



Dickson Bottoms
in...

**The
Inevitable
Murder
of
Horace
Fink**

Gary Kelly

...for Cody

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The Inevitable Murder of Horace Fink

**Revised edition
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Chapter 1

In bright mid-morning summer sunshine, Doris Fink drove her black Golf convertible along little more than a track toward a deserted patch of coastline some miles north of Old Bar. 'I'm lost', she thought as she stopped the car, brushed her long red hair aside and checked the map. A few meters further along stood a dilapidated timber cottage where she decided to ask directions.

The rear of the house backed onto the road, while the front faced the beach. On the lawn was parked a small motorbike. Doris knocked at the open back door and, while waiting for an answer, observed the rear porch with its assortment of roller blades, skateboards, sneakers that had seen better days, beach towels and various other surf-related paraphernalia. Directly ahead, at the end of the long central hall, was the open front door which revealed the surf. After calling 'hello' several times, Doris entered the house and emerged at the far end where she saw a young blond man, clad only in colorful knee-length shorts, exit the water and sprint up the beach, surfboard tucked under his muscular, tanned arm.

"G'day," he grinned as he arrived, breathless and dripping wet. "Back in a tick."

The surfer leaned his board against the outside wall, then disappeared down the hall to grab a towel with which he dried his shaggy locks. "What can I do for you?" he asked as he re-emerged through the door.

"I'm lost. I'm looking for a Mr. Dickson Bottoms."

"You're looking at him, pleased to meet you." He offered his hand to Doris, a well-preserved thirty-something, however her brief confusion caused her to respond hesitantly.

“You must be his son. I meant ... Mr. Bottoms ... senior, the private investigator. I phoned earlier and made an appoint to see him at his, uh, office.”

“Of course, you’re Doris Fink. Sorry I’m a tad late but the surf is rocking big time today. Can I get you a drink? Tea? Coffee?”

“Actually, I think I could do with something a little stronger. There must be some mistake. I was expecting—well, I certainly wasn’t expecting you, young man. You can’t be any older than 18.” And with that, Mrs. Fink bade the boy farewell, left the house, slid behind the wheel of the Golf and sped away. Five minutes later she was back. “I’ve changed my mind,” she explained at the back door.

“That’s a woman’s prerogative,” Dickson smiled, and flashed a perfect set of pearlyies.

“I see you pronounce ‘prerogative’ correctly. I’m impressed.”

“Honors in English. Tea or coffee...or something a little stronger?”

“Tea’s fine...black with a slice of lemon.”

“What made you change your mind?” Dickson asked as Doris followed his muscular V-shaped back to the kitchen—a rustic relic of the 1950s.

“You don’t look like a private investigator, and I think that could very well be an advantage, given the circumstances of the case. However, I am concerned about your ... youthful lack of experience. Have you solved many cases?”

“Let’s go to my office—the front verandah, it’s much nicer out there.”

The pair sat on rickety old canvas chairs, sipped tea, and spent a contemplative minute or two admiring the vast expanse of beach with its assortment of sea birds, and rolling waves crashing and foaming their way to shore. Only a handful of people dotted the sand,

and about the same number of surfers caught rides.
“This old place must be worth a fortune,” Doris declared.

“It was my grandmother’s—she left it to me, her favorite grandson—actually, her only grandson.”

“And your parents?”

“Both shot and killed by thieves during a bungled robbery when I was five—my gran raised me.”

“I’m sorry.”

“How many cases have I solved? To be honest, none, you’re my first client. Well, my second—Aunt Flo, my gran’s younger sister, hired me to find her wedding ring. She lost it a while back. Her memory is failing so she probably forgot where she put it.”

“What kind of training have you undergone?”

“Reading; I love crime novels and whodunits, fiction and non-fiction. I’m intuitive, observant, analytical, a good judge of character, a touch cynical... and modest. My gran always said I’d make a great detective.”

“Were the thieves who murdered your folks jailed?”

“They were never found.”

“Why not join the police force?”

“Nah, too many rules and regs, too many bosses, too much bureaucratic bullshit. I prefer my independence.”

“But you have no qualifications.”

“Who says?” Dickson noticed his guest’s cup was empty. “More tea?”

“Let’s get down to business, first.” Doris opened her bag and produced an envelope. “This is a list of suspects... addresses, routines, personal information, habits, associates, etcetera.”

“Suspected of...?”

“Murdering my husband, Horace Fink.”

“Whoa! Wait a minute, Mrs. Fink. Hang on to your horses. Murder? This is a job for the cops! Or are the cops already on the case?”

“There is no case—yet. I believe that my husband’s murder is inevitable; he has many enemies who would like to see him ... removed. Your job, Mr. Bottoms, is to get to the bottom...sorry...investigate the suspects, discreetly of course—I don’t want my husband to know about this—and narrow the list down to one. When my husband is eventually murdered, we’ll know who the culprit is. And now, your fee?”

“Fee? Oh, yes, fee. Uh, well, I figured maybe \$50 an hour...”

“\$30.”

“Plus expenses.”

