dashed into the kitchen and re-emerged with a handful of mince which he scattered on the verandah floor. “We need to teach him to talk,” he declared before Maggie interrupted.

“Horace and Doris.”

“What? Hey, Dickson, did you hear that?”

“Horace and Doris, Horace and Doris,” the bird repeated in between devouring morsels of meat.

All onlookers were intrigued except Cody. “That’s gotta be the same maggie that hung around next door,” he explained. “Horace used to feed it. Doris wasn’t too crazy about it, though... I think it frightened her a little. One time it wandered into the kitchen and she freaked big time. I heard her yelling and had to go next door to get rid of the thing.”

“Honey for Doris,” the bird squawked before it ate the last of the food and then, without warning, flew off.

“Come back here!” Mick demanded with a wave of his fist, but to no avail. The bird soon disappeared from sight. “Honey for Doris? What that’s supposed to mean?”

“Don’t read too much into it, Mick,” Dickson suggested as he toweled, “it’s just repeating stuff, that’s all. It’s not like the damn bird is engaged in intelligent conversation or whatever. Anyway, it’ll be back, you can be sure of that. Is there enough mince left for meatloaf?”

“I’ll get some more... and extra for Maggie. Anything else you want in town?”

“Better get some more beer.”

Cody was a little disappointed that his friends' surfing session was over for the day – he'd hoped to join them for a wave. Nonetheless, he contented himself with chatting; in particular to Maaka about whom he was obviously curious. Cody asked a number of questions about the dark boy's culture and life in New Zealand. He discovered, for example, that the name Maaka was the Maori equivalent of his friend's name, Mark. "Do your friends call you Mark?"

"No, I like to be called by my proper name... Maaka Te Tikiwawa."

"Sounds cool... Maaka Te Tikiwawa... yeah, kinda like poetry... it's cool." Cody then proceeded to quiz his new friend about his impressions of Australia and whether or not he intended to stay.

However, due to some sort of protective instinct, Dickson elected to be Maaka's spokesman: "He's new to Oz... and lives at Wallabi Point. I thought if he made friends here, it might make life easier."

"Consider me one," Cody said enthusiastically, complete with trademark grin, and offered his hand.

"Me too," Cody's friend Mark agreed and also offered his hand. "Any mate of Code's is a mate of mine."

"Before you guys arrived," Dickson explained, "we were talking about organizing a hangi."

"Hangers?" Cody laughed. But his brief mirth was silenced by a surprise punch on his arm that sent it numb. "Yow! I was only kidding, Mark. Cool it!"

"It's a Maori feast, you idiot. Even I know that. What damn rock did I find you under?"

"So when's the hangi?" Cody asked as he attempted to rub life back into his aching limb.

"I figure Saturday," Dickson answered, "everyone's invited. Bring your friends if you want."

“You’ll need to prepare all the meat and vegetables the night before,” Maaka informed the group. “I can help if you like.”

Following Mick’s return from shopping, the conversation eventually - albeit predictably - drifted to the topic of Serge Vodkinski’s suicide, which prompted Mick to mention the visit by Rocque and Rowles earlier that day. “They think Dickson and Doris were having an affair,” he chuckled. “How dumb! Anyway, they don’t want us going anywhere without keeping them informed of our whereabouts. Can you believe that?”

“Everyone is guilty until proven innocent,” Maaka said quietly in all seriousness. “Coppers suck.”

“They’re just doing their job, mate,” Mark responded. “I’m a school prefect so I know what I’m talking about.”

Cody: “Being a prefect isn’t the same as being a copper. A prefect is more like a school bouncer who keeps the guys in line. I agree with Maaka... coppers suck.”

Mark: “And what would we do without them?”

Cody: “Have more fun, hehehehe. Seriously, though, remember that highway patrol copper killed by a runaway car? They blocked off Alfred Street for his funeral! They had the whole guard of honor thing... cops everywhere. Like, you know, the cop wasn’t even on duty when he was killed... he was a regular pedestrian. So how come cops can block off a whole damn street and ordinary people can’t?”

Mark: “They got permission.”

Cody: “Yeah, right... who’s gonna say no to a copper?”

Mark: “Why so aggro, Code? You’ve never spoken like this before about the boys in blue.”

Cody: “I don’t like bullies. You used to be a bully before I sorted you out, hehehe.”

Mark: “Careful, Code,” the champion boxer warned, “I can always go back to my old ways, you know.”

Dickson: “Is that what you really think, Cody? That I was being bullied by Rocque and Rowles?”

Cody: “What would you call it? They walk in here like they own the joint, ask a bunch of questions, accuse you of something, tell you not to go anywhere without informing them first, and leave. Like, how friendly is that?”

Dickson: “They’re investigating a murder case.”

Cody: “Yeah? It’s like Maaka says, you’re guilty until proven innocent.”

Before the guests left for the day, Dickson, with Maaka’s help, made a list of requirements for Saturday’s hangi. “You got any volcanic rocks? Sandstone is no good, Dickson... too porous and it explodes in the heat of the fire.”

“You see any volcanoes around here?”

“No worries, Dicko,” Mick reminded his mate, “we used volcanic rocks to edge the garden... remember?”

Late Friday afternoon, Maaka and Reg arrived at the beach house to help prepare the food for the next day’s hangi. The boys detected a hint of Maori in the man, but his Islander heritage was by no means as obvious as that of his younger charge. Reg, however, was of solid build with a ready smile and olive skin. His black, tightly-curled hair had receded slightly from his forehead. “Maaka has told me all about you,” he announced in a deep baritone, “and I’m very pleased to meet you. It’s a relief to know that he has friends locally who can care for him when I’m away. I do worry about him, you know.”

In the absence of a 44 gallon drum, Reg suggested they use the bathtub to soak sheets of mutton

cloth and Hessian sacks overnight. Then an earth oven was dug in the backyard where the soil was less sandy... the hole being slightly larger than the steel baskets that would contain the parcels of food.

Next, kumara (sweet potato from New Zealand) and pumpkin were peeled and then soaked in a large pot of water, together with shredded cabbage.

Reg checked the remaining ingredients to make sure everything was in readiness for the earth oven: pork, mutton, chicken, bread stuffing and steam pudding. "You'll need to start cooking about 6 hours before the meal is ready to serve," he said. Then he showed the boys how to light the driftwood fire, place rocks over the embers, wrap the food parcels in banana leaves, stack the food in a particular order in the steel baskets, and cover them with the wet cloth and Hessian. "Remember, we want heat and steam, not flame. Okay?"

Chapter 18

Once Reg and Maaka had left for the day, Mick sat at the kitchen table and flicked through the local paper. “We need some light relief, Dicko,” he suggested, “how about pizza and a movie in town?”

“What’s on?”

Mick scanned the cinema page: “Lemme see... Death at a Funeral.”

“Sounds a tad inappropriate considering recent events?”

“Gimme a break, we hardly knew Vodkinski from a sand fly bite, mate. Besides, funerals happen all the time. This is a comedy... we could do with a few laughs, especially after all that Rocque and Rowles crap this morning. Whaddaya say?” Mick checked his watch. “Bloody hell! It screens at Fays in 10 minutes... time to move our cute little butts.”

After the movie, the boys rode their Suzukis the short distance to Il Colosseo, where they were immediately recognized by the head waitress. She showed the boys to a table and then disappeared into the kitchen. A moment later, a swarthy man with a beaming face emerged and strode up to his two famous guests. “Buona sera, and benvenuto to Il Colosseo, amici. My name is Charles. It is a great honor to have such esteemed company in my humble ristorante.” Charles’ booming voice immediately attracted the attention of the other diners, much to Dickson’s discomfort. “Only the best for my special guests,” the owner added, “Il Colosseo Masterpiece Magnifico with absolutely everything, plus a little extra for good measure! Bellissimo!” Before the boys had a chance to react, the man continued in earnest, “and, for my special guests, allow me to offer you a bottle of Migliore Italiano red wine from my own personal

cellar.” Charles then clicked his fingers, an action that fetched a waitress almost instantly to the table. “Aldo Conterno Barolo Granbussia for the gentlemen,” he ordered. “Buen Provecho... and now, if you will excuse me, I must attend to your pizza which I will create with my own hands!” And with that, the man returned to the kitchen, leaving the stunned pair of teens sitting at the table, endeavoring to avoid the stares of other diners.

“Charles?” Mick asked in a hushed tone, “what kind of a name is that for an Italian?”

“Can you see a crack in the floor anywhere? I wanna go crawl into it.”

“Look at it this way, Dicko, you used to attract stares before but for a different reason... now, you’re not only a hunk, you’re a famous hunk.”

“Don’t ever take up comedy, Mick.”

“Why is it that Italians wave their hands around like conductors on steroids when they speak? Can you imagine a bunch of Italians in a crowded elevator?” Mick laughed, then leaned back in his chair to allow the waitress to present the bottle of Barolo Granbussia. “Grazie, that’s lovely,” Mick nodded despite his total ignorance of the finer viticultural arts as well as the wording on the label.

The waitress uncorked the bottle, then poured a little into Mick’s glass. He sniffed it, swirled it, tasted it, mimicked the mouth-and-jaw ritual he’d seen on television shows and, after what seemed adequate deliberation, declared the drop satisfactory, “very nice, grazie”. Before leaving, the waitress placed the wine on the table.

“How come she didn’t pour some into your glass,” Mick asked as he made a grab for the bottle.

“Leave it for Christ sake! It’s supposed to breathe for ten minutes, you moron. For a moment

there, you almost had me convinced that you knew something about wine.”

“Hey, trust me... I saw all that tasting shit one time on *The Simpsons*.”

Shortly afterwards, the waitress delivered the *Il Colosseo Masterpiece Magnifico* to the table. “Charles sends his apologies,” she explained, “he would have served it personally but he’s busy in the kitchen. He asked me to tell you that he will join you later for coffee and Galliano. *Buon appetite!*”

Once the waitress had departed, Mick studied the steaming pizza, piled high with everything Mediterranean imaginable. “We’re gonna need a doggy bag,” he concluded with raised eyebrows. “That bloody thing is enormous!”

“You dare ask for a doggy bag and I’ll personally strangle you. This is a posh restaurant, mate, as in p-o-s-h, you don’t ask for doggy bags in a class joint like this! Check out the *décor*... probably worth a fortune... all that timber and fancy whatever. Besides, this bottle of wine’s gonna cost a bomb, I just know it.”

Following the meal or, at least, what the boys could manage without exploding, Charles arrived at the table with three espressos and three liqueur glasses of Galliano. “Sorry we didn’t finish the pizza,” Dickson apologized in anticipation of being questioned, “but we’re full!”

“Non c’è problema, I’ll organize a doggy bag. *Ti piace? Did you like it?*”

“Delicious... uh, *bellissimo*... is that how you say it?”

“Si... you no speak Italiano? *Non ti preoccupare* or, as we say in Aussie, no worries, mate. And what did you think of the *Barolo Granbussia?*”

“Smooth,” Mick answered, “delicious and all that palate stuff.”

“And now, amici, we drink a toast to your success on Sunday night.” Charles lifted his liqueur glass as a signal to the boys to follow suit. “May you show that asshole Bedford that he is wrong!” And with that, each of the trio sipped his respective glass. Without waiting for a response, Charles continued: “I was one of the callers to talk-back radio on the morning after the first Focus interview, and I told Long Jaws exactly what I think of that Bedford bastard. I just wish Bedford was interviewing me instead of you this Sunday,” he laughed, “I would like to tell him myself to his face! Detestare! Do you know who I think it was? – the one who shot Fink? I tell you... I think it was that one they call ‘Lemon Lips’... she comes in here sometimes with that camera man, Swan. You know him? You understand body language? Si? I do... I deal with many people all my life and I know what comes from the mouth is not always esattezza. You know? It’s the way the body moves that reveals the truth. And I tell you, amici, those two are, how you say, conniving? Si? Like the way the mafia talk in hushed tones, planning evil. I know mafia, I grew up in Italy where mafia was powerful... lots of Don Corlionis! When I came to Australia, I thought no more mafia... never again. But then I see Lemon Lips and Swan and I think, oh, no! Mafia in Australia! Ha ha ha ha ha! Maybe too much Barolo Granbussia, no? Scusami, maybe I get a little carried away but I just want you to know that I believe in you.” Charles raised his glass once more, waited for the boys to do likewise, and drank another toast. “Buona fortuna!”

“Thank you for a wonderful night, Charles,” Dickson said as he reached for his wallet, “but we have a big day tomorrow.”

“No, no, no, no! No bill! You are my guests!”

“But...”

“No but!”

“I really don’t know what to say...”

“Save your sayings for Sunday night, amico, and give that Bedford some stick! Ha ha ha ha ha!”

“We need to phone a taxi.”

“You arrive here by tassi? No problemo, I get one.”

“No, we rode our bikes here,” Dickson said, “they’re parked outside, but we’ve had too much wine and so...”

“Scusami, un momento prego.” Charles called a waitress to the table and said something in Italian, which he explained to the boys when the girl departed. “I organize two of my boys to ride your bikes home, and another to drive you in my car. Okay? Problemo fixed.” At that moment, more espressos and liqueurs arrived. “And now, my special guests, we drink and talk some more, ha ha ha ha ha!”

Early next morning, feeling decidedly worse for wear, the boys dragged themselves out of bed in order to attend to the hangi preparation. The pre-dug hole in the backyard was filled with screwed-up newspaper and kindling. Once the fire was established, larger pieces of wood were placed on top in a criss-cross fashion. Finally, a number of heavy stones were laid on top of the red-hot coals.

After two hours, the embers were doused with water and removed from the pit with a rake, leaving only the hot stones. Once the remaining debris and ashes had been cleared, a steel basket containing the roast beef, mutton, chicken, pork, vegetables and pudding, wrapped tightly in banana leaves and old bed sheets, was lowered over the stones, then topped with wet Hessian bags, the overlapping ends of which were neatly tucked down the sides and deep into the pit.

Lastly, the pit contents were covered with a heavy layer of earth, and sealed to prevent the escape of any steam.

“Almost 9am,” Mick noted, “time for a wave, Dicko, before everyone arrives.”

By 1pm, the backyard was fully populated with guests; Cody, Mark and their girlfriends, Steph and Carol, Tom Samuels, Maaka and Reg, Alan Fogarty, Aunt Flo, Tony Spiropoulos, Paul and Maureen Parker, Dr. David Hardy and his wife Helen with their two young boys and one uninvited guest, Maggie the magpie. Maaka and Reg had arrived a little earlier to help Dickson and Mick remove the food from the fire pit and assemble it on a makeshift table made of planks supported by crates. All guests brought their own beverages, which filled the laundry tub and bathroom tub to capacity, along with a couple of bags of crushed ice.

“Will you be attending Serge Vodkinski’s funeral on Wednesday?” the Rev. asked the boys as the remaining guests ate, drank and mingled.

“No, Tom... we didn’t know him that well. Actually, we hardly knew him at all.”

“It’s all rather sad, really. The poor man must have been deeply troubled in order to organize his own celestial discharge that way. Do you know anything about the circumstances?”