“\$30, inclusive of expenses.” She produced a second envelope. “There’s \$1000 in there, Mr. Bottoms; that should take care of things for a while. By the way,” Doris smiled knowingly, “how much are you charging Aunt Flo?”

Dickson watched the black Golf disappear down the road in a cloud of dust, then he set about studying the list of suspects. He knew none of them. How was he supposed to investigate total strangers? He re-read the list and, this time, paid closer attention to the detailed accounts of occupations, addresses, routines, habits and photographs.

The familiar sound of a motorbike at the rear of the house interrupted Dickson’s concentration. A few seconds later, following the bike’s motor shut-down, a young man breezed inside the house and greeted his mate with a hi-five. “How ya goin’, Dicko? Surf’s up.”

“I wish, but I’m on a job, Mick.”

“You should call me Micko, then we could be Micko and Dicko. Whoa! Check out the cash, man. You win a bet or something?”

“It’s an advance on my fee from my client.”

“Client?”

“A good looking woman. You know any of the people on this list?”

Mick scanned the pages. “Yeah, a couple. They belong to my dad’s golf club.”

“Let’s go meet your dad.”

“My dad? I meet him every damn day, man! Besides, he’s out of town for a while on business. What’s this all about, Dicko?”

Dickson informed his black-haired, brown-eyed mate of what little he knew about the case, which Mick Morris nonetheless found intriguing to say the least. In fact, he suggested that Dickson could do with a partner. “Where would Sherlock have been without Watson? Or Steve McGarrett without Dano?”

“I can’t afford a partner.”

“You can’t afford *not* to have a partner, mate. Besides, what about all that loot on the table? Tell you what, I’ll work for \$20 an hour.”

“\$10.”

“Plus expenses.”

\$10, inclusive of expenses.”

“Hey, this Doris chick sounds like a real hottie. Are you... ?”

“She’s a client, mate. No hanky panky. She’s expects professionalism, and I won’t disappoint her.”

“You’re a dud lay, anyway,” Mick laughed.

The two strapping surfers grabbed a cold beer each and sat on the front verandah to discuss tactics. They agreed that their first priority was to elicit more information from Doris in relation to her husband. After all, the better they understood him, as well as her, the better equipped they would be to extract relevant information from the ‘suspects’.

“You’re right,” Dickson concluded, “two heads are better than one.”

“As long as it’s not in the groin department. One would get in the way.”

“Think positive, mate. You could get two simultaneous BJs.”

Dickson ignored Mick’s giggling to answer a call on his cell phone. It was Aunt Flo; she wanted to know when the super sleuth would visit again to search for the missing ring. “C’mon, Mick,” Dickson ordered as he ended the call, “we got a job to do.”

“But the surf’s up!”

“Later.”

The boys threw a naked leg over their respective Suzuki saddles and rode the short distance to Flo’s house, a small villa unit closer to town. Following introductions, and the obligatory fresh scones, cream and jam, the boys did a room-by-room search, despite the failure of Dickson’s previous attempts.

“God knows what the neighbors think,” Flo smiled, “two half naked boys arriving here on motor bikes. Don’t you own a shirt?”

“Don’t worry about it, Aunt Flo; it’s good for your rep as the town siren.”

Florence Flannigan was well into her 80s, but quite spritely and independent. She wore her white hair in a bun and always dressed in smart clothes that befitted her natural dignity. “Siren? Those days are well and truly over,” she laughed. “But I suppose it gives the neighbors something to gossip about.”

After a thorough search, the ring was not to be found, and everyone agreed to postpone the investigation for another day. “You must stay for lunch,” Flo insisted. Over sandwiches and tea, the group discussed various scenarios as to where the missing wedding ring could possibly be. The

conversation eventually included the Horace Fink case and, as it happened, Flo was familiar with many of the 'suspects', or at least had some knowledge of them through friends of friends. Old Flo had lived in the Manning Valley district all her life, and was very well known.

By mid afternoon, Dickson and Mick had returned to the old house. There, they took advantage of an off-shore breeze and enjoyed two hours of ideal surfing conditions.

Shortly after 5pm, Dickson called Doris Fink's cell phone number. She had instructed him previously not to call the home phone in case it was answered by Horace. They arranged to meet again the next day at Dickson's 'office'.

Chapter 2

Doris Fink noticed a second motor bike parked on the rear lawn of the old beach shack...in fact, it was the only lawn, the front yard was beach sand. This time, she didn't bother to knock. Rather, she marched through the house to the front verandah. Sure enough, two surfers, both clad in board shorts, and carrying surfboards, trotted up the beach to greet her with their youthful and endearing smiles.

Dickson took care of introductions: "Doris Fink, this is my partner, Mick Morris."

"Partner? You mean...?"

"Business partner."

"I see. You never know these days," Doris smiled and cocked an eyebrow. "I must say, I'm a little concerned about this—uh, case—becoming public knowledge. I hope you young men understand the meaning of professional discretion."

"I like your perfume, Mrs. Fink. What is it?"

"Call me Doris, Mick. It's actually a concoction my husband made in the hope of selling it to commercial interests. He's full of ideas, most of which don't seem to work. However, I admit, I do like the perfume."