“Not really but Rocque and Rowles were here yesterday morning, asking questions. Vodkinsky accused Doris and me of having an affair.”

“They questioned me about that too.”

“You?”

“Yes. I told them quite frankly that I knew nothing about an affair between you and Doris. By the way, are you well prepared for the Focus interview tomorrow night? You wouldn’t want a repeat of the last one.”

“As prepared as I wanna be, Tom” Dickson shrugged. “I’ll just take it as it comes.”

“I’ve been praying for you.”

“Thanks.”

Chapter 19

As the hangi progressed through the afternoon, Dickson noted that Maaka Te Tikiwawa and Alan Fogarty had recognized each other but were curiously reluctant to speak. Meanwhile, Cody and Maaka seemed to get along very well. “You have a very diverse group of friends,” Reg said at one stage as he approached Dickson and Mick. “This is good for Maaka – he needs to meet people and feel at home here. Despite all the problems back in New Zealand, he gets homesick sometimes. I want him to stay but I also want him to be happy, and I know that I can’t do that alone. I would like to thank you very much for providing this opportunity for Maaka. I also note that he seems to have found something in common with your spiky black-haired friend.”

“Cody? Cody’s everybody’s friend, Reg – he’s a great guy.”

“You know, driving tour buses means I am away a lot, often interstate. I don’t want to impose, Dickson, but I would rest much easier if I knew you were keeping an eye on him.”

“That’s really up to Maaka, Reg, not me, but he’s welcome here any time – and you, of course. Actually, after today – meeting all these people - I reckon Maaka will have no shortage of people to visit – or to visit him, for that matter. And, by the way, thanks for teaching us how to put a hangi together. The food is just awesome! I don’t think there’s a single person here who would disagree.”

“Including Maggie,” Mick laughed. “He’s gonna be so damn stuffed he won’t be able to fly.”

“Horace and Doris, Horace and Doris. Honey for Doris, honey for Doris.”

The bird's call attracted the immediate attention of Tom Samuels and Tony Spiropoulos, who were involved in a conversation with each other. "Did I hear that correctly?" Tom asked. "I could swear..."

"Cody says the bird used to hang around the Fink house," Dickson explained. "I guess it learned those words from Horace. Doris was terrified of the thing."

"I wonder what else it knows. It's a pity magpies can't be interrogated."

"He's here just about every day. If he knows any more words, I guess we'll hear them sooner or later."

"Yes, I can see it now," Tom laughed, "Maggie in the witness box in court" But then, realizing his potential indiscretion, he apologized. "I'm sorry, Tony, I wasn't thinking."

"No worries, Rev., no offence taken. But I agree with you, it would be fascinating to know what else that bird might be able to tell us."

"Whatever it is, I'm afraid it would fail to shed any new light on the mystery of what happened on the night of Horace's celestial discharge. That secret may remain forever a secret."

"Which raises an interesting point," Dr. David Hardy interrupted. "Sorry, but I couldn't help overhearing your comment, Reverend. May I ask what would happen if the person who pulled the trigger that night felt the need to confess his or her guilt to you as a priest?"

"I hope it doesn't happen," Tom admitted. "As you're no doubt aware, the confidentiality between a priest and his confessor is sacrosanct. However, in this particular case, I would need all the moral support the good Lord could bestow on my human frailty in order to maintain that confidentiality. In other words, my dear

Doctor, I'd rather not know who, in fact, shot Horace Fink. And what about you, Doctor? If you, as a professional, should happen on information that might help police in their investigation, would you break your doctor-patient trust in order to share that information with the authorities?"

"Good question, Reverend... like you, I hope I'm never faced with that choice."

"But if you were?"

Dr. Hardy searched the smiling eyes of his wife Helen before delivering his consideration. "If I were? Well, hypothetically I suppose I would feel compelled to assist the authorities in the interests of justice."

"But what if the person you suspected happened to be me?"

Dr. Hardy laughed heartily. "Yes, I see what you mean... hahaha, not so simple. I'm glad this scenario is hypothetical, Reverend. Quite frankly, I'm unable to satisfactorily answer your tantalizing question."

"And you Mick," Tom asked as he turned to face the lad, "if you were reasonably sure that your friend Dickson was the one responsible for shooting Horace, would you share your suspicions with the police?"

"With Rocque and Rowles? Ha! No way, Tom, no way... not with those overgrown morons."

"With whom, then?"

"No one, no one at all."

"Not even with Dickson himself?"

"No... not even with Dicko. Dicko and I are best mates and that's how it's gonna stay."

"Excuse me, Rev., but what's the point of all this?" Dickson asked.

"Elementary, my dear Watson," the chrome-dome smiled, "unless or until the person who pulled the

trigger volunteers that information directly to police, the secret will forever remain a secret.”

“Very interesting, very interesting,” Dr. Hardy muttered thoughtfully.

As the feasting and festivities wound down later in the afternoon, Dickson was in the bathroom when he overheard voices on the front verandah. He recognized them as those of Maaka and Reg who were engaged in a relatively heated discussion. When Dickson was done, he washed his hands and went to his room where he took his check book from a drawer, and filled in an amount of one thousand dollars made out to cash. He placed the check in an envelope and wrote Reg’s name on the front.

A few minutes later, Reg had rejoined the party in the backyard and left Maaka alone on the verandah. Dickson approached the boy, handed him the envelope and said, “Give this to Reg when you get home, and tell him I won’t take no for an answer.”

“What is it?”

“I overheard you guys when I was in the bathroom. There’s a thousand dollars in there... that should do the trick until Reg sorts out his problem with the bank. Okay?”

“He did it for me, you know. He thought the extra money would help to send me to school and buy clothes and all that kinda thing. He had no idea it was illegal.”

“I understand... and tell Reg there’s no hurry to repay the money... whenever he can will do.”

Without warning, a startled Dickson was the recipient of Maaka’s clinging arms. The Maori boy said nothing. Rather, he let his strong hug do the talking.

As the late afternoon sun began to set, there was so much food remaining that Dickson asked his guests to choose whatever they wanted, wrap it in foil and take

it home. “We could never get through all that stuff ourselves in a million years.”

“Speak for yourself,” Mick joked.

The guests also volunteered to help clean up. With so many extra and willing hands, the rear yard was back to normal within half an hour. Then, as the guests departed in pairs and small groups, Dickson and Mick shook hands with the formal types and hugged the others, and received countless wishes of good luck for the Focus interview the following night.

Daylight had begun to fade as Dickson and Mick sat on the front verandah alone. They drank tea and watched the vibrant colors of the sunset gradually give way to softer, quieter pastels and the emergence of the first of the night stars.

“That was one helluva day,” Mick said as he scanned the horizon. “Everyone had a ball.”

“This tea is so beautiful! I don’t wanna see another beer for a month.”

“You’ll change your mind tomorrow, Dicko.”

“Tom and David got along together like a house on fire.”

“Probably got a lot in common.”

“A priest and a doctor?”

“They’re both healers, I suppose.”

“And what about Cody? I don’t think he paused for breath the whole time.” Following a brief but thoughtful interval, Dickson added, “Steph’s nice... so’s Carol.”

“Trust you to notice.”

“And you didn’t?”

“Yeah... but not in the same way.”

“What way? I said they’re ‘nice’, I didn’t say anything about physical attributes. You’re paranoid, Mick, not to mention twisted.”

“I hope you don’t mean that.”

“Dammit, I gotta hit the loo again... I think I’ve got the runs or something.”

Shortly after Dickson disappeared into the bathroom, his phone rang. Mick answered it and recognized the voice at the other end. “Reg? It’s me, Mick... Dicko’s in the loo. Anything I can help you with?”

“Tell Dickson I can’t accept it.”

“Accept what?”

“He didn’t tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

At that moment, Dickson reappeared and took the remainder of the call which lasted a good ten minutes.

“What was all that about?” Mick asked when his mate finally ended the call.

“Reg got himself involved in a money laundering scam on the internet. He applied for a job... transaction processor, they called it. They...”

“Who’s they?”

“I don’t know... the scammers. Anyway, the deal was they deposit money into Reg’s account. He takes 10% and sends the rest via Western Union to a person they nominate... usually in Eastern Europe.”

“Sounds a bit suss.”

“Reg said their explanation was that they were a legitimate business involved in computer retailing, and that the Western Union process was to minimize tax in their country. He said he had no reason to doubt their credibility.”

“Yeah, right. If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.”

“That’s all very well in hindsight, Mick.

Remember, Reg now has Maaka to take care of... he saw this opportunity as a stroke of luck out of the blue, and a way to take care of the extra financial strain.

Anyway, he made two successful transfers before the bank put a stop to his account and froze the bloody lot... not only proceeds from the overseas deposits, but also his own money. He's stuffed until he somehow sorts this mess out with the bank."

"I see. But how can they do that? I mean, just put a stop to his account without consulting him?"

"It's a bank, remember... They call the shots. Reg is totally pissed off."

"So what did he mean by 'he couldn't accept it'? Accept what?"

"I loaned him some money to see him through the problem. I overheard him and Maaka talking about it on the verandah when I was in the loo this afternoon. Maaka wanted Reg to ask me for a loan, but Reg insisted that he hardly knew me and that it was also a matter of pride. I wrote a cash check, put it in an envelope, gave it to Maaka and told him to give it to Reg when they got home."

"How much?"

"A grand."

"Will he accept it?"

"He's gonna think about it. It's not bloody charity, Mick, it's a bloody loan for Christ sake! I dunno what his problem is. Besides, banks suck."

"Ooer! Dicko's on his soapbox!"

Chapter 20

After the boys had completed the obligatory side-door security check at Swan Video Productions, and were allowed access, Simon Swan introduced Dickson and Mick to the makeup artist, Gloria Barnsdale. “You have wonderful features,” the 20-something brunette said as Dickson took a seat, “high cheekbones, square jaw and a cute nose.”

“Cute?”

“I have a thing about noses, and I like the shape of your nostrils.”

“Nostrils?”

“Try not to move too much while I apply the makeup,” she ordered. “I want you to look perfect. Yes, nostrils... I have a thing about them... they’re important you know. They should be tear-drop shaped with the rounded part at the front.”

“Says who?”

“I do.”

“I don’t understand why I need makeup.”

“You’re in a studio situation with artificial lighting, Dickson. We don’t want any shine or your forehead or cute little nose, do we?”

“Do you do this kinda thing all the time?”

“It’s my living. One day, I hope to work in the film industry and travel the world.”

“You look stunning, Dicko,” Mick laughed, totally gorgeous and edible.”

“Don’t take any notice of him,” Dickson grumbled, “he’s an idiot.”

“He’s right, though,” Gloria said as she took a step back to inspect her work. “There, all done. Mick? Would you like to take the chair?”

“Me? I’m not being interviewed.”

“Bedford might change his mind” Simon interrupted, then turned to Dickson. “Where are your notes?”

“In my head.”

“That’s not good enough,” the cameraman complained, “you’ll be under intense pressure.”

“I don’t want to appear contrived.”

“Suit yourself, mate, it’s your neck.”

Shortly after 7:30, as Edward Bedford introduced the scheduled stories for the night’s program, he turned slightly from Camera 1 to face Camera 2. “But first, live from our Taree studio, we have Dickson Bottoms, the young surfer caught up in the turmoil of the murder case known as ‘The Fink Curse’. Bedford then looked to one side of the camera toward a large screen that featured Dickson’s face and upper torso, clad in a white Billabong T-shirt.

“Welcome to Focus, Dickson, and thanks for joining us.”

“My pleasure.”

“Following my last interview with you on this program, talk-back radio exploded with criticism of my handling of the situation... there was also a public outcry in favor of your innocence.”

“I was surprised.”

“Did you hear any of the calls on radio?”

“No, but I did hear about them from other people.”

“And what was your reaction?”

“Reaction? Pleased, I guess.”

“You guess?”

“Yeah, I mean like the opinions expressed by viewers of Focus were their own... unsolicited. I had nothing to do with it. It’s cool that people are on my side but it doesn’t alter anything... not really. The case is still under investigation and nothing’s changed.”

“We took the liberty of commissioning Tilsbury and Osborne to conduct a poll. I’m sure you’ll be interested in the results. 5,000 people were asked if they thought you were guilty. 89% said no, 9% said they were unsure, and 2% said that you shot Horace Fink. What do you say to that?”

“What’s there to say?” Dickson shrugged.

“They are opinions.”

“Opinions in your favor.”

“They are still opinions.”

“When asked why they thought you were innocent, 62% of the 89% said you didn’t look like a killer, almost all of the remaining 38% said you were far too good looking to be a criminal. Do you think you’re good looking, Dickson?”

“What’s that got to do with it?”

“Doris Fink thought you were good looking, did she not?”

“Yes.”

“And was her admiration for you reciprocated by you?”

“Yes.”

“So I assume that you did have an affair?”

“No.”

“Was it a clandestine affair?”

“There was no affair.”

“If there were, would you admit it?”

“No. And anyway, that’s a trick question.”

“Speaking of questions, have you agreed to the police request to undergo a lie-detector test?”

“There’s been no request.”

“I’ve been informed by a reliable police source that a letter was mailed to all of those people present at the honey shed on the night Horace Fink was shot. Have you not received that letter?”

“No.”

“It will probably arrive tomorrow, Monday. But, to answer my question, Dickson, will you undertake a lie-detector test?”

“I don’t know. I can’t comment. I’ll need to consult with my lawyer.”

“And if your lawyer gives you the go ahead?”

“That’s hypothetical.”

“You haven’t answered my question.”

Dickson drew a deep breath and exhaled audibly. “I guess if Abraham Goldstein says it’s cool then it’s cool.”

“So your answer is ‘yes’; you would be prepared to undergo a lie-detector test?” Just then, a phone sitting on Bedford’s desk rang. Bedford answered the call, repeated the word ‘yes’ a few times, and replaced the receiver. “That was a message from Abraham Goldstein,” he explained. “He asked that I discontinue this particular line of questioning. Okay, let’s turn our attention to the recent suicide of Serge Vodkinski who, among others such as yourself, was present at the honey shed on the night Horace Fink was murdered. How do you explain Vodkinski’s assertion that you were having an affair with Doris Fink?”

“That’s supposed to be confidential.”

“The assertion or the affair?”

“Mick and I were informed by the police...”

Dickson began, but then abruptly halted his reply.

“Sorry, you tricked me into that.”

“Tricked you into what?”

“What the police discussed with Mick and I is confidential. I dunno who your police source is, but whoever he is – or she, they’re in big trouble. And for the last time, Mr. Bedford, let me repeat: Doris Fink and I did not have an affair. Besides, what’s the biggie? What if we had? What the hell would that have to do with anything? I can’t see what the damn point is.”

“The point, Dickson, is motive. Everyone in that shed had opportunity; and when that Smith and Wesson landed in their midst, everyone in that shed had means; but not everyone in that shed had sufficient motive to actually do the deed.”

“Don’t stop there, keep going, say what you really mean.”

“Is there a makeup person there, Dickson? Your brow is perspiring.”

Before Dickson could unscramble his thoughts, Gloria Barnsdale dashed into frame and dabbed Dickson’s forehead with a cotton pad. She retreated just as quickly. “It’s hot under these lights,” the blond offered feebly.

“I’m sure it is,” Bedford agreed. “I hope you have better luck with the lie-detector test.” Bedford returned his focus to Camera 2 and continued: “And that concludes our interview with Dickson Bottoms for tonight. Dickson will return for further discussions in a few weeks time as the case of The Fink Curse develops. Back in a moment...”

[Super Focus logo. Cut to ad break].

“All dressed up and nowhere to go,” Mick joked as the boys headed to the bathroom to remove their makeup.

“What did you think of the interview?”

“You did okay.”

“Okay? Is that all?”

By the time Dickson and Mick had returned to the main studio, Simon was almost done with dismantling the lights and backdrop. “I hear you’ve been hanging around with undesirables,” he said. “That black fella... Maori or whatever the hell he is. Do yourself a favor, Dickson, don’t be seen mixing with low life, it’s bad for your image.”

“He’s not low life, he’s a great guy. Anyway, I’m not racist. I’ll choose my own friends, Simon, if you don’t mind.”

“That’s the trouble with you young blokes... no experience. You won’t fucking listen.”

“Not to that racist crap, that’s for sure.”

“Suit yourself. But don’t bring those darkies around here. Okay? There’s a fortune in electronics here and I don’t want their beady black eyes seeing any of it.”

Half an hour later, the boys relaxed on the front verandah of the beach house as they sipped a beer each, and gazed at the vast moonlit ocean. “This must be the only sane place on earth,” Dickson commented.

“Gloria’s right, you know.”

“About what?”

“Your nose.”

“Jesus, Mick, don’t start that crap for Christ sake. I’m not in the mood.”

“Don’t worry about the interview, mate... you’ll get yourself all worked up over nothing. Forget it. You did okay.”

“Okay’s not good enough. And what’s with all this lie-detector bullshit? I’ll phone Abraham first thing in the morning.”

“If he doesn’t phone you first.”

“And what about Swan... mouthing off all that racist shit? Who the fuck does he think he is?”

“He’s a blowhard, Dicko. Don’t take any notice of his paranoia or you’ll burst your damn boiler.”

“I wish we’d never gotten involved with all this Fink crap in the first place.”

“Too late now, mate. Hey, listen up, where are we right now?”

“Home.”

“And what are we looking at?”

“The ocean.”

“And we’re two best mates sipping on a beer in this awesome piece of Paradise, yeah? So what’s the prob?”

“You’re right, Mick,” Dickson said following a thoughtful pause, “I shouldn’t get so worked up about all that Fink bullshit. Truth is, I’m a pretty lucky guy.”

The conversation then turned to the hangi and what a great time everyone had. “You’re making me hungry, Dicko. Back in a sec, I’m just gonna make a sandwich from the leftovers.”

“Make that two. And grab two more beers.”

Chapter 21

Dickson waited at the back gate for Paul as the boy approached on his bicycle, blowing his whistle. Paul handed the morning paper to his blond friend and immediately launched into a flurry of hands and fingers. “My mom is going to kill Bedford,” he declared excitedly in sign. “She says you should never do another interview with that man... except she didn’t call him a man.”

“I won’t... not if she kills him.” Dickson laughed.

“She was very upset. She wanted to phone you but it was late. I don’t like Bedford either... he’s a... let me spell it... m-a-n-i-p-u-l-a-t-o-r. Is that how you spell it?”

“Take it easy, mate... I can handle it. Bedford is doing all this crap on purpose to promote his ratings. It’s called showbiz. Don’t worry about it.”

“Are you going to take the lie-detector test?”

“I’ll speak to my lawyer about it.”

During breakfast, Dickson’s phone rang hot. First it was Tom Samuels who suggested, among other things, that Bedford was conducting a vendetta. “It’s blatant and malicious,” he said. “If I were you, I’d speak to Abraham Goldstein about having the contract with Focus annulled, and suing that Bedford bumhole.”

“I didn’t think you swore, Rev.”

“I don’t... at least, not often. Besides, ‘bumhole’ only gets you purgatory, not hell like the other version. Seriously, Dickson, you can’t continue to tolerate this attempted character assassination.”

“It’s not that simple, Tom, and there’s a lot of money at stake here, part of which belongs to Mick. Besides, you’re forgetting something...”

“What?”

“The blokes in the white hats always win in the end.”

“Just be careful, my dear boy. Don’t bite off more than you can chew. And always remember, you have a friend here in me if you need to talk.”

“Thanks, Tom. You’re a good man.”

Other callers included Aunt Flo, Maureen Parker, Cody, Maaka, Tony Spiropoulos and, not surprisingly, Abe Goldstein. “There are a number of ethical issues involved with regard to lie-detector testing, Dickson, and I suggest we discuss them here in my office. I’ll be free at 2:15 this afternoon.”

Cody’s comments included quite a deal of profanity. Suffice to say that Cody Callaghan is not a big fan of Edward Bedford. “If I get my effin’ hands around that c...’s neck he’s dead meat.”

One caller – the last person Dickson expected to phone – was Charles from Il Colosseo. “I got your cell number from a friend,” he apologized, “I hope you don’t mind. But I want to tell you that if that Bedford idiota ever sets foot in my restaurant I’ll feed him Ratsak. Will you be listening to Long Jaws this morning on radio?”

“I hadn’t planned to.”

“Do it... for me. I am going to call him again and complain about Bedford. Keep your radio on, Dickson.”

“Okay, Charles... will do, and thanks again for the other night. Mick and I thoroughly enjoyed your hospitality, but you were way too generous.”

“Non c’è problema!”

Dickson and Mick washed the breakfast dishes as they listened to the radio. “Hello world, this is Long Jaws...” Then, 10 minutes into the program, they recognized the voice of Charles. “Buongiorno, Mr. Jaws! Mi chiamo Charles.”

“You’re Italian? How are you?”

“Bene, grazie. Come stai?”

“I’m fine, thank you. Allow me to say, Charles, that Italians have enriched Australian culture a great deal... I love Italians and have a lot of Italian friends, many in the restaurant business. As you know, I practically live in restaurants.”

“I am also in restaurant business, Mr. Jaws... Il Colosseo in Taree.”

“Il Colosseo? I’ve heard it’s a very good restaurant, Charles.”

“You have?”

“One of the handmaidens told me... she’s been to Il Colosseo. Now, what can I do for you?”

“Mr. Jaws...”

“And please don’t call me Mr. Jaws.”

“Mi scusi! No can do, Mr. Jaws. You are a man of great importance and deserve respect... an Australiano tesoro! So, if you don’t mind, I call you Mr. Jaws. Last night, I watched Focus...”

“You and everybody else...”

“That Bedford – he’s a bad man.”

“He’s just doing his job, Charles. I know Edward – had lunch with him a few times - and respect his professionalism. He’s been in the news and current affairs business for a long time, you know.”

“Then he should know better, Mr. Jaws.

Dickson Bottoms and his friend Mick Morris have been in my restaurant. They are both fine giovinetto, Mr. Jaws.”

“I agree with you, Charles. From what I’ve seen of the boys on television, they’re charming young people... thoroughly decent young men... apparently. I have no axe to grind whatsoever. But murder is murder, Charles, and you need to remember that Edward Bedford has a job to do.”

“Then why doesn’t he interview all of the people who were present that night Fink was shot? Why interview only Dickson?”

“You’d have to put that question to Edward himself, Charles. But I suspect that Edward believes Dickson is a ratings winner... in fact, each time Dickson has appeared on Focus, the ratings have gone through the roof. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Mr. Jaws, may I suggest something?”

“Go ahead.”

“Why don’t you interview Bedford and give him a taste of his own medicina?”

“If Edward decides to call this program I’ll be happy to speak with him.”

“And Dickson?”

“I believe Dickson is under exclusive contract to Focus. In other words he’s not available to speak with me on this program, or any other program for that matter, unless he gets permission. In fact, you could say that Dickson has created this problem for himself by signing that contract.”

“Like you, Mr. Jaws, I am a father. I love my sons, and am very proud of them. When I see Dickson being... how you say, intimidire...?”

“Intimidated.”

“Si... when I see that, I think of my sons.”

“I’m sure many people feel the same way, Charles, but Dickson is legally an adult... Just a moment, Charles, can you hold on there for a bit? We have Edward Bedford on the line. Don’t go away... hold the line, Charles, and I’ll get back to you. Edward? Good morning, thanks for phoning.”

“G’day, Long. I was listening to your program and heard Charles.”

“What do you have to say in response?”

“You’re right when you say I have a job to do, Long, and I’ve been doing that same job for a very long time.”

“It seems to a lot of callers to this program – and not just today - that you have singled out Dickson, and are treating him unfairly.”

“Not at all, Long. I treat Dickson no differently to the way I treat all interviewees involved in similar circumstances.”

“I doubt whether there are many cases similar to this one, if any at all. Besides, he’s 18... he’s still a boy.”

“As you said yourself, Long, he’s an adult. You also said that murder is a very serious business.”

“But you don’t know that he’s guilty.”

“Which is precisely why I ask the very questions I ask. You yourself, Long, are aware of the interview business; it’s not a place for the faint hearted or for pussy-footing around. ‘Hard hitting’ is a term that’s often used to describe interview techniques. You’ve done it yourself, Long.”

“Are you employing these rather harsh tactics on purpose, Edward?”

“How do you mean?”

“I mean, is your modus operandi intentional in order to gain greater publicity and ratings? ...which is what has happened.”

“With respect, Long, that is not one of your better questions,” Edward laughed. “Of course, I use whatever means are at my disposal to attract ratings! Don’t you?”

“But in the Dickson Bottoms case, public sympathy, overwhelmingly, is on Dickson’s side. Does that worry you?”

“Not in the least.”

“Do you think Dickson is guilty of shooting Horace Fink?”

“Let me put it this way, Long, don’t let Dickson’s fresh-faced innocence fool you.”

“Fool me into what? Thinking that he’s innocent? Everyone is innocent until proven guilty, Edward. Do you see yourself as his prosecutor or his interviewer?”

“Allow me to answer your question this way, Long, if Dickson Bottoms is guilty, I’ll be the one to establish that guilt on Focus.”

“Sounds like an obsession. Don’t you think that’s dangerous in terms of your professionalism?”

“I’ve been doing my job for a very long time, Long.”

“Is that a yes or a no?”

“No comment.”

“Thanks for your time, Edward.”

“Pleasure, Long. Bye.”

“Well, Charles,” Jaws asked, “what do you have to say to that?”

“It’s obvious, Mr. Jaws! Bedford is out to crucify an innocent man.”

“And it wouldn’t be the first time, Charles. But times have changed since the crucifixion at Calvary... only a legitimate court of law can convict a person of a crime.”

“Mi assentire, Mr. Jaws, and that is precisely something Bedford should remember!”

Music sting Live commercial.

Dickson dried his hands with a tea towel and turned off the radio. “Don’t you wanna hear the reaction, Dicko?” Mick complained. “There’ll be a lot more callers yet!”

“I’m going for a surf – you can please yourself.”

Chapter 22

At 2:10pm, Dickson and Mick arrived at the offices of Goldstein, Nicholls and Blogg, parked their Suzukis, went inside and took a seat in the waiting area. “Nothing new,” Mick commented as he scanned the magazine rack. “Same old, same old.”

“You can’t read, anyway.”

“Don’t be cruel.”

The wall clock showed 2:23pm by the time Abraham emerged from his office door and beckoned the boys to enter his sumptuous inner sanctum. “Thanks for coming,” he said as he gestured toward the two green vinyl-covered chairs, “please take a seat. It’s nice to see you again.” Abraham sat on his buttoned leather chair behind his desk, leaned forward on his elbows and clasped his hands. “What are your thoughts regarding the polygraph test?”

“The letter from the cops arrived today.”

“May I see it?” After reading the letter, the lawyer noted that the test was voluntary. “Damned if you do, and damned if you don’t,” he smiled. “The police and lawyers are supposed to be on the same side, but that doesn’t mean I have to like them.”

“You said there were ethical issues involved, Abe.”

“First of all, let me explain what a polygraph or lie-detector test actually is: it’s a machine used to measure the autonomic nervous system responses in terms of blood pressure, pulse rate, respiration rate and galvanic skin response. In theory when a person tells a lie, fear of detection causes uncontrollable reactions in these physiological areas. However, there is considerable debate as to the validity and accuracy of results during the questioning of crime suspects and others. For example, a naturally nervous and/or stressed

person may cause the machine to misinterpret those natural responses.”

“Are you advising us against taking the test?”

“I’ll get to that in a moment. Another example of the device’s questionable accuracy is in a case where a person truly believes that something false is indeed correct. For instance, the world is flat.”

“I see.”

“With the exception of this state of New South Wales, there is no legislation in Australia that specifically prohibits the admission of lie detector evidence in criminal trials. However, here in New South Wales any evidence obtained by the use of instruments or apparatus that monitor the physical reactions of the body or elements of stress is inadmissible in court.”

“That’s crazy! If it’s inadmissible why bother to ask us to take the test?”

“I think Rocque and Rowles are playing a mind game, Dickson. They’re probably hoping that this request will help them sort the sheep from the goats as it were, and somehow narrow down their list of suspects.”

“Okay, so you’re advising us not to take the test.”

“Not so fast, my boy, not so fast. What I propose is this: you contact them and agree to undergo the polygraph test tomorrow or the following day. It’ll take them a while to organize an accredited tester anyway. By the way, are the police aware of this meeting?”

“No... not specifically.”

“Good. When you call them, use your cell phone, not my office phone. When that’s done, I will contact Rocque and Rowles by letter immediately and inform them that I have since advised my clients,

namely you, to reject the offer of a polygraph test on the grounds of the legal reasons I have outlined just now.”

“How devious!” Dickson laughed. “But I like it! You’re a genius, Abe!”

“Thank you. So that will satisfy Rocque and Rowles in terms of your willingness to be questioned while, at the same time, my letter gets you off the hook.”

“Off the hook?” Mick interrupted. “I don’t wanna be the party pooper here, Abe, but wouldn’t it be a lot easier just to take the test and satisfy Rocque and Rowles of our innocence?”

“I have already explained that polygraphs are not foolproof, Mick. What happens if you become nervous or stressed for whatever reason – no matter how seemingly insignificant - and cause an inaccurate reading? Are you willing to take that risk?”

“No... at least not when you put it that way, Abe.” Mick scratched the black shaggy hair of his head and added, “I just thought of something... what if all the other suspects take the test and pass with flying colors? Where would that leave us?”

“Excellent point, Mick. Once I have couriered my letter to Rocque and Rowles, I’ll send a press release to the local media, informing them of my decision to advise against taking a polygraph test. Hopefully, when that becomes public knowledge, all other people involved in the Fink case will think twice about volunteering as well. And, in that way, it won’t appear as if you have personally tried to influence anyone.”

Dickson followed Abe’s instructions to vacate the office, step out into the street and phone the police station to inform Rocque and Rowles of his and Mick’s intention to go ahead with the polygraph test. A few

minutes later, Dickson was seated once more in the green vinyl chair. “Rowles was surprised,” he explained to Goldstein. “He wanted to know if we’d sought your advice beforehand. I lied and told him ‘not yet’.”