"Black with lemon?" Dickson asked.

"Do you have sherry?"

"Cooking sherry."

"That'll be fine. Do you cook?"

"Love it." Dickson disappeared into the kitchen buoyed by the idea that, if Doris wanted a sherry, then the guys could enjoy a beer. He returned to the front verandah and distributed the drinks.

"You don't look like a private investigator and you don't look like a cook," Doris smiled as she sat on the canvas chair. "So what's this meeting all about?"

You want to know more about my husband? It's very simple. Pardon the French, but he's an asshole... a selfish, self-centered, egotistical asshole who thinks the entire world revolves around him."

"Why not leave him?" Mick asked.

"He's rich."

"Okay, okay, I see... fair enough."

"My husband won a large amount in a lottery some years ago—5 million dollars—most of which he invested in blue ribbon stocks. We live on the proceeds, which is more than adequate for our needs. But nobody, not friends, relatives or whoever else, got a single cent. I am the sole beneficiary of his will. I never mention it, though. I worry that he might change his mind. I think he's so self-absorbed that he's forgotten about it, and I don't want to remind him."

"Do you get along okay?" Dickson inquired.

"Just fine, but only because I'm the palm tree in a hurricane. Besides, he's away on business much of the time... don't ask me what business, I have no idea and I don't ask."

"Doesn't he mention it when he's home?"

"Vaguely; his references are confined to 'it went well' or whatever."

"You mentioned enemies."

"Oh, there's no shortage of those, my dear.

Most are peeved that he's a skinflint. Before the lottery win they were all good friends, and he was inclined to be sycophantic. After the lottery windfall, he changed completely. He no longer has any friends, at least none that I'm aware of. There's also Serge Vodkinski..."

"Sir gay?"

"That's how 'Serge' is pronounced in his native Ukraine. He was madly in love with me when I was single—make that impossibly infatuated—he still is, and went into a jealous rage when I married Horace."

“Did you marry Horace before or after the lottery win?”

“Before. He charmed me, treated me like a princess and showered me with gifts and attention. He was every girl’s dream, and good looking.”

“And now?”

“The money changed him completely. As they say, power corrupts. He no longer needs people.”

“Including you?”

“No. I’m the only friend he has left, or thinks he has.”

“Do you hate him?”

“I’m not sure hate is the correct word; intense dislike perhaps.”

“How do you stand living with someone you can’t abide?”

“With some difficulty. If it weren’t for his regular jaunts interstate or overseas, I don’t think I could stand it. But I have the security of the house, a regular income, a nice car, money to spend, friends, interests... I get by.”

“A lover?”

“A good friend, Tony. He lives on a small farm outside of Taree. It’s a hobby farm, but he makes a living selling honey locally. He’s an apiarist... a bee keeper. I never visit the farm, though. We keep a low profile.”

“Is he married?”

“Separated but not divorced.”

“Please don’t take this the wrong way, Doris,” Mick interrupted, “but if one were to be impartial, even cynical, one might assume that you are also a suspect in the inevitable murder of Horace Fink.”

The redhead laughed for some seconds. “Me? I have no intention of spending the rest of my life in prison, dear boy. No, I’m not a suspect.”

“May I ask a risky question and, once again, I don’t want to offend you. Would you be happy to see your husband murdered?”

“Let’s put it this way, I’d order a crate of Dom Perignon. Speaking of which, may I have another sherry? I’m rather enjoying the view... and you two hunks can take that any way you like.”

Sherry replenished, the discussion continued. Dickson asked his client if she suspected any particular person more than the others on the list. “I don’t want to influence your thinking,” she replied. “You need to start from scratch and make your own judgements. My feeling is that all of those people on the list are more than capable of doing the deed, and with good reason.”

“Are they friends of yours?”

“Apart from Tony Spiropoulos, no.

Occasionally, some ‘associates’, if I may call them that, visit the house for whatever reason, certainly not to see me, and at times I might see them at the supermarket or in town somewhere. I know them well enough to say hello but that’s it.”

“What about Serge Vodkinski? Does he visit the house?”

“No—Horace hates him. I’ve also made it plain to Serge that he’s not welcome at any time, whether Horace is there or not.”

“Does Serge phone you or harass you?”

“No, at least not any more. He did for a while after Horace and I married.”

“Is Serge married?”

“Yes... unhappily I might add. I think he married her out of spite, hoping to make me jealous. But the poor fellow bit off more than he could chew. He insists he wears the pants, but she’s the one who tells him which ones to wear.”

All three dissolved into laughter for some seconds before Dickson asked Doris if she had any thoughts about how the super sleuths might go about meeting the ‘suspects’, all of whom were strangers. “That’s your job,” she said matter-of-factly. “That’s why I pay you. Observant, analytical, intelligent—isn’t that how you described yourself?”

“Another sherry?”

“No thank you, I need to drive home... which reminds me, my house is out of bounds for meetings such as this. However, Horace will be in New Zealand for a month starting next week. If you need to see me, phone first. And be careful of nosey neighbors. Enter via the house next door, number 41, mine’s 39, and hop the fence like Cody does.”

“Cody?”

“Cody Callaghan, he’s my gardener, a year or two younger than you. People will think you’re visiting him as surfer mates or something. I’ll warn him of your possible arrival. Actually, you can phone him yourself.” Doris took a small notepad from her bag, jotted down the name and number of her gardener, tore out the page and handed it to Dickson. “He’s a very nice boy, but be warned, he’s... how shall I put it? Even less inhibited than you are. But remember, he’s not to know the purpose of your mission. Tell him I promised you a couple of jars of honey or whatever.”

At dusk, Dickson and Mick rode their Suzukis to the banks of the Manning River, a mile or two upstream from the twin mouths at Old Bar. They slowed as they neared a lone middle-age fisherman, parked their bikes a few meters away and chose a grassy spot where they unpacked their fishing gear.

“You won’t do any good down there,” called the fisherman.

“What’s biting?”

“Bream, mullet, an occasional flathead.”

“You doing okay?”

“Just arrived. But I usually get enough for a feed. Name’s Ian, Ian Ajit.” The man spelled his last name and explained that it was Indian. “My father’s Indian and my mother’s English.” The boys introduced themselves, then cast their rods into the river. Mick’s hook snagged on the tail of Dickson’s T-shirt, which caused Ian to burst into laughter. “You boys are pretty new at this game, I see.” He wedged the handle of his rod between two rocks, and offered to teach the boys how to cast.

“The rods belonged to my dad,” Dickson said after a few lessons. “This is the first time I’ve used them. My dad was a keen fisherman—I still have a lot of his trophies.”

“What was his first name?”

“Dickson, same as mine. He said he wanted me to suffer as much as he did.” The blond’s attention was suddenly diverted by a tug on his line. “Hey, I think I got something. What do I do, what do I do?”

“Reel it in slowly, then pause. Lift the rod, reel in some more and pause again. You don’t want the line to break. When you feel the fish tire, reel in again. That’s it—you’re doing just fine, mate.”

“Oh, shit!” Dickson exclaimed as the fish broke the surface with a large splash. “It’s huge!”

“Easy now, easy now, easy does it. You don’t want to lose this fella. Looks like a flathead. Gotta be 5 pounds if it’s an ounce.”

Some seconds later, the out-of-water fish dangled from the end of the rod. “What do I do now?”

“Get it off the hook.”

“You mean touch it? You’re kidding! What if it bites?”

“Let me show you.” The fisherman took hold of the fish’s head as he explained the danger of sharp spikes that could cause a nasty wound to the unwary.

“You got a bucket?”

“Bucket? Uh... Did you bring a bucket, Mick?”

“I didn’t think we’d catch anything.”

“Right, no bucket. Maybe we should throw it back. I heard about this catch and release thing.”

“Throw it back? Are you daft?” the fisherman gasped in horror. “That’s a prize fish, mate. You got a cleaning and scaling knife?”

“Mick?”

“Sorry.”

“You live around here?” Ian asked.

“A few miles up the road... not far.”

“Tell you what, you invite me to dinner and I’ll clean and scale the fish, filet it, and cook it. There’s plenty there for the three of us, plus leftovers. Besides, my wife and kids are at a church function all night. Deal?”

“Deal.”

Chapter 3

“Is this a kitchen or a museum?” Ian asked as the trio entered the room. “I like it, though, very much—it has a rustic homeliness and friendliness about it. In fact, I love the whole house, especially its situation right on the beach. You’re a very lucky bloke, Dickson. Ah! I see you have bananas—good. Nutmeg?”

“Yep.”

“Mozzarella?”

“Mick?”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, I bet Watson didn’t have to run errands like this.”

“It’ll only take you a few minutes... the market’s still open.”

“And flatleaf parsley,” Ian added as he adjusted the oven temperature to 350 F. “Just a small bunch.” Once Mick had left the house, Ian asked Dickson what his friend meant by his reference to Watson.

“Just a private joke. You had to be there.”

The fisherman used his own filleting knife, taking care to cut the flesh from around the bones that surround the gill flaps and stomach cavity. “They’re called pin bones, and we need to get rid of those. Do you have a pair of tweezers?”

Dickson returned in a flash with the requested implement. “You’re not religious?”

“Why do you say that?”

“Your wife and kids... going to church while you fish.”

“She’s very religious. She turned to God for solace when I left her for a younger woman. It’s over now, I mean with the younger woman. But my wife remains glued to the church. And now, my friend, now we skin the filets. Do you have any chilled Riesling?”

Unfortunately for Mick, he arrived at that precise moment with the mozzarella and parsley.

“Mick? Can you get a bottle of...?”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, I heard.” A few seconds later, the Suzuki revved into life and took off noticeably faster than previously.

Once the filets were skinned, Ian patted them dry, then seasoned them lightly with salt and pepper. He set them aside on a greased baking dish. Next, he sliced the bananas diagonally and placed the fruit pieces over the fish as Dickson looked on, taking mental notes. The guest then added a light sprinkle of ground nutmeg followed by a generous cover of grated mozzarella.

“And now into the oven until the cheese melts and is slightly golden.”

“Is that it?”