“What was his response to that?”

“He wanted to know why. I told him Mick and I had discussed the matter and decided we had nothing to hide. Then I lied again and told him we had an appointment with you later today to confirm our decision.”

“Goodness me! That’s two lies... it’s a good thing you weren’t taking a polygraph test,” Abe smiled. “By the way, do you gentlemen have your names on the electoral roll? Are you registered to vote? You’re both 18 now, and the federal election is next Saturday.”

During their return to the beach house, the boys stopped at the post office to register their names on the electoral roll. Upon arrival back home, they discussed the polygraph issue once more. Dickson, despite having taken his lawyer’s advice, was nonetheless troubled by the decision. “No matter how logical or justified Abe’s rationale is,” he reasoned, “the fact remains that some people will still accuse us of being too chicken to take the test.”

“But you’ve already told Rocque and Rowles that we are prepared to take it.”

“I hope Abe includes that info in his press release... I don’t want people to think we reneged out of fear or something. But there’s another thing, Mick... if Abe’s press release convinces others to reject the test, then that will automatically include the person who pulled the trigger.”

“So? What difference would that make? The polygraph results are not admissible evidence in court, anyway. And you’re forgetting something, Dicko, even if you did pass the test with flying colors, it still

wouldn't prove a thing, and you'd be no closer to getting your stickies on Fink's four million bikkies."

"I'd rather be poor and happy."

"What's wrong with rich and happy?" Mick asked as he opened a kitchen cupboard and reached for a bottle of Johnny Walker. "I think we both need a stiff drink."

Dickson cracked up at his mate's comment and accepted his offer of a double scotch. "Did you notice Maaka and Fogsy at the hangi?" he asked, changing the subject. "They recognized each other but didn't speak."

"That figures. On the rocks?"

"Thanks, and half water."

"Wuss." The boys took their drinks to the front verandah where they pondered the long stretch of deserted beach. "Maaka and Fogsy saw each other at the Auckland hotel where Fink was assaulted," Mick continued. "That doesn't sound like the ideal conversation starter to me."

"Pity... I'd love to be a fly on the wall."

"Do you think Fogsy shot Fink?"

"He's just a kid."

"It doesn't take an adult to pull a trigger you know."

"He's only one of thirteen possibilities, Mick, and I seriously doubt he was the one. If I were a bookmaker, I'd put the short money on Ajit and Lemon Lips."

"What about Vodkinski?"

"Him too, but he's dead. How the hell can you prove a dead man did it?"

"Remember, Dicko, Fogsy admitted that he went to Auckland with the intention of assaulting – or worse – Fink. That makes him potentially violent."

"Aren't we all? Don't you think the thought of grabbing the gun crossed my mind that night?"

“True,” Mick agreed, “for a fleeting second it crossed mine as well. Actually, it probably crossed everyone’s... at least, almost everyone’s. I don’t think the Rev. or Dr. Hardy is the type, though.”

“Listen, Mick, there’s something that’s been bugging me but I don’t wanna share it with Rocque and Rowles... not even Abe.”

“What’s that?”

“Keep this to yourself, okay? I just wanna talk it through with someone.”

“No worries.”

“Powder burns... there could have been powder burns on the gloves used by whoever shot Fink. All the cops have to do is find those gloves, do a DNA test and prove the identity of the wearer and the murderer.”

“As well as everyone else’s innocence.

Woohoo! What did you do with your gloves?”

“Tossed them away in the honey shed.”

“Me too. Hang on a minute, Dicko, what makes you think Rocque and Rowles haven’t already tested the gloves? They’re detectives, mate, they know about this kinda stuff – they do it all the time. If they’d found evidence of powder burns, then whoever shot Fink would be in the clink already. Maybe there were no powder burns, or maybe whoever shot Fink got rid of them somehow. Hey, Dicko, are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“Clive Farrell?”

“He’s a shooter at the rifle club as well as a cop. He knows about guns and bullets and all that shit. What if he destroyed the gloves he wore?”

“If he did, that would leave 12 pairs of gloves. Once they were DNA tested, the cops would know who wore the missing pair. Simple process of elimination, mate.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right... and what would they charge him with... malicious damage to a pair of surgical gloves? So... it’s back to square one, Dicko.”

“Yep, and I think Rocque and Rowles would agree with you. Thanks for talking this through with me, Mick, I feel better now.”

“What’s for dinner?”

Chapter 23

As usual, Dickson waited at the back gate for Paul to arrive with the morning newspaper. Splashed across the front page was the headline: NO LIE TEST FOR FINK CURSE.

“What will I tell my friends at school?” Paul asked in sign.

“How do you mean? What’s there to tell?”

“They watched Focus on Sunday and they know about the lie detector test.”

“My lawyer advised against taking it, Paul.”

“My friends will think you’re chicken.”

“And what do you think?”

“It doesn’t matter what I think. My friends know I hang with you and Mick... they expect me to know stuff about you guys.”

“So now you know... it’s all in the paper. My lawyer says no... that’s it. End of story.”

“Is that what you want me to tell my friends? They won’t believe me.”

“What are you trying to tell me, Paul? That your friends think I’m guilty?”

“No, it’s not that exactly... it’s just that if you don’t take the lie test, they’ll think you have something to hide.”

“Okay, watch my lips... ready? I did not shoot Fink. Tell your friends what I just said, okay, and also tell them to read the full story in the paper before they start imagining a whole bunch of loony-tunes crap.”

Dickson watched his little red-head mate pedal off down the road. Then he continued to stand at the gate while he read the full story. A few minutes later, he placed the paper on the kitchen table and began to prepare breakfast.

Mick entered the room, wished his friend good morning, and sat at the table to read the paper's lead story. "Have you read this?" he asked.

"Yeah. Cornflakes or Rice Bubbles?"

"Weet Bix."

"We're out of Weet Bix."

"Abe says we contacted the police and volunteered to take the polygraph but he advised us to reject it. Then he goes on about all that legal mumbo jumbo he mentioned yesterday. So that means we're in the clear, Dicko."

"I'm not so sure about that, Mick," the blond said as he placed bowls, spoons, milk, sugar, and two boxes of cereal on the table, then seated himself. "Just because a lawyer gives advice doesn't mean you have to take it."

"Where's the Weet Bix?"

"You weren't listening... we're out." Dickson had just taken his first mouthful of cereal when his cell phone rang. "Hello?"

"Dickson, it's Aunt Flo. Are you busy today?"

"Never too busy for you, Aunt Flo. What's the problem?"

"My hot water's on the blink. Do you know anything about fuses?"

As the two Suzukis neared Flo's villa, the boys saw Dr. David Hardy emerge from the front door and walk toward his car. "Hello, Dickson, hello Mick," he said when he recognized the boys.

"G'day, Doc," Dickson responded after removing his helmet. "Is Aunt Flo okay?"

"She's not getting any younger... to use a cliché. I gave her a check-up and she's alright, provided she takes her medication. It's just a precaution to thin the blood and improve circulation. By the way, I read about the polygraph test and what Goldstein advised."

“Did you get a letter from the police?”

Dr. Hardy opened the rear door of his car and tossed his bag onto the back seat. “Yes, I did but after reading Goldstein’s advice, I’m having second thoughts about taking the test. At first, I didn’t see a problem but now...”

“Damned if you do and damned if you don’t... that’s what Abe said.”

“And what do you say?”

“To be honest, Doc, I don’t know what to say. It’s kinda like what they say about being half pregnant.”

“I agree. Well, I must be off... I have another house call... I hope to see you again soon.”

As the doctor drove away, the boys approached Flo’s front door, which opened before they had a chance to knock. “You were peeking,” Dickson joked.

“That’s what little old ladies do, or haven’t you heard? And, anyway, don’t believe a word of what Dr. Hardy told you,” she said as she stood aside to allow the boys entry. “He’s a fuss pot.”

“You’re not a sprout any more, Aunt Flo, you need to look after yourself. The Doc’s just doing his job.”

“Pills, pills and more pills. If I take one more pill I’ll sound like a box of Jaffas. Now you boys take a seat while I make some tea... the scones are in the oven and are almost ready... scones must be eaten while they’re hot, you know.”

“Did the Doc say anything about your diet?”

“He must think I’m a rabbit... for God sake, carrots and lettuce. There’s nothing wrong with my diet.”

“What did David say?”

“It doesn’t matter what he said... he’s not the one who eats it.” Flo placed the teapot on the table and reminded the boys to let the brew draw for a minute or

two before pouring, then she headed to the oven. “I’ll just check the scones.”

Once the trio was seated, Dickson poured the three teas while Mick spread his scone with jam and cream. “So what’s this about your hot water, Aunt Flo?” Dickson asked.

“It’s not hot... that’s what. Oh!” she laughed, “That rhymes!”

“Are you sure it’s the fuse?”

“It was the last time.”

“Do you have a spare?”

“What do they look like?”

“Where’s your fuse box?”

As soon as the tea and scones were duly demolished, Dickson checked the fuse box, found the switch and fuse for the hot water system, plus a roll of spare fuse wire attached to the board. Within a minute, he had diligently fixed the problem. “You’re not just a pretty face,” Flo beamed, and kissed him on the cheek. “Your father was like that... very good with his hands. Anyone for more tea?”

“No thanks, Aunt Flo. We’d better head back to the beach house.”

“Before you go... about that business in the paper this morning...”

“The polygraph thing?”

“Yes... I’m not sure I agree with your lawyer’s advice.”

“You think we should take the test?”

“Well, it’ll certainly put a stop to what the neighbors are saying.”

“Such as...?”

“Are you sure you don’t want more tea?”

“Just one. Do you mind if I use your loo, Aunt Flo?”

“I’d mind more if you didn’t,” she laughed, and began to fill the kettle. While Dickson was gone, she said to Mick, “what do you think about that poly thing, whatever it’s called?”

“I’m just as confused as everyone else,” the lad admitted. “It’s like Abe said, ‘damned if we do and damned if we don’t’.”

When Dickson returned, Mick took his turn in the loo. By then, the tea was drawing in the pot. “Use the same cups, Aunt Flo, don’t bother with washing them.”

“Which one was yours?”

“That one.”

“Are you sure? I think that was Mick’s.”

“That’s okay, it won’t kill me.”

“You boys are very close.”

“The brother I never had, I guess.”

As the trio seated itself again, and Flo poured the tea, Mick eyed the plate of cookies on the table and grabbed two. “You’re a better cook than Dicko, Flo, and that’s saying something.”

“He said you’re a bottomless pit.”

“There’s nothing wrong with my bottom.”

“I’ll second that,” Flo winked. “Now, about this poly thing and the neighbors... I wish they would shut up but you know how people are – they love to gossip. Most of the people around here have nothing better to do... too many idle minds if you ask me.”

“What are they saying?” Dickson asked.

“The obvious... that if you have nothing to hide you’d take the test.”

“But Abe Goldstein explained all that.”

“He’s a lawyer. Nobody believes lawyers.”

“What’s the point of having one if you’re going to ignore his advice?”

“I wish I’d thought of that.”

“Anyway, Dr. Hardy said he’s having second thoughts about taking the test after what he read. You can tell your neighbors that as well. It’s not just Mick and me, you know. And I won’t be surprised if a lot of other people involved in this whole Fink mess make the same decision. But, tell me Aunt Flo, what’s your personal feeling?”

“I just want this whole thing to go away. By the way, are you registered to vote this Saturday?”

“Yep.”

“I hope you’re not going to vote for ‘Rudd the Dud’. I don’t like that man... there’s something about him. And he wants to say sorry to the Aborigines. When was the last time you walked up to an Aboriginal person in the street and said sorry for what our grandfathers or great grandfathers did? It’s ridiculous. And then what? We all go back to where we came from? Don’t get me wrong, boys, I’m not condoning what took place during the stolen generation period... far from it... it was a bad decision rooted in ignorance. But it’s in the past. Am I expected to say sorry for what Jack Doolan did?”

“The Wild Colonial Boy? The bushranger?”

“Yes.”

“What’s he got to do with it?”

“We’re related, but it was a very long time ago.”

“Related? You? That means... that means... bloody hell! I am too! Mom never mentioned it.”

“My sister wasn’t particularly proud of her convict heritage but... well, put it this way, I’m not either but I also don’t deny it.”

“Bloody hell! Related to Jack Doolan, the Wild Colonial Boy! That’s incredible!”

“Is it? I don’t think so. No one gets to choose their ancestors, Dickson. And, like I say, there’s no point in apologizing for whatever Jack Doolan did just

as there's no point in saying sorry to the Aborigines for what our forebears did. It's actions rather than words that are important. We owe it to all Australians, black and white and whatever else, to provide security and decent living standards but it's equally important to give them self respect and the means to stand on their own two feet."

"You sound like a politician, Aunt Flo."

"It's election time, darling, what do you expect?"

Chapter 24

Dickson and Mick sat astride their boards on the backline of their local beach when they noticed two other surfers paddling toward them. They soon recognized the mop of spiky black hair, Cody Callaghan, accompanied by his blond mate Alan Fogarty. “Mark’s here too, but he’s body surfing,” Cody explained before disappearing down the face of roller. Two hours later, the group returned to the beach house where they took turns to shower under the front yard hose.

Mick dashed into the kitchen to fetch 5 colas and a plate of snacks which he delivered to the front verandah.

Meanwhile, Dickson couldn’t help but detect Cody’s subdued behavior. “What’s the prob, Code? Normally we’re flat out trying to get a word in edgewise with you here.”

“He had a blue with Steph,” Mark offered on his mate’s behalf. “A misunderstanding.”

“Yeah, right,” Cody pouted, “SHE misunderstood ME!”

“Takes two to barney, you know.”

“She started it.”

“Those two fight all the time,” Mark explained to his hosts. “Code’s got a short fuse... so has Steph for that matter. Putting those together is like mixing hydrogen peroxide and acetone.”

“You should talk!” Cody hastily retorted. “What about you and Carol? You two are like Mohammed Ali and Frazier in the same ring, so don’t you give me any dumb lip.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?” Dickson offered in a vain attempt to calm the situation.

“Yeah,” Mark laughed, “there is... ignore him.” The handsome fitness fanatic took a swig of cola and then continued: “Do you and Mick fight much?”

“Hardly ever.”

“Cody and I go a few rounds in the ring at the school gym almost every morning. He spends half of his money on bandages, hahahaha! So how come you guys don’t barney?”

“We get along,” Mick intervened. “There’s nothing to fight about... is there, Dicko?”

“Don’t tempt me.” Then Dickson turned his attention to Alan. “Hey, Fogsy, you’re pretty quiet today. How have you been?”

“No dramas,” the boy shrugged.

“You still hang with that teacher... Barbara Thorne?”

“Not really... she’s gone all weird since the Fink thing. I hear you guys are not gonna take the lie-detector test.”

“That’s what our lawyer recommended... did you read about it in the paper?”

“Yeah, and I agree... not that I wanted to take it in the first place. My dad says I’m a minor, anyway, and I shouldn’t have to.”