“Not quite, I’ll just whip up a quick salad and chop the parsley. What do you have in the fridge?”

Twenty minutes later the trio was seated at the kitchen table, enjoying the sumptuous dish, caught fresh not an hour beforehand. Dickson served the Riesling in ordinary glass tumblers. “All Gran’s crystal is packed away, I’m afraid.”

Ian Ajit was mid forties, balding, olive-skinned and equipped with a prominent nose. “It means he who is yet to be conquered,” he said in reference to his last name. “But I doubt it now that I’ve returned to my wife. Women! Stay clear of them, boys. By the way, do you guys share this house?”

“I live at home with my folks,” Mick explained, “even though I spend quite a bit of time here with my best mate.”

“Best mate?” Dickson smiled. “You never mentioned that before.”

“Slip of the tongue. Blame the Riesling.”

Uppermost in the minds of the teens was how on earth they could manage to steer the conversation around to the subject of Horace Fink.

“It’s obvious that you two young fellas get along very well together,” Ian mused. “I had such a friend once, but no more. I hope you blokes never experience a loss like that.”

“Who was he?” Dickson asked casually, as if making polite conversation as he polished off the remaining morsel of flathead.

“Horace Fink.” The boys almost choked on their food. “Do you know him?”

With some difficulty, Dickson remained calm and collected. “Yeah, I’ve heard of him. He’s rich.”

“We were close fishing mates before he won the lottery, and that was it. He treats me like shit now. That hurts—I can’t even begin to tell you how much that hurts—best mates and now enemies. Actually, he treats everyone like shit.”

“Enemies?”

“When I left my wife, she was gracious enough to accept me back, but not Horace. I tried a few times to reignite the friendship but he brushed me aside like I didn’t exist. Stay away from women and don’t buy lottery tickets, guys, that’s my advice.”

“My gran always advised me not to waste my energy and time on hate.”

“Sounds to me like she never met a Horace Fink.”

“Do you know of anyone else who carries a similar grudge?” Mick asked as discreetly as possible.

“The list would be a helluva lot shorter if you asked me who likes the mongrel.”

“I see. How does he cope with being so disliked?”

“He uses his money as a buffer. The people with whom he associates these days are all newbies, people who are attracted to his wealth and power. However, they soon realize, much to their chagrin, that they’ll never get their sticky fingers on either.”

“From what you tell us,” Dickson interrupted, “it’s a wonder the bloke hasn’t been bumped off.”

“It’s only a matter of time, mate.”

“Would you do it?” Dickson asked as Mick cringed at the directness of his partner’s question.

“Don’t ask” Ian shrugged. “Anyway, enough of that asshole. Let’s not spoil the evening which, I might add, I’m enjoying immensely as well as the company. So tell me about yourselves—what do you do for a crust?”

“Crust?” The boys glanced at each other. “Uh, well, we kinda work around the ‘hood, you know—odd jobs, that kinda thing.”

“Jacks of all trades, huh?”

“It gives us time to surf.”

“Any permanent plans for the future?”

“Mick and I are business partners—whatever jobs I can’t do he can do and vice versa. We get by okay.”

“You got a business name?”

“Dicko and Micko,” Mick laughed. “Cute, huh?”

After washing the dishes and cleaning the kitchen, the trio retired to the front verandah where they continued the conversation over a beer each. The rising full moon, barely above the horizon, bathed the ocean in shimmering silver, and illuminated the few streaky clouds that hovered above. Closer to shore, the phosphorescence of the scampering foam added to the romantic magic of the warm night with its gentle sea breeze.

“This is paradise,” the fisherman commented. “You guys are blessed. And I don’t just mean by this location, but also blessed by your friendship. I envy you guys, you know that? I’m married, have a delightful family—a lovely daughter and a wonderful son—own a nice house, car, all the usual trappings, but you guys have something money simply cannot buy. Maybe you should invite Fink here one day; it might influence him to see the error of his ways.” Ian took a swig from his can of VB and continued. “There’s something very special about Aussie mateship, you know. Don’t ask me what exactly, I think it’s impossible to describe in words. I’ve traveled the world a few times. Sure, there are buddies and friends and whatever else, but mateship is different somehow. From what I’ve read, the tradition began during the First World War and the diggers at Gallipoli. They formed inseparable lifelong bonds, and would clearly sacrifice their lives for their mates. A greater love hath no man...”

“Is that what you had with Horace Fink?”

“Yes.” Ian checked his watch. “Oops! Must be off home, my wife and kids will be wondering where I am. I’ve thoroughly enjoyed tonight, guys, and I hope it’s not the last time I visit. Next time, I’ll hook a six-pounder and prove to you young whippersnappers that tonight was just beginner’s luck.”

As the headlight beam of the visitor’s car vanished into the night, the boys returned to the house. “Did you notice his eyes?” Mick asked.

“Green.”

“Not just green, mate, neon green. I noticed them become incredibly intense, like smouldering green fire, when he first mentioned Horace Fink. He seems like a nice enough bloke, actually a pretty good bloke, but I reckon there’s a lot of hatred deep inside that guy.”

“Hell hath no fury like a fisherman scorned, huh?”