“And what about you, Cody?”

“It wouldn’t bother me,” the mop shrugged, “but, hey, I’ll go along with everyone else. Besides, I get enough interrogation from Steph already. Lemme tell you, Dickson, DON’T get yourself involved with a girlfriend. It’s too much damn hassle.”

“So why do you guys stay together?”

“Good question... I dunno.”

“They’re crazy about each other,” Mark laughed. “They fight like cats and dogs and then make up, and it’s like they’re all lovey dovey again. Come to

think of it, we're the same... him and me... except for the lovey dovey bit, hahaha!"

"How did you guys meet?" Mick asked.

"Cody gave me a bunch of fives in the school quad one day and flattened me. So I got him alone the next day and flattened him."

"Have you guys ever thought about opening an introduction agency?"

Alan Fogarty was the only one not to crack up at the joke. His mind was elsewhere. "What are you gonna do about Fink's will?" he asked Dickson.

"Do? You tell me, mate, 'cause I don't have a bloody clue. To be honest, I don't think I care. It's a hassle I don't need."

"It's a lot of money," Cody chirped. "I can think of a few things I'd like to do if I had that kinda loot."

"Have you ever thought that collecting all that money would be easy if the person who shot Fink admitted it?" Fogsy continued. "Are you pissed off about that?"

"I've never really thought about it quite that way, Fogsy. Yeah, I suppose I should be but... well, it's not something I have any control over, so... I'm not sure."

"I would be... I'd be mad as hell."

"Me too," Cody agreed.

"It's not that simple, guys," Mark intervened. "Whoever shot Fink could be looking at 20 years in the clink. Who the hell is gonna admit to something that comes with that kinda price tag? He'd have to be crazy."

"Or she," Mick offered.

"Yeah," Dickson nodded, "you're right, Mark. There's no way I'll ever qualify for Fink's fortune, and the bastard knew it. He wanted the last laugh, and he got it. So, Fogsy, to answer your question, no, I'm not

pissed off... there's no point. That's what Fink was hoping for – that I'd be frustrated and depressed – but I'm not gonna play his evil game. Stuff him.”

“What happens when the money from Focus runs out?”

“There's plenty of time to think about that, Fogsy. Actually, I'm kinda toying with the idea of setting up a surfboard factory around here somewhere – just a small one, a shed with a few tools.”

Dickson's comment caught Mick by surprise. “You never mentioned that to me! I thought you wanted to be a private dick?”

“After what we've been through... and what we're still going through? You gotta be joking, Mick. Anyway, what's wrong with a surfboard factory? I kinda like the idea.”

“And what about me?”

“Same deal... partners. You invest half the setup cost and do half the work.”

Obviously, the idea appealed greatly to Cody. “That sounds awesome! Do I get a discount? And maybe a summer job? Woohoo!”

The conversation was suddenly interrupted by someone calling ‘hello’ at the back door. “Anyone home? It's me, Maaka!”

“We're on the verandah, come on through... grab a cola from the fridge on your way.”

Maaka was dressed in floral board shorts, flip flops and a black t-shirt that featured a colorful Maori scene of a powerful warrior attacking a giant sea creature. “It's the legend of Maui Tiki Tuna,” he explained as he sat on the floor and crossed his muscular dark-brown legs.

Dickson leaned forward and read the caption aloud: “The pieces of Tiki Tuna chopped up by Maui

turned into many life forms including the Cougar Eel, freshwater Eels, Vines and the red wood of trees.”

“It’s a famous Maori legend.”

“Wow, that is just so damn cool,” Cody enthused. “Where can I get one?”

“Maori shirts on the net. They’ve got a whole stack of Maori designs.”

“Awesome! That would look totally outtasight as a design on a surfboard. Whaddaya reckon, Dickson?”

“Yeah,” Dickson nodded thoughtfully, “...yeah, you’re right, Code, not a bad idea. So, Maaka, what have you been up to? How did you get here?”

“Not much. Reg is in Sydney overnight... back tomorrow afternoon. And I hitched a ride over here.”

“You wanna stay for dinner? You can sleep over if you want.”

Maaka was a little hesitant. “Uh, is anyone else staying?”

“Just Mick and me. Why?”

“Nothing. Yeah, thanks, that would be cool.”

Once again, Dickson noted that Maaka and Fogsy were – or at least seemed to be – reluctant to speak to each other. For one thing, they avoided eye contact as much as possible.

By the time Cody and his mates had left it was almost evening; an appropriate time for Mick to ask what was for dinner. Dickson queried Maaka as to what he would like. “Whatever’s going,” was the boy’s response. “I’m easy.”

“Do you like Italian?”

“Sure!”

Maaka and Mick amused themselves with computer games while Dickson prepared the evening meal. The boys had previously promised to do the dishes afterward. The recipe was one of Dickson’s

own... not quite authentic Italiano but close enough. He took 500g of mince meat, added finely chopped celery, carrot, onion, garlic, a pinch of mixed herbs and a packet of chicken soup, all of which he formed into small balls and fried. After discarding the fat, he returned the meatballs to the pan, added a can of chunky chopped tomatoes, Italian style in oregano and basil, then warmed the dish through while he attended to the mashed potato.

Dinner was served at the kitchen table with a bottle of cheap but eminently quaffable red. "No offence, Maaka," Dickson said as the meal progressed, "but I noticed that you and Fogsy aren't exactly all over each other like a rash."

"It's nothing personal, Dickson, it's just that he reminds me of something I'd rather forget."

"Sorry, mate."

"No worries. He's probably a great guy and all... you know, being a friend of Cody... but..."

"I understand, mate, forget I mentioned it."

"Fogsy is a good bloke, though," Mick offered despite his mate's retreat. "I think you'd like him if you got to know him. Maybe you should try not to associate him with what happened in Auckland. I mean, you saw each other for maybe a whole 5 seconds, right?"

"What if he doesn't like me? What if he doesn't wanna be my friend?"

"Well, I guess there's only one way to find out, mate."

"By the way, Dickson, these meatballs and mash are awesome. Thanks for inviting me."

"Tell me, Maaka, why did you ask if anyone else was staying over? Was it because of Fogsy?"

"Yeah."

"That's fine... I was just curious. So what are your plans? You gonna stay in Oz?"

“Reg is working on it. He wants to be my official guardian and organize permanent residency.”

“Are you happy about that?”

“Sure... everyone needs to feel like they belong, right?”

“Consider yourself part of the furniture, mate.”

And with that, Dickson took his glass of red and proposed a toast: “To Maaka Te Tikiwawa, our friend and brother.”

Maaka coughed a little as he swallowed the wine and explained that he wasn't used to alcohol. “But I really appreciate having you guys as Aussie mates,” he said, then took another sip. “I don't think you guys realize how important this is to me.”

“I think we do,” Mick smiled.

Chapter 25

The Friday night before the federal election, Dickson and Mick sat on the front verandah after dinner and discussed politics. “Aunt Flo reckons we shouldn’t vote for Rudd the Dud.”

“She’s 80-something, we’re 18,” Mick argued.

“So?”

“This is the 21st century, Dicko, we need new blood.”

“Rudd the Dud’s blood? What’s wrong with the old blood? You don’t need a transfusion if you’re not bleeding, you dumbass. Howard’s done a great job for 11 years. Why change course?”

“Who’s a dumbass? Listen to yourself, Dicko, you’re sounding like an old man. What’s the point of being young if you’re not gonna change things?”

“Because, there’s no point in changing things just for the sake of change. Check out the economy... it’s never been better. Australia is in good shape... I don’t understand your thinking. Wait a sec... yes I do... you’re not.”

“Not what?”

“Thinking.”

“Maybe we should change the subject.”

“Why?”

“We’re arguing.”

“We’re discussing.”

“You never called me dumbass before.”

“Pardon my neglect... I’ll make the effort more often in future.”

“What’s the matter with you, Dicko?”

“This whole ‘change for change sake’ thing bugs me. Haven’t you heard the old saying ‘if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it’?”

“According to Rudd, it is broke.”

“What the bloody hell would he know? Of course he wants change... change would give him the job of PM. That’s all he wants.”

“And Howard doesn’t?”

“Howard’s earned it. Rudd’s a blow-in. Besides, if you bother to check Australia’s political history, you’ll find that Labor gets in, buggers everything, then the Libs get in and fix the problems. And then what happens? People like you get all bloody antsy and think it’s time for change and, lo and behold, Labor gets back in so they can bugger everything up again. It’s bloody ridiculous.”

“So is this ‘discussion’, Dicko. I’ve made up my mind and I’m not gonna change it.”

“That’s just being stubborn.”

“Yeah, right... talk about the pot calling the kettle black. I’m gonna get a beer... you want one?”

“Thanks.”

Mick removed the stubby twist tops before he took the bottles to the verandah. He handed one to Dickson, then took a seat. For a while, the pair sipped their beers in silence as they contemplated the ocean, with its broad expanse bathed in the silvery light of the moon.

“I didn’t mean it, Mick... I’m sorry.”

“What?”

“Calling you dumbass... you’re not a dumbass.”

“Thanks... I appreciate that.”

“At least, not normally.”

“Let’s drop it, Dicko. Have you given any thought to how we’re gonna resolve the Maaka-Foggy issue?”

“What makes you think it’s our responsibility?”

“They’re our mates... mates do things for their mates, right?”

“What if they don’t want any help? They might perceive it as meddling in their private affairs.”

“So who’s meddling? We just get them together here one night, all innocent like, and kinda let nature take its course.”

“Hahahaha! Coming from you, that’s funny.”

“Gimme a break, Dicko... you know what I mean. They need a chance to get to know each other... you know, in a situation where they’re kinda forced to communicate.”

“What if they don’t? What if they become aggro? What if they get involved in a barney or whatever?”

“Think positive.”

Just before 8 next morning, the boys rode their Suzukis to the local polling booth in Old Bar. Both boys politely refused offers of ‘how to vote cards’ from lunging representatives of various political parties and took their places at the rear of the long queue. “So much for getting here early,” Dickson complained. “Seems like everyone in town had the same idea.”

“I told you to wait until the early morning rush subsided, didn’t I?”

“So why did you come with me?”

“Because you’re cute.”

“Jesus, Mick... keep your voice down.”

“Especially when you’re mad.”

“Are you still gonna vote for Rudd the Dud?”

“Kevin-oh-seven, mate, way to go.”

“Way to go backwards,” said an elderly man standing in the queue behind the boys. “Did I hear you right, son? You’re gonna vote for Rudd?”

“You heard me right, sir,” Mick replied, somewhat peeved at having been overheard.

“And what happens then? We’ve got a Prime Minister named Kevin. How the hell is the rest of the

world supposed to take Australia seriously if we've got a PM called Kevin?"

Dickson's hand clasped his mouth and tried desperately to muffle his laughter, but Mick was not so amused. "With respect, sir, John Howard is 68... he's past it. Australia needs new leadership."

"And I'm 83, young fella, and still sharp as a tack. You young blokes wouldn't know your ass from your elbow... and neither does Rudd. And what about that bloody sheila who's gonna be deputy PM if Labor gets in? Julia Tryhard or whatever her name is? Jesus, talk about a classic daily double. Every time she's on the tele I press 'mute'."

"It's a free country."

"Yeah, free for anyone who wants to bugger it up."

Shortly after the boys had returned to the beach house, the Reverend Tom Samuels paid a surprise visit. "I received a call from Dr. Hardy," he said as he was invited inside. "He wanted the last rites and sacraments."

"Dr. Hardy?"

"One of his patients, a terminally ill man in his 90s."

"Tea?"

"Thank you," Tom said as he seated his considerable bulk at the kitchen table. "I know you're not religious, my young friends, but for anyone who is, the last rites and sacraments are a comfort and blessing in more ways than one... not just for the dying but also for the relatives and friends. They're comforted in the knowledge that death is simply a transition from one life to another."

"Has the old bloke carked it yet?"

"I know you won't believe this, Mick, but that's an expression I've never used in any of my eulogies."

No, he's still alive but only just... it's only a matter of time."

"Shouldn't he be in a hospital?"

"He wants to be at home with his family."

"I'm sorry we don't have a tea service,"

Dickson apologized as he placed three mugs - with teabag strings dangling over the sides - on the table. "I think Gran's old set is stored in a box someplace but I have no idea where."

"It's the total lack of ceremony that bothers me about teabags... rather like serving communion wafers from a coin-operated dispensing machine. However, Dickson, in this case the company more than compensates for the lack of decorum. It's not every day that I'm served tea by a bronzed, shirtless surfer, you know."

"Sorry, Rev, I'll grab a shirt."

"You do and I'll kill you. Now sit down and tell me the latest news. Have you voted yet?"

"Just a little while ago."

"How does it feel to be 18 and able to have your say in the way Australia is governed?"

"To be honest," Dickson shrugged, "it's a bit like having a voice in the wilderness. For example, Mick and I don't see eye to eye on this issue so it's like our votes cancel each other out."

"I voted Labor," Mick explained.

"I see," Tom said as he jiggled his teabag, then squeezed it and almost scalded his fingers. "Well," he continued after waving his stinging digits in the air, "Liberal, Labor... there are differences, of course, but they're not so extreme as to change or threaten the basic character of Australia. In other words, the sky won't fall in despite who wins."

"Then why bother to vote?"

“If you want to keep the devil at bay, you pray. If you want to keep the political loony fringe – the extremists - at bay, you vote.”

“And who did you vote for?”

“I haven’t yet... I’ll vote when I get back to Taree. However, I think I’ll stick to the devil I know, so to speak. I realize that’s a strange expression for a reverend to use, but... speaking of devils, have you heard from Edward Bedford?”

“Not since the last interview.”

“Do you regret having gotten yourselves into this situation?”

“Yeah, Tom, we do but, you know... it’s too late now. By the way, how did you get here?”

“Taxi.”

“I’ll give you a lift back to Taree on the bike.”

“You’re very kind, Dickson, but I’m not quite ready for my inevitable celestial departure just yet. I’ll call a taxi. Incidentally, how well do you know Alan Fogarty; the young blond boy who was present at Howard’s shooting?”

“Not all that well.”

“I was surprised to see him at mass last Sunday. He’s not a regular, you know. I saw him again after mass when I was outside chatting to some of the parishioners. For a moment there, I had a feeling that he was waiting to see me but, when I looked up again, he was gone. Quite mysterious, really.”

“What do you make of it, Tom?”

“I don’t know. I was hoping that perhaps you two could shed some light on the matter but, as you say, you don’t know him very well.”

“We’ve met a few times... he’s been here with Cody and his friends, but Fogsy doesn’t say much. He’s pretty quiet.”

“Actually,” Mick intervened, “Dicko and I were talking about getting Fogsy and Maaka together. They’ve both been here at the same time but don’t talk to each other. Actually, it’s more like they avoid each other.”

“Maaka?”

“Maaka Te Tikiwawa... the Maori kid who was at the hangi.”

“Oh, yes... I remember... a rather intriguing young man with a most striking presence. So, what’s the connection?”

Dickson explained the brief meeting that took place outside the Auckland hotel between Maaka and Fogsy when Horace Fink was assaulted some time ago.

“I see,” Tom continued, “so you think perhaps Alan Fogarty has something he wants to tell me about Maaka? But Maaka wasn’t present at the honey shed on Tony Spiropoulos’s farm the night Horace was shot.”

Chapter 26

By early evening Saturday, following the elections, it was obvious from the television reports that the incumbent government was in serious trouble. "I'm going for a walk along the beach," Dickson announced as he rose from his chair.

"I'll come with you."

"No you won't, Mick. No offence, I just want time out for a little while... I need to do some thinking. I'll be back in an hour or so."

As the blond surfer's feet left their tracks in the squeaky dry sand before reaching the firmer wet sand at the edge of the wash, Dickson contemplated the stillness of the night, punctuated by the sound of spent waves that scampered up the beach before returning in haste to the bosom of the sea. He was entranced by the rhythm... the regular pattern of sound that hadn't altered in a billion years, and never would. It was a reassuring sound, a gentle sound, a reminder that the sea continually went about its business in spite of man's madness. This was a place where troubled minds could come for solace and comfort; a place where thoughts were free from interruption or contradiction.

Dickson pondered the countless hours he had spent in the surf, riding the waves. Each time he caught a ride that he considered too dangerous or unsuitable for whatever reason, he had the option of exiting over the lip in order to wait for another. But his ordinary day-to-day life was on a wave from which there was no escape, or so he believed. It was a monster that offered no retreat as his metaphorical board screamed down its steep face at breathtaking speed. His only option was to survive... somehow.

The status quo of Australian federal politics was about to change just as Dickson's life had irrevocably

changed since his involvement with Horace and Doris Fink. Could he simply exit over the lip and paddle once more out to the back line? No. The wave had begun to curl and all escape options were closed. He was committed.

And then there was Mick who loved him. What would happen if or when the day arrived that a girl entered Dickson's life and the relationship developed into a love affair and possible marriage? Mick would be devastated. Mick would be alone; totally alone; discarded like a rag doll that had ceased to amuse its child owner. And Dickson's life would move on. "Move on? How could I move on and leave my best mate behind?" Dickson uttered aloud. "That wouldn't be fair."

Dickson imagined what it must have been like for people who chose to end their lives by walking out to sea and drowning. "It must be like going home," he thought. "They must see the ocean as being a sort of welcoming committee waiting to solve their problems and to comfort them. I wonder if Mick would ever do something like that?"

Dickson ordered Mick not to reveal the election result as he entered the kitchen. "I don't want to know." He grabbed a beer from the fridge and stared at the TV screen. "So who's winning?"

"You told me not to tell you."

"Is it all over for Howard?"

"Looks like he lost his own seat."

"What? To that McKew chick? I don't believe it. I remember seeing her on the 7:30 Report. Every time she interviewed a politician she chewed him up and spat him out."

"You got a problem with women in politics?"

"I got a problem with women who wear pants."

“What about blokes who wear dresses?” Mick couldn’t contain his mirth and burst into laughter.

“Chill out, Dicko, this is the 21st century. Things have changed.”

“Yeah, like global warming.”

“And whose fault is that?”

The following morning, after breakfast, Mick said he would visit his folks. Instead, he rode his Suzuki into Taree and attended mass at Our Lady of the Rosary church.

“Where’s Dickson?” was the reverend Tom Samuel’s obvious question when he spoke to Mick on the steps of the church afterward.

“I was hoping you had time for a bit of a chat.”

“Wait for me at the presbytery door. I won’t be long... I just need to say hello to some of the parishioners.”

During the 10-minute wait, Mick was tempted several times to dismiss the idea of speaking confidentially to Tom about a very personal matter. However, his indecision prevented him from choosing to stay or leave.

“I’m not so sure this is a good idea,” he said to Tom as the priest opened the door and invited his young friend inside.

“Do you have any reason to doubt the value of a nice cup of tea?”

“No.”

“Then don’t argue.”

Mick followed Tom to the kitchen where he took a seat and watched the old man perform the almost ceremonial ritual of tea-making in the traditional, old English manner.

“Are you happy about the election result?” Tom asked.

“Yeah. Dickson’s not, though. He’s furious.”

“It’s all rather temporary, you know. No matter who’s in power, there’s one ultimate power that never changes.” Tom placed the silver teapot on the table.

“Iced Vo-Vos?”

“Thanks.”

When everything was in readiness for morning tea, Tom lowered his generously proportioned butt onto a chair opposite Mick. “You see, my friend, Dickson’s problem is that he’s not looking beyond the next three years. There’ll be another election followed by another... and on and on it goes. It’s not all that important, really.” Tom pointed toward the ceiling.

“There are more important things in life... and death.” Then he poured the teas. “Help yourself to an iced Vo-Vo, my friend. Now, what can I do for you?”

“It’s nothing really... like you say, Rev., life goes on.”

“Yes, it does... however, what happens in the meantime also matters, you know.”

“It’s just that... well, there’s no one I can talk to about... about... Dickson.”

“Does he have a problem?”

“No.”

“I see. You’re the one with the problem.”

“Well, sort of...”

“You’re in love with him.”

“How do you know?”

Tom smiled, then sipped his tea. “Is Dickson aware of your feelings?”

“Yes.”

“What does he say about the situation?”

“He’s cool... I mean, he doesn’t freak out or anything. We don’t talk about it much, and nothing happens... like, you know.”

“No sex.”

“Yeah... I mean, no.”

“And that troubles you?”

“It’s frustrating not being able to express my feelings, but I’m more concerned about the future... our future. I’m not sure we have one. What if he gets married or something?”

“He’ll probably ask you to be best man.”

“I couldn’t do that, Tom.”

“If you didn’t, you’d break his heart. You’re his best friend; closer to him than anyone else. His love for you is not the same as the love a man has for a woman, but it’s love nonetheless, and a very powerful love. Do you think God’s love for us is compromised or diminished by gender? Of course not. He loves us all equally. By the way, does Dickson know you’re here?”

“No, I told him I was going to visit my folks.”

“Your penance is one Our Father and three Hail Marys.”

“Our Father which art in Heaven...”

“NOT NOW! Later... Listen, Mick, I appreciate how difficult this must be for you. However, I want you to also keep in mind how difficult it must be for Dickson. As you say, he’s aware of your feelings for him... he’s a very sensitive and intelligent boy. I’m sure he understands as well as empathises with your... uh, predicament. But you must also empathise with his.”

“Yeah... I guess so.”

“There’s no guessing about it, Mick. I know it doesn’t solve your problem... at least not the sexual side of the situation, but it will help to ease tensions. In fact, I suspect part of the problem is that neither of you is willing to discuss the matter for fear of causing an argument. It’s not healthy to suppress our feelings, especially deep feelings. Sooner or later, they’ll explode. Take my advice, Mick, and choose a time to talk sensibly to Dickson about the matter. You can

mention this chat with me, if you like, and tell him that I suggested you two behave like civilized adults. Meanwhile, never allow jealousy or lust to be your masters. They will destroy you, as well as those you love.”

Mick called in to see his folks on the way back to the beach house. He stayed for an hour but, even during that relatively brief spell, he sensed that the atmosphere was becoming increasingly tense. At one stage, his father made some lame excuse in order to leave the room. It was then that his mother asked if he and Dickson were involved in a ‘relationship’. “Dicko’s straight as an arrow, mom... and no, there’s no relationship, at least not like you’re thinking. We’re best mates, that’s all... like brothers.”

“You should never have been born.”

“Say goodbye to dad for me. I gotta split.”

Mick stopped his Suzuki at a remote part of the beach, not far from home, and sobbed until he had exhausted his very last tear. He checked his face in the rear view mirror to ensure that his eyes were sufficiently normal to return home. He would mention none of what took place that Sunday morning to Dickson.

“How are your folks?” the blond asked as Mick stepped onto the front verandah.

“Same old, same old... they’re okay.”

“You don’t sound very excited.”

“So how has your morning been?”

“Surfed for a while... I thought about loyalty when I was out there. There’s no such thing. How could voters turf the prime minister out of his own seat?”

“Not all of them did. McKew won by a few thousand votes, not fifty thousand. Besides, there is such a thing as loyalty... you’re loyal to me, and I’m loyal to you.”

“That’s different, we’re mates. Politicians don’t have mates. I wouldn’t be a politician for all the money in the world. ‘They love me, they love me not, they love me, they love me not...’ How the hell do pollies live with that kinda uncertainty? The public is too fickle for my liking.”

“You have your own public, mate... those who think you shot Fink and those who don’t. Is that why you’re so pissed off with this whole election thing?”

Chapter 27

Dickson was surprised to receive a call from Ian Ajit who wanted to know if he and Mick were still interested in fishing. "It's not really our thing, Ian, but you're always welcome here. How have you been?"

"We can talk about that later. What's the fishing like off your stretch of beach?"

"I don't really know. We see a few guys out there early morning and evening, so I guess they must catch something."

"Tell you what, if I catch something I'll cook it for dinner. What are you doing tonight?"

"Well, with a bit of luck... having fresh fish for dinner, I guess."

Following the call, Mick expressed his reservation about becoming too friendly with Ajit.

"There's something creepy about him... slimy."

"So what am I supposed to tell him? To piss off? He's never done anything to us. Besides, it means I don't have to cook tonight."

"Don't count your chickens – or fish - just yet, Dicko."

Ajit, complete with fishing gear, arrived at 5pm as the boys were engaged in horticultural pursuits in the rear garden. "When you finish that, you can weed my garden," Ajit laughed. "I hate weeding. Catch a fish and you can eat it, pull a weed and what can you do with it?"

"Mulch."

"Okay, I'm off to the beach. Do you mind if I take a shortcut through the house? I hear there's bream running tonight. I'll catch you blokes later."

As Dickson and Mick sat in the kitchen, watching the 7 o'clock news, they heard Ajit walking down the hall. "Three bream," he called, then appeared

at the kitchen doorway holding one of the fish aloft.
“One to one-and-a half pounders. I’ll scale and filet them... you can refrigerate what we don’t use tonight. I think that deserves a beer, guys.”

“In the fridge... help yourself. You want a hand with anything?”

“Fish ‘n’ chips, mate.”

“Dicko makes awesome chips,” Mick intervened, then received a sideways glare from his mate.

“Excellent... I’ll take care of the fish, and Dickson can do the chips. I need salsa... don’t worry, I made it before I left home... and herb butter.”

“You didn’t invite your wife?”

“This is a boys night out,” Ajit explained as he began to scale the fish on a cutting board, “besides, she and the kids are at a church function. I think I mentioned to you once before that I’m not religious.”

“How does she feel about that?”

“She prays a lot. She figures one day I’ll be struck by lightning and fall off my horse.”

“And the kids?”

“She blackmails them. ‘Do the right thing, she tells them, or you’ll go to Hell.’ It’s blackmail.”

“That’s a bit harsh.”

“Is it? If I criticize the government, that’s my democratic right. But if I criticize the church, I’m a sinner or an infidel. Anyway, I’ve learned not to criticize my wife... that’s worse. Believe me, Hell hath no fury... It makes me think that God must be a woman. I never discuss religion at home. My wife is ultra sensitive about her faith. By the way, do you know I took the lie detector test?”

“No.”

“Yeah, I figured I would just get the damn thing out the way. So now I’m in the clear... no more

speculation, no more whispers behind my back, no more Rocque and Rowles.”

“Our lawyer advised against it.”

“So I read in the paper. I think it was the wrong advice. You can start on the chips now, mate. The fish doesn’t take long... pan fried in a few minutes.”

“Were you nervous?”

“With the polygraph? Yeah... a little. I was conscious of making a mistake and providing the machine with a reason to deliver an inaccurate assessment. Yeah, I was relieved when it was all over.”

“What did Rocque and Rowles have to say?”

“They said I should let everyone know about my taking the test and recommend it to all the others.”

“Is that why you’re here?”

“Partly. Does that bother you?”

“I’m kinda surprised, that’s all. Have you spoken to anyone else?”

“Simon Swan, Barbara Thorne, Tony Spiropoulos and a few others.”

“Tom Samuels?”

“No, hahaha! I steer clear of the Reverend... he always gives me the third degree about why I don’t accompany my family to church. However, my wife says she’ll speak to him about the polygraph.”

“She agreed with you about taking it?”

“Of course! She said that the good Lord would guide me and protect me, and that there was nothing to worry about. Mind you, she was also concerned about the local gossipers. Now she’ll be able to tell all those busybodies that I took the test and passed.”

During the meal, served with a bottle of Riesling, Ajit mentioned the Focus program with Edward Bedford. “When is the next interview?” he asked.

“Dunno. He hasn’t called yet.”

“Bedford is barking up the wrong tree, if you ask me. I don’t believe either of you blokes shot Fink.”

“Thanks. Does that mean you also don’t believe we should take the polygraph?”

“No, but not because I think you’re innocent. If you blokes took the test it would end speculation. I read quite a few crime novels – whodunits – and I can assure you that the villain is always the one who’s least obvious.”

“Such as Tom Samuels or Dr. David Hardy?”

“I don’t believe they had sufficient motive.”

“So who did?”

“Think about it... who knew Doris Fink very well?”

“Tony Spiropoulos.”

“Too obvious. Let me give you a hint... he lives right next door.”

“Cody Callaghan? Nah... no way, Ian. Cody’s not the type. He’s a good mate of ours.”

“Have it your way, Dickson. It’s just my opinion.”

“Why would Cody want to shoot Fink?” Mick asked.

“He was fond of Doris. Horace murdered Doris.”

“Cody wasn’t the only person who was fond of Doris. Lots of people were. No offence mate, but you were pretty pissed off with Horace as well.”

“Okay, you blokes are entitled to your opinion. But just remember, no self-respecting crime writer would choose the most obvious person to be the villain.”

“Maybe not,” Dickson argued, “but this is not fiction... this is real life. Besides, for all we know, it could have been Serge Vodkinski. Personally, I think

he's the most likely suspect. He was crazy about Doris and hated Horace with a vengeance."

"What do you think of the bream?"

"Excellent... and the salsa is awesome."

"Ditto the chips, Dickson."

"It's amazing to think that you can just wander down to the ocean, throw in a line and catch a meal," Mick commented.

"You don't get a lot of beef or pork swimming around, though," Ajit laughed. "But, yes, fishing is one of the very few options left for catching food in the wild. It's a practice that goes back countless eons. I still have a strong hunting instinct, you know, which is why I love to fish. It satisfies the primeval urge in me. Come to think of it, I would love to be in Rocque and Rowles' shoes. I'd have the Fink case solved in no time."

"Cody Callaghan?"

"That's my educated guess. I have it on good authority that Cody and Doris were involved in a sexual relationship."

"Cody? That's ridiculous! Doris was in her mid thirties! Cody is just a kid!"

"A curious kid. It wouldn't be the first time a young boy made love to an 'older' woman, you know... especially a woman disenchanted with her husband. Do you know that he skinny dipped in the Fink pool after tending the garden each week?"

"Cody's the type to skinny dip in Hyde Park fountain in broad daylight. It's a wonder he wears clothes at all. No, I don't believe what you're saying, Ian."