“You feel like a coffee before I head home? I’ll make it.”

“You can sleep over if you want.”

“Nah, better not—my folks are expecting me home. You know, they freak easily—it’s the teenage son thing, and all the bad publicity teens get in the news headlines and whatever.”

“They worry about you because they love you.”

“Yeah, I know, but I’m not exactly still wearing nappies, I’m going on 19. I wipe my own butt these days.”

“Really? Well, you learn something new every day. Anyway, you don’t remember the nappies, Mick, but your mom does, just like it was yesterday. To her, it’s like the years have vanished into thin air.”

Steaming mugs of coffees in hand, the boys headed for the ‘office’ where they discussed the night’s proceedings. “What’s your honest assessment of Mr. Ajit?” Dickson asked.

“He seems like an okay guy.”

“You haven’t answered my question.”

Mick pursed his lips, blew air over the surface of the steaming coffee, then took a sip. “The word sinister comes to mind. I’m no shrink, mate, but I sensed something sneaky about that guy, especially after his eyes went all weird and fiery. It’s kinda like he tries too hard to be pleasant. Know what I mean?”

“Yeah, I got the same feeling... sort of, as though he’s hiding something.”

“I liked what he said about mateship, though. I thought that was cool. Do you reckon he’s totally pissed off with Fink for dumping him like that?”

“He was happy to do that to his own wife.”

“Yeah—double standards, huh?”

“Do you like him?”

“He’s likeable, but... I don’t think I could trust him. Don’t ask me why, exactly, it’s something about his smile—like an Indian carpet salesman or a snake charmer.”

“A person charmer.”

“Yeah, a person charmer; Mr. Silver Tongue. You got it, Sherlock.”

“I need to write a report for Doris. You wanna hang here for a while?”

“I’ll make more coffee. Woohoo! This is exciting, Dicko! I wanna be a private dick all my life!” Mick’s comment surprised even himself. “Hey! Did you hear what I just said! Private dick! Hahahaha!”

Chapter 4

Doris Fink insisted that Dickson's report not be sent by email or any means other than hand-delivered. Security and privacy were the main issues. She suggested that the boys arrange to meet Cody Callaghan, her neighbor, who would deliver the envelope when 'the coast was clear'. "And," she added, "print the report on plain paper—no letterhead, no signatures, nothing that might implicate you in the case. Oh, and turn up in your regular beach 'uniform' so as not to encourage any local gossipers."

Just after school hours, the two Suzukis came to rest outside No. 41. "Don't even glance at No. 39," Dickson ordered as the pair alighted from their chariots and then proceeded down the path to the front door, which was answered by a mop of black spiky hair wearing a towel around its waist. "G'day, guys," the mop grinned just before the towel unexpectedly unravelled and dropped to the floor. The teen retrieved it, tossed it over his shoulder, and invited the visitors to follow him to the rear kitchen. "I'm just making some toasted peanut butter sangers. You want some?"

"Thanks all the same, but we're not hungry."

"Juice?"

"Cool."

"I'm Cody Callaghan," the host said, tossing the towel over a nearby stool and then pouring three juices. "You must be the guys Doris told me about—Dickson and Mick. Right? You're surfers by the look of it. So what's this all about?"

"What did Doris tell you?"

"Not much, just that you guys were gonna deliver an envelope. But she's home right now, so..."

“No, we can’t do that,” Dickson interrupted as he reached for the envelope in the back pocket of his board shorts.

Cody read the wording on the front. “Strictly confidential—but it doesn’t have a name on it.”

“Doesn’t need one, right?”

“Guess so. Are you guys going for a wave? You’re not exactly dressed for the Prom. Actually, I wouldn’t mind going to the Prom naked but I reckon I’d raise a few too many eyebrows.”

“And that’s not all,” Mick laughed. “Last time I saw something like that was at a dressage meet.”

“Huh?”

As the conversation continued, and the fruit juices disappeared, Cody discovered that Dickson owned the old beach house just north of Old Bar. “I know that place,” he enthused, “yeah, that is so cool, man. I’d kill for a place of my own like that. Wow, that seriously rocks big time! I don’t suppose...”

Cody threw a leg over the pillion seat of Dickson’s Suzuki and adjusted his surfboard under his arm so that it didn’t interfere with the bike’s steering, before the trio headed for the beach house.

Following quite a number of ‘Oh, man, this is soooooo cools’ from the mop of spiky black hair, the boys sprinted down the sand and into the blue Pacific where they enjoyed two hours of ‘bitching’ surf.

“I’m impressed with your airs and floaters,” Dickson remarked as the lads headed back to the house. “You sure know how to handle that stick.”

“Thanks, I thought you guys were pretty cool as well.”

“How about a Coke before I take you back home?”

All three took turns to shower under the front-yard hose, then sipped their chilled colas on the

verandah. Dickson's patient endeavor to subtly steer the conversation around to the Finks eventually proved successful.

"Doris is totally cool. I know she peeks through the Venetians when I skinny dip in her pool," Cody laughed. "Maybe Horace does too."

"What's he like?"

"Hard to say, he's away a lot of the time on business. My dad doesn't like him—says he's totally stuck up. They used to be good mates."

"What happened?"

"They say it was the lottery win."

"They?"

"Some of my dad's mates who used to be mates of Horace, and some other peeps I do odd jobs for around the 'hood."

"And what do you think?"

Cody shrugged. "I really don't know the bloke so I guess I don't think much at all, except..."

"Except?"

"If he did anything to hurt Doris I'd kill him."

"Literally?"

"From what I hear around the 'hood, I'd need to get in the damn queue."

"Have you ever spoken to him?"

"One time he asked why I wasn't embarrassed to swim naked, so I asked him what there was to be embarrassed about. He said, 'If you were me, you wouldn't ask that question'."

"What did he mean by that?"

"Not sure, maybe he's got a little willie or something. In any case, I reckon there's something that bothers him, like a compy or whatever."

"Compy?"

"Complex. I guess he figures his money compensates for that—he's always on about

possessions and that kinda shit. His pool is like something outta Hollywood.”

“Is that the only conversation you’ve had with him?”

“Why the interest in Horace? Does it have something to do with that letter you gave me?”

“Just curious.”

“I get the feeling that Horace likes me, not that he says so or anything. It’s just a feeling—you know—like when you really like someone but you can’t find the words to express it, or you’re afraid they’ll take it the wrong way or whatever.”

Cody’s comment had a noticeable effect on his hosts, who glanced at each other momentarily in silent communication. “Anyway, guys,” he continued, “it’s been a wicked arvo, and thanks for the Coke, but I gotta hit the books. I’m still at school you know. I hope I get another invitation to rock over here. It’s just soooo damn cool! And so are you guys.”

As Cody was delivered to his house, he remembered the two jars of honey, which he gave to Dickson. “They’re from Doris... she knows a local bee farmer. It’s delicious!”

Shortly before dinner, Doris visited the Callaghan house to retrieve the envelope. She checked the seal and saw that it was unbroken. The Callaghans invited her to stay for supper but she declined. “Another time perhaps, Horace is due home any minute now.”

Later in the evening, Dickson answered his cell phone. The caller was Doris Fink. “Very interesting report,” she said. “It’s amazing what people will tell you that they daren’t tell me. By the way, did you give young Cody the third degree?”

“He said you peek at him through the Venetians when he skinny dips in your pool.”

After quite a long pause, Doris responded, obviously shocked and embarrassed. “Oh, my God! He did not, did he? Oh, my God! How can I face that boy again? Oh, my Goooooooooooood! This is so incredibly embarrassing!”

“Chill out, Doris. He thinks it’s funny. Besides, that young bloke has a lot going for him and I don’t blame anyone for noticing.”

“Peeking through the Venetians is not simply ‘noticing’, Dickson. It’s practically criminal!”

“Do you think if the shoe were on the other foot, and you were the one skinny dipping, that he wouldn’t also peek through the Venetians?”

Following a short interlude, Doris responded: “You’re quite right, Dickson, thank you very much,” she chuckled. “You’re a very insightful lad. Who’s next on your list?”

“Reverend Samuels, but I hardly think that a man of the cloth is capable of murder.”

“Perhaps not, however, he might be able to provide valuable information in relation to others on the list.”

“Good point.”

Dickson and Mick arrived at Our Lady of the Rosary church, Taree, just as the Rev. Tom Samuels delivered the end of his booming Sunday morning sermon:

And I say to you, brethren, if there be any among you who has given scandal, I will endeavor this day to convince him of the evil he has done, that he may bewail it, and guard against it for the future. I will show, in the first point, the great displeasure the sin of scandal gives to God; and in the second, the punishment which God threatens to inflict on the authors of scandal!

“Bloody hell,” Mick whispered as the boys took a pew at the rear of the grand church, “he must’ve gotten a sign from Heaven that we were coming.”

The boys also quickly realized that board shorts, flip-flops and T-shirts emblazoned with surfing graphics were not generally suitable attire for Sunday Mass.

“Good morning my dear chaps,” the rotund Samuels beamed—with cheeks as shiny as his bald dome—at the front steps of the church after the service. “I don’t remember seeing you here before. Are you new to the parish?”

“Uh, no, not really. We heard about your sermons mister, uh, Reverend . . . sir.”

“Yeah,” Mick agreed, “and all that fire and brimstone stuff. Pretty impressive, I reckon—enough to make a bloke shake in his boots.”

“Boots?” Samuels asked as he studied the boys’ footwear.

“Figuratively speaking, heh.”

“At least your nails are clean . . . must be all that surfing. I’ve never surfed. I’m sure if I turned up at the beach, the environmentalists would roll me out to sea.” Following a moment of awkwardness, the Reverend added, “Don’t look so serious, my dear chaps, I’m not *all* fire and brimstone you know. Besides, I rather enjoy all that pulpit melodrama. It allows my thespian side to terrorize the congregation. Now what can I do for you?”

“Do? Oh, yes . . . do. Uh, well we’re kinda curious about that scandal thingy in the sermon. You said you would endeavor this day to . . .”

“Are you guilty of the sin of scandal?”