"Me neither," Mick agreed. "Anyway, who's the 'good authority' who told you that story?"

"My wife."

After dinner, and doing the dishes, the trio relaxed with coffee on the front verandah where the

conversation turned to fishing, in particular Ajit's various exploits in which, quite naturally, he played a starring role. Neither of the boys was interested; moreover neither had any personal fishing tales to tell. Instead, they listened and made an occasional favorable comment to fake attentiveness. Unbeknown to Ajit, the boys were simply grateful that their guest had decided not to pursue the previous topic of conversation.

"You boys are yawning," Ajit eventually noted, then glanced at his watch. "My wife and kids will be wondering where I am." He thanked the boys for a wonderful night as they escorted him to his car. Then he drove away.

"What a load of shit," Mick said as he and his mate returned to the house. "Do you believe any of that stuff about Cody?"

"About 'doing it' with Doris? It's possible, but I don't believe he shot Horace. He's a lover not a fighter. I'm not sure I understand Ajit. Why did he come over here to tell us about the polygraph, and then crap all over Cody?"

"He likes to cause trouble... he's a shit stirrer. I still think he's a creep. Ya know, Dicko, if he convinces everyone except you and me to take that lie test, it's not gonna look good for us."

"You wanna talk to Abe Goldstein again?"

"I dunno. Do you?"

Next morning, Dickson received a call from the Focus Production office. "Mr. Bedford would like to speak with you, Mr. Bottoms. Please hold the line... I'll put you through to his office now."

"Bedford."

"Morris."

"Mick? I was expecting Dickson."

"I'm his agent, remember?"

"Fuck off with all that shit. Put Dickson on."

“Just a moment... I’ll check if he’s available.”

“Cut the crap!”

“Hello? This is Dickson.”

“I want another interview this coming Sunday. I’ve already made the necessary arrangements with Simon Swan. Usual time, be there at about 7pm. The interview is scheduled for just after 7:30.”

“I’m not sure I wanna do this thing, Ed.”

“Break the contract and you’re finished... broke. Is that what you want?”

“I’ll be there.”

Chapter 28

As usual, Dickson waited at the back gate for his young red-haired mate to arrive with the morning paper. “G’day, Paul,” the blond said in sign, “how’s it going?”

“Cool. Do you know about Ian Ajit?”

“He was here last night for dinner.”

Paul handed the paper to Dickson who quickly scanned the front page. “IAN AJIT TAKES POLYGRAPH,” he said aloud as he read the bold headline. “Yeah, he told us already.”

“Will you?”

“Depends on what our lawyer says... not sure. How’s the surfboard going?”

“Few dings... but it’s okay.”

“Bring it around here one afternoon and I’ll fix it for you.”

Back in the kitchen, Dickson prepared breakfast of cereal, scrambled eggs and toast. “I’ll make the coffee,” Mick offered as he entered the room after showering. Then he noticed the newspaper headline. “So what’s the big deal? Ajit takes polygraph... that’s supposed to be headline news? No wonder newspapers are used to wrap fish ‘n’ chips... that’s all they’re good for.”

“They’ve gotta print something there, Mick. It’s a beat-up. What’s the bet we get a call from the journo?”

“What are you gonna tell him... or her?”

“I know what I’d like to tell ‘em but I’ve gotta be careful. They can easily turn a throwaway line into a major headline.”

“You’re already a major headline, mate.”

As expected, a journalist from the Mid Coast Standard phoned just after 9am. The male voice

introduced itself as Bill Bragg, and asked if he could “pop around” for an interview.

“Sorry, Bill, I’m under contract to Focus... no interviews without permission.”

“Okay... off the record, then, just for the sake of my own curiosity, has the fact that Ian Ajit submitted himself to a polygraph test changed your mind about taking one?”

“It’s not my mind that needs changing, mate, it’s my lawyer’s.”

“I hear on the grapevine that you’ll be interviewed again on Focus this Sunday. Does that concern you?”

“Should it?”

“Edward Bedford is not known for his subtlety or sweet nature, Dickson. Can you handle it?”

“Even a bastard like Bedford can’t hang an innocent man.”

“Thanks for the quote and good luck. Bye.”

“Hang on a second...” But Dickson’s attempt to continue the conversation was met by silence. “Hello? Hello? Are you still there? Jesus Christ,” he growled as he ended the call.

“You should let your media agent handle those kinda calls, Dicko,” Mick suggested, albeit not so discreetly. “That’s what I’m here for.”

Dickson checked his cell phone memory and pressed another button. “G’day Kelly, could I make an appointment to see Dr. David Hardy as soon as possible, please? A cancellation? When? No worries, that will be fine... 3 o’clock this afternoon. See you then. Bye.”

“What’s the prob?” Mick asked. “Are you sick?”

“No, not really... I just wanna check a few things with David, that’s all.”

Dickson arrived at the Taree Medical Center at 2:55pm but was still sitting in the waiting room at 3:15. “Waiting rooms are like churches,” he thought to himself, “nobody talks. And that print on the far wall... it’s been lopsided for as long as I’ve been coming here. Doesn’t anyone notice these things... except me?” Dickson toyed with the idea of straightening the print himself but declined the urge when he realized his action would attract the attention of all the other patients. He’d already had enough of being noticed.

“Dickson!”

The blond rose from the blue vinyl bench and approached the smiling doctor. “G’day, David,” he grinned, and followed the medico toward his room. “I hate waiting rooms.”

“They’re called waiting rooms because they are waiting rooms. If you didn’t have to wait, they’d be called something else.”

“Touche.”

“Take a seat. How have you been?”

“Pretty good, Doc,” Dickson responded as he settled into a chair at the side of the doctor’s desk.

“Let me take your blood pressure. This is my new digital testing machine, and I’m still getting used to it. It’s very sensitive, so please be still for a few moments. I suppose you know about Ian Ajit taking the polygraph test.”

“Told us himself... he was at the beach house last night.”

“Have you changed your mind about taking the test yourself?”

“I’ll leave that decision to Abe Goldstein.”

“Blood pressure’s normal... so what brings you to the surgery?”

“I’ll be interviewed again by Bedford on Focus this Sunday and... well, David, I was wondering if... you know... if you could give me something to take.”

“For what? Stress? I could... but I won’t. Neuro stimulants such as amphetamines may be calmativ and anxiolytic due to increased mental concentration - and even the elimination of worrisome external stimuli - but the problem is, Dickson, uppers can also be downers and vice versa.”

“Sorry, doc, but can we dispense with all the medico speak? I just want something on the night to settle my nerves.”

“Uppers are drugs that stimulate; they make a person feel up. You’ve already been interviewed twice by Bedford... don’t you think people, including Bedford, will notice a difference in your behavior? Any noticeable change in your attitude, Dickson, will only add fuel to the fire. Apart from that, we’re all different. Each of us has a unique response to any given drug; a unique experience. I can’t guarantee that your reaction to a particular medication will be beneficial under a given circumstance. In other words, Dickson, I don’t think taking a pill – whatever it may be – before the interview is a good idea.”

Dickson took a deep breath and then exhaled slowly. But said nothing.

“Tell me something, Dickson, what is it precisely that worries you about the interview? If you’re innocent...”

“If?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“It’s Bedford’s aggro, Doc... the way he cross examines me like some Hollywood prosecutor trying to win a bloody Academy Award. He pressures me into saying things I don’t mean. He tries to trick me.”

“Bedford’s job – at least, the way he sees it – is to get you onto the back foot, up against the ropes as it were. He can’t do that if you don’t let him, Dickson. You’re falling into the trap of acting defensively. Think more aggressively and positively. But above all, mate, don’t rush your answers. Take your time. Don’t be bullied. Pause before you open your mouth. Watch my lips, Dickson, and remember what I’m about to say: The pressure you’re under is self-imposed. It’s not Bedford, it’s you. You’re allowing it to happen. Do you think Bedford is at his doctor’s surgery right now asking for a pill? Of course not. He’s got you on the ropes, Dickson. Do something about it.”

“Thanks, Doc... thanks a stack.”

Naturally, when Dickson arrived home, Mick was anxious to satisfy his curiosity. “How did it go with the doc?”

“He called me ‘mate’. He never does that.”

“So what’s the story? Do you have pulmonary adenomatosis or something?”

“What the bloody hell is that?”

“Fatal disease in sheep... just kidding. You wanna beer?”

“Thanks. No, I’m fine. I guess you could say that the doc gave me some ‘fatherly’ advice.”

Mick tossed his mate a can of VB and they both headed to the front verandah. “What about?”

“The Focus interview. My head was a bit screwed but I’m okay now. Actually, David is about mid 40s so he’s old enough to be my dad. He’s cool. So what have you been up to?”

“Maaka called around for a chat. He’s doing okay... hangs with Cody and his mates quite a bit... they get along really well.”

“Including Fogsy?”

“Seems like they’ve broken the ice.”

“Good... glad to hear it. Did you tell Maaka where I was?”

“Yeah, and he was worried. I told him you’d phone him later. So what exactly did Dr. Hardy say?”

“He said I should stop acting defensively... that I should be more aggressive and positive.”

“I could have told you that, you boofhead!”

“You’re not mid-forties, Mick... you’re a kid. Advice like that from a teen sounds dumb.”

“Next you’ll be telling me you’ve got a crush on David, hahahaha!”

“Cut the crap.”

“By the way, Simon Swan also called just to check that you were okay for Sunday night at his studio... 7pm sharp. And Maggie dropped in for a while... I gave him some mince. I’m pretty sure he said ‘honey for Cody’. I can’t be sure ‘cause it was kinda garbled, but that’s what it sounded like.”

After the boys had dined on home-made pizza at the beach house, Maaka phoned. “G’day, Dickson. Is everything alright?”

“You mean after the visit to the doc? Yeah, mate, no worries. Mick tells me you called in today. Sorry I missed you. He says you’re hanging with Cody and the guys.”

“Yeah, Code’s totally cool. He’s got a really neat room with a poster of Endless Summer. I like his folks, too, they rock. Code invited me to sleep over this Friday, then we’re going on a dawn patrol next morning.”

“How’s Fogsy?”

“We get along okay.”

“Any mention of what happened in Auckland?”

“Nah... we don’t talk about that. We talk about what happened at the Spiropoulos farm, though, and

your appearances on tele. He said you're gonna be interviewed again this Sunday."

"Yeah, dammit... I'm kinda locked in so there's nothing I can do about it."

"I should teach you the Maori Haka... frighten the shit outta Bedford, hehehe."

"My tongue's not that long."

"Fogsy says whoever shot Fink must be a total asshole for not admitting it. He says if whoever did it owned up, you'd be a millionaire."

"Yeah, well, maybe, maybe not. I'm doing okay. Listen, mate, don't forget you're welcome here any time, okay? So don't leave it too long."

Chapter 29

Next morning, as Dickson anticipated, the Mid Coast Standard's front-page headline read in bold: "EVEN A BASTARD LIKE BEDFORD CAN'T HANG AN INNOCENT MAN". Young Paul, as he delivered the paper, couldn't help but wear an infectious ear-to-ear grin. "I'm gonna put that in my scrap book," he said in sign. "That's a keepers!"

Later, in the kitchen over breakfast of sausage and baked beans on toast, Mick noted the obvious: "Wow! That headline's gonna liven up the Focus interview this Sunday, Dicko. Woohoo! The whole of Australia will be watching."

After breakfast, Dickson's phone rang hot. First, it was Simon Swan: "Are you nuts? Are you crazy? Are you out of your fucking tree? Bedford's gonna crucify you!"

Tom Samuels was more discreet: "I don't think you've done yourself any favors, Dickson. But try not to worry... I'll recite the Rosary three times a day for you. I'll also dedicate Sunday morning's Mass to your cause. It would be nice if you could attend."

And Cody? "You're outtasight, Dickson! That is just so damn cool! You remind me of Mark when he gets mad in the ring, you better watch out! Trust me, I know! Hehehe. I can't wait for Sunday night, mate... you're gonna put that Bedford asshole right on his smartass butt!"

Alan Fogarty also called: "I just wanna wish you luck, Dickson. I'll be rootin' for ya."

Meanwhile, Dickson pondered the idea of suing the Mid Coast Standard for slander. His finger was poised to dial Goldstein's number when he changed his mind. "I don't think I could stand any more dramas," he explained to Mick. "Besides, what I said to Bill Bragg

is true. Whatever Bedford throws at me, I'll just have to handle."

"Most people are on your side, Dicko. That's something you need to keep in mind."

On Friday afternoon after school, Paul turned up with his surfboard and showed Dickson the dings.

"They're not so bad," the blond reassured the redhead after a brief inspection. "I still have patching materials left over from the last time I repaired this stick. Call around tomorrow after lunch... it should be ready by then, and we can go catch a wave or two."

Fixing Paul's surfboard was a welcome distraction from other matters. Apart from that, Dickson also got a kick out of doing favors for his little mate. Even at the relatively tender age of 18, he understood the value of giving, with little or no thought of receiving anything in return... except perhaps a beaming smile; and Paul's was one of the best, enhanced still further by his prominent laugh lines and cute freckled nose.

Later that afternoon, the boys were surprised by a visit from Robert Down on his Harley, which clattered noisily to a halt in the rear drive. "People don't really appreciate silence until I turn off the motor," Bob guffawed, and then explained that he was in town for a few days on 'business'. "I just wanted to wish you good luck on Sunday's Focus program, mate," he said as he shook Dickson's hand with bone-crushing enthusiasm. "It's a bloody good thing for Bedford that he's not interviewing me, hahahaha! So, you guys got time for a beer or what?"

Dickson invited Bob to stay for dinner but the big man had prior commitments. "Thanks anyway," he said as he took a seat on the verandah and lifted the can of VB to his bearded lips. "So how do you feel about the interview on Sunday?"

“Apprehensive.”

“Bedford’s all huff and puff, mate. He thinks he’s the big man just because he’s a famous TV star. Trust me, Dickson, he’d go down like a sack of potatoes if someone with guts stood up to him. Don’t get me wrong, mate, I’m not saying you’re gutless... no, not at all. I’m saying that you’re still a kid and you haven’t done the hard yards yet... you haven’t toughened up. Bedford knows it, he knows you’re easy pickings.”

“That’s more or less what Dr. Hardy said.”

“Dr. Hardy’s right... at least in this case. He once told me to stop making grappa, hahahaha! I told him if he said that to me one more time I’d burn his surgery down, hahahaha! He thought I was serious, hahahaha! Anyway, guys, I gotta split... got things to take care of. Do me a fav and give my regards to Aunt Flo... she’s a sweetie. If she was a bit younger I’d ask her to be my biker chick.”

“Jeez!” Dickson cracked, “I can’t imagine Aunt Flo on the back of a Harley.”

“Don’t you believe it, mate. She’s got spunk, that one. I can tell.”

Paul arrived just after lunch on Saturday and joined Dickson and Mick for a ‘bitching’ surfing session. Paul was thrilled with his board’s repair job. “It looks like new again! I hope I’m as clever as you when I’m older. Actually, my mom said she wishes you were ten years older.”

Paul left for home mid afternoon, so the boys threw a leg over their respective Suzukis and headed for Aunt Flo’s villa. “Just in time for afternoon tea,” she beamed at the front door, and invited the lads inside. “I was just whipping up a batch of scones, so you must be psychic.”

Over tea and scones with strawberry jam and cream, Aunt Flo introduced the inevitable topic of conversation: “I hope you’re all geed up for tomorrow night, Dickson. It’s about time someone taught that Bedford clown a lesson he won’t forget. Actually, I’ve been thinking about your mental attitude... and there’s something I want you to do for me.”

“Sure, Aunt Flo. Anything for another scone.”

“I want you to think of your father. I realize you hardly knew him... you were only five years old... but I want you to imagine him being here. What advice do you think he would give you?”

“I know what you mean, Aunt Flo. He would want me to go into that studio with all guns blazing.”

“Exactly. However, your father wasn’t given to violence; actually, he was a quietly spoken man. But he had more inner strength and resolve than a thousand Bedfords. He never once spoke a harsh word to your mother. He didn’t have to. He was the kind of man who automatically commanded respect, without making a fuss about it. His strength was a quiet strength, but stronger than the strongest steel. You have your father’s eyes, Dickson; compassionate but not weak. Oh, no, definitely not weak. Remember that when you look at the studio camera... you have your father’s eyes, Dickson.”

“Thanks, Aunt Flo, I’ll keep that in mind... and thanks a stack for the advice.”

“And you, Mick,” the white-haired lady continued with a sparkle in her eye, “you’re Dickson’s best friend. I want you to take care of my boy when I’m not there. And if he tries to give you any lip, send him a solid bunch of fives right to the kisser.”

Late Sunday afternoon, Maaka Te Tikiwawa visited the beach house. “I was gonna call you,” he

explained, “but I decided it was better to wish you good luck in person... good luck for tonight, that is.”

“Thanks, mate, I appreciate it. How’s Reg?”

“He’s fine. He’s driving to Brisbane tonight, so he asked me to wish you luck from him as well.”

“Any luck with the bank?”

“No, and Reg is really pissed off. They haven’t contacted him about the closed account... nothing, not a word. He says it could happen to anyone, even you. He says if you ever do get the proceeds of Fink’s will, and four million bucks is transferred to your account, the bank could consider it suspicious, close the account and not explain a damn thing. He says it’s outrageous.”

“Has he written to anyone... complained to the local member?”

“He says it’s pointless. Anyway, how do you feel about tonight? You look pretty relaxed. Reg asked me to record the program so he can watch it when he gets back home.”

“Yeah, I’m okay, I guess, but I’ll be glad when it’s over.”

“Maybe Bedford will too!” Maaka’s laugh revealed a sparkling row of perfect pearlys that matched the glint in his chocolate eyes.

It had been a hot day, but the lights in Simon Swan’s studio were even hotter. “I hope you’re not nervous,” Gloria Barnsdale said as she applied makeup to Dickson’s face. “We don’t want you perspiring, do we?”

“It’s hot in here.”

Following Dickson’s remark, Simon walked over to the air conditioning control panel and made an adjustment. “That should fix it,” he said, then returned to his camera. “It’s almost 7:30... everyone ready?”

Once Bedford had completed the Focus program’s standard introduction and welcomed his

guest, he launched into his questioning: “Do you really think I’m a bastard, Dickson?”

“That was an impulsive comment. I hadn’t thought about it.”

“You haven’t answered my question.”

“Let’s just say you’re not on my Christmas card list.”

“Was Horace Fink a bastard?”

“Yes.”

“Did you hate him?”

“I don’t hate anyone.”

“You’re aware that Ian Ajit volunteered to undergo the polygraph test?”

“Yes, he told us so himself the night before the newspaper headline.”

“You’re friends?”

“We’re not enemies.”

“Are you also aware that Barbara Thorne, Tony Spiropoulos, Clive Farrell and Robert Down agreed to undergo the polygraph test?”

“So that’s why he was in town?”

“Who?”

“Bob Down.”

“It appears that the list of suspects has been significantly diminished, Dickson. Does that concern you?”

“No.”

“Not at all?”

“Not at all.”

“Why not?”

“Because, according to my lawyer Abraham Goldstein, the polygraph test is not proven to be 100% accurate and is also not admissible as evidence in a New South Wales court of law.”

“You’re saying that any of those people who underwent the polygraph test could have lied and not been detected?”

“No, that’s not what I’m saying. That’s what other people – experts in their fields – have said. I’m simply repeating what they have already stated.”

“Do you have an opinion as to who shot Horace Fink?”

“Would it make any difference if I did?”

“You don’t have an opinion... a suspicion, a hunch?”

“I don’t see the point.”

“If, as you say, the results of a polygraph test are inadmissible as evidence in a New South Wales court of law, what’s the problem? Why not take the test?”

“My lawyer advises otherwise.”

“If you took the test, wouldn’t your life be that much easier?”

“Possibly. But even if I did take the test, I’d still have to contend with your biased attempts to smear my reputation.”

“I resent that allegation.”

“That’s your prerogative, Ed. I’m not too thrilled about your allegations either.”

Bedford became visibly flushed as his eyebrows narrowed. “I’ll tell you what my allegation is, Dickson Bottoms,” he growled as his finger jabbed the desk top. “You did it. You shot Horace Fink. What’s more, you’re too much of a coward to admit your guilt and, as a consequence, you’re causing unfair and unjust suffering to all those innocents who were present at the Spiropoulos honey shed that fateful night. You were in love with Doris Fink and you couldn’t stand Horace’s treatment of her, let alone her attachment to Tony Spiropoulos... or, for that matter, Cody Callaghan. Do

you think all I do is sit behind this desk? Ha! I've had investigators looking into your case, Mr. Bottoms, and I've done my own investigating as well. You're guilty as hell. Admit it!"

Calmly and with great composure, Dickson remembered what Aunt Flo had said about his father's eyes. He looked at the camera and said with a hint of a smile, "You just shot yourself in the foot, Ed. I imagine Abraham Goldstein right now is rubbing his hands together with glee at the prospect of a law suit."

Chapter 30

Simon Swan was the first to congratulate Dickson following the end of the live telecast. “I didn’t think you had it in you,” he admitted as he shook the blond’s hand. “That was one helluva performance, mate, congratulations.”

“Thanks. I’m shaking like a leaf... you got a scotch or something?”

“My pleasure.”

“I’ll get it,” Mick offered, and headed toward a group of bottles on top of the bar fridge.

“I agree with Simon,” Gloria beamed. “I’ve never ever seen anyone get Bedford so riled and flustered. You were awesome!”

Right away, Dickson’s phone rang. “You take the calls, mate,” he said to Mick who handed him a glass of scotch. “My head’s still spinning. Tell whoever it is I’ll call back later.”

“Whatever you do, don’t miss talk-back radio in the morning,” Swan continued, “you’ll be the talk of the nation. And listen, mate, I’m sorry if I offended you in the past. To be honest, I thought you were just some dumb kid smartass. Not now, though... not after tonight. What you did took real guts. People often go to pieces in front of a camera, particularly when they’re interviewed by someone like Bedford. You handled that pressure like a pro, mate.”

Dickson threw back the scotch in one gulp. “Don’t ask me how, Simon... it’s like a blur.”

“Kinda like riding a big wave,” Mick said between taking calls. “It’s not until afterwards that you start to realize just how big it was... and how scary as well! By the way, George from the pizza restaurant phoned; we’re invited to call in on the way home. He

says to leave the Suzukis here. His son is on the way here now to pick us up.”

“Sounds like we have no choice. I think I’ll have another scotch.”

The moment the boys entered George’s pizzeria they were met by a standing ovation, led enthusiastically by George himself, with much cheering and shouts of “bravo” by the patrons. Mick noticed the installation of a television mounted on a wall shelf which had not existed previously. After a minute or two, the shouts of “bravo” turned to shouts of “Speech! Speech!”

Dickson stood just a few feet from the doorway, somewhat overwhelmed and embarrassed, as he waited for the bedlam to subside, and then began: “Thank you, thank you, but I think all the applause should go to the wonderful friends I have, and the advice I’ve received lately, especially from my Aunt Flo. Trust me, I was scared stiff in front of that camera with Bedford firing his big canons. The only thing that saved me from annihilation was remembering the words of wisdom from my friends. I wish they were all here now to take a bow. They are the ones who deserve your cheers. I’d hate to think what would have happened tonight if it weren’t for them. And while I’m at it, I’d like to thank Mick here, my best mate, for his moral support. He doesn’t say all that much – probably because he rarely gets a word in edgewise - but he’s always there for me. Thank you again.”

Applause and cheers erupted once more as Dickson and Mick were led to a vacant table by George. “This one is reserved for you,” he explained, then snapped his fingers which immediately fetched a waitress. “Take a seat, my friends, and thank you so much for coming.” The host then turned his attention to the waitress. “Three Nastro Azzurro with the special

glasses, and a large Caesar salad with some Gnocchi, please.” The waitress disappeared. “I will make you a special pizza later. First, let me congratulate you on tonight’s performance. Ben fatto! Hai fatto un lavoro eccellente. Splendido! Bedford’s face was redder than a Roma tomato! Hahahaha!”

As the night progressed, with its feasting and drinking, several patrons couldn’t resist approaching the boys’ table to say a few words and to ask for an autograph. A few had small digital cameras and sought permission to be photographed with their hero.

It was almost midnight when the pair of newly crowned celebrities arrived home, a little worse for wear, and so stuffed with food that neither could contemplate even the smallest of midnight snacks.

“Thanks for what you said tonight, Dicko... about my being your loyal and best mate. You not only said it, you said it in front of all those people. I just want you to know that I’m totally chuffed. That means more to me than you’ll ever know.”

“Don’t get a swelled head, Mick. Come to think of it, don’t get a swelled anything.”

BEDFORD LOSES COOL was the headline next morning on the front page of the Mid Coast Standard. “My mom thought you were awesome,” Paul beamed at the back gate as Dickson scanned the first paragraph. “And so did I. Are you really gonna sue him?”

“I’ll leave that to the lawyer, Paul. I’ve had enough crap to last me quite a while.”

Mick was showering when Dickson returned to the house. He sat at the kitchen table to read the rest of the newspaper story before he began to prepare breakfast of bacon and eggs.

Mick, still towelling his black hair, stopped at the table to read the morning paper. “I made a list of the

people who called last night,” he said, “not that I needed to. Just phone everyone you know.”

“I’m boiling the eggs this morning – soft yolks so you can dip your toast.”

“I love that! Yum!”

“Did Abe call?”

“No, but you can bet he will.” Mick checked the wall clock: 7:10am. “You better not go surfing until later, mate. You’re gonna be a busy boy taking care of all your fans.”

“Fans?” Dickson laughed as he placed the fried bacon and toast on two plates, which he brought to the table. “The eggs are almost ready. You wanna make the coffee?”

“Sure thing.”

“Why do you call them fans?”

“What would you call them?”

“I dunno... supporters.”

“So what do you call supporters of a football team?”

The first people on the list of callers Dickson phoned were those who had to leave home early for work or school. Last but not least was Aunt Flo. “Did you take my advice?” was her first question.

“Yes, I did. Actually, Aunt Flo, I had a lot of advice from a lot of people, and it was difficult to remember it all, especially under all that pressure. But I did remember what you said about my dad’s eyes. It was weird... I didn’t quite understand how I should look like my dad would have looked, so I just did my own thing, if you know what I mean.”

“That’s all you needed to do, Dickson. I knew your father quite well, and last night on the television, you reminded me of him. Mind you, he was in his mid twenties when I met him, but not all that much older than you are now. Anyway, as I said, you have your

father's eyes, so you didn't need to 'do' anything different. I think it helped just to be aware of the resemblance during that interview, and to think of him. And you were wonderful, Dickson, absolutely wonderful. You have made me so very proud, as well as your father and mother in Heaven, I'm sure."

Later that afternoon, once the Suzukis had been delivered to the beach house on the back of a truck, Alan Fogarty joined the boys for a surfing session after school, as promised during an earlier phone call.

The session lasted until almost 6pm. After showering under the front yard hose, Foggy explained that he needed to be home in time for dinner with his folks. Dickson offered him a ride into Old Bar, from where the boy could hitch a ride.

At about 6:30, Dickson and Mick, as was their habit, grabbed a cold beer each and sat on the old canvas chairs on the front verandah to ponder the changing colors of the sky and the ocean as the sun made its way slowly toward the horizon behind them.

"What was Foggy on?" Mick asked. "Whatever it was, I want some."

"On? He was on a natural high," Mick. "Foggy doesn't do drugs."

"I've never seen him so happy."

"We had a bit of a chat out on the back line.

Listen, Mick, I wasn't gonna say anything about this, but you're my partner and best friend. What I'm about to tell you goes no further, agreed?"

"Agreed."

"Foggy shot Fink."

"What?"

"He felt guilty, not about shooting Fink but about not telling the cops. He felt guilty about me not being able to access the proceeds of Fink's will."

"Woohoo! You're a millionaire!"

“Not so fast, Mick. Fogsy wanted to tell me his secret before going to the police to confess. He figured he owed me at least that much after causing so much trouble over the past few months. His words, not mine.”

“Fair enough. The kid’s got guts.”

“I told him not to go anywhere near the cops.”

“You what?”

“He said he’d probably get 6 to 12 months in a juvenile detention center. Fink abused him, you know... badly... if anyone had good reason to kill Fink it was Fogsy. He said 6 months in a juvenile institution would be a piece of cake.”

“He’s right... he’ll be out in no time and you’ll be RICH! How cool is that?”

“Six months in jail – even a juvenile one – has the potential to ruin his life, Mick. He will always be the kid who shot Horace Fink. He will always be the bearer of The Fink Curse, so I told him not to confess. The kid didn’t plan to shoot Fink. It just happened. It was an impulsive thing, a spur of the moment decision. Fogsy is not a killer.”

“So, there you go... the court will understand all that and let him go Scott free.”

“Will they? Even if he gets a suspended sentence, he still carries that conviction for the rest of his life.”

“What are you saying, Dicko? What are you telling me? That you’re turning down the opportunity to collect over four million bucks! Have you completely lost it? Jesus Christ, mate, you’re crazy!”

“No, I’m not crazy, Mick. I don’t want any part of 20 pieces of silver to send a kid to jail. I couldn’t live with myself.”

“You’re forgetting something, Dicko. What about Fogsy’s conscience? Don’t you think he will carry that guilt all his life? He shot a man.”

“He shot a monster, not a man. Besides, it’s not Fink he feels guilty about, it’s me. He thinks he’s an asshole for depriving me of Fink’s fortune.”

“He’s right about that!”

“So I told him that even if he did confess to the shooting, I would not contest the will. In other words, Mick, he’s not depriving me of anything.”

For some minutes, the pair stared in silence at the panorama that stretched before them: the waves that ceaselessly rolled toward shore, a couple of joggers, flocks of bickering gulls; all oblivious to the drama that had just unfolded on the front verandah of an isolated beach house not 100 yards away from them.

*** *THE END* ***