Mick and Dickson momentarily searched each other’s eyes. “That, Reverend, is what we’d like to find out.”

“Let’s have a cup of tea in the presbytery. Do you like English Parlor Royal blend? And call me Tom—I’m only referred to as the Reverend Samuels when I bellow.”

Chapter 5

“Always warm the pot first,” Tom explained as he poured boiling water into the ornate silver receptacle, then rinsed it clean. Next, he spooned in careful measures of loose tea: “One for each cup and one for the pot.”

“Isn’t it easier to use tea bags?” Dickson inquired as he noticed a jar of Spiropoulos honey on the kitchen shelf.

“Wash your mouth out with soap, my son. There is only one proper way to serve tea. By the way, the porcelain service was donated by a dearly departed parishioner. It’s worth a fortune.” Once tea was served, the group arranged themselves at the table. “Now, tell me what it is that troubles you boys.”

“We’ve heard a lot of unkind gossip about a certain person, and we’re wondering if that constitutes scandal.”

“Do you repeat the gossip?”

“Well, yes ... sort of.”

“Who is the person about whom the gossip is being spread?”

“If we tell you, won’t that be scandal?”

“I’m a priest, a servant of the Lord.”

“His name is Horace Fink.”

“Husband of Doris Fink? She’s normally at the 8am service but she attended the 7am service today for some reason. Anyway, it’s no surprise that scandalous gossip about Horace has reached your innocent ears. It’s all over town. It’s not as if Doris is unaware of it, so I don’t think you boys are guilty of ‘initiating’ scandal. Whatever you’ve heard is most likely common knowledge. However, I would caution against falling into the trap of nurturing the devil’s deeds.”

“Does Horace ever accompany his wife to church?”

“Not since he won the... not for quite a while, however I do see him socially. He’s a troubled man, my young friends.”

“Does he confide in you?”

“That, you will appreciate, is confidential— suffice to say he feels deserted by his former associates.”

“Deserted? I heard it was the other way around.”

“That’s not the way Horace sees it. In fact, he feels persecuted.”

“And what’s your opinion?”

“Judge not...” the gentle man smiled.

“Does he still count you as a friend?”

“I’m a priest. Meanwhile, dear boys, I don’t think you need be concerned about scandal per se. You can’t help what you hear, but you can avoid its unwarranted and cruel dissemination.” The Rev. rose from the table as a signal that the meeting was about to be terminated. “Hopefully, I’ll see you at church on a more regular basis from now on. I’ve prepared a sermon for next Sunday that will knock your cotton socks off.” The Reverend, once again, and deliberately, checked the boys’ sandaled feet. “Perhaps I should rephrase that last comment.”

As the teens prepared to leave and stood at the presbytery door, Samuels said, “I almost forgot to ask: are you acquainted with Doris Fink?”

“We’ve met,” Dickson answered, “but we don’t actually know her very well. And if it’s okay with you, sir, I’d rather you didn’t mention our being here.”

Samuels remained at the door while he watched the boys return to their motorcycles. The three

exchanged friendly waves before the Suzukis revved into life and headed back to the beach house.

“I reckon we can cross Tom off the suspect list,” Mick concluded as the boys removed their helmets and entered the house. “That old bloke wouldn’t hurt a fly.”

“Not unless it buzzed his chrome dome during a sermon,” Dickson laughed, then checked his phone for messages. “Oh, no, guess who? It’s Aunt Flo.”

After two hours of searching the grounds of the villa complex, Dickson and Mick returned to Flo’s apartment with the bad news . . . no wedding ring. “I’ve thought and thought and thought about where I may have mislaid it,” she lamented as she removed a tray of freshly baked scones from the oven. “Besides, I always wear gardening gloves when I potter about in the garden.”

“Where are they?”

“Outside, of course, where you just came from.”

“The gloves.”

“Oh, silly me. Cream and jam? And tea?” There was never a need for the boys to answer; the scone ritual had always been a rigid tradition. “The gloves? Oh, now let me see . . . the gloves . . . yes. They must be here somewhere. You boys enjoy your treats while I fetch the gloves.”

Every single crumb had been eagerly devoured by the time Flo returned. “The gloves are normally in the laundry where I keep a few tools and other gardening things, but I can’t find them.” The boys rose from their chairs, about to search the laundry, but were stopped by the old lady. “Now don’t you boys fuss any more, you’ve done enough for one day already. I’m sure you have better things to occupy your time. I’ll keep looking. Meanwhile, you toddle off and do your airs and graces, or whatever you call those surfing things you do.”

An unexpected downpour saturated the riders on their way back to the beach house. They immediately changed into dry shorts upon arrival. “We need a company car,” Mick complained.

“Too expensive. Besides, what’s the diff between getting wet in the surf and getting wet in the rain?”

“What are your thoughts about Chrome Dome?”

“The Rev? A little eccentric but a helluva nice old guy.”

“Are you gonna write a report for Doris?”

“Hey, Einstein, what is that you don’t earn when you don’t write a report?”

“True, true, true. But I thought you asked the Rev. not to mention our little chat this morning?”

“If Doris wants to speak to him about it, fine, if not, at least he won’t broach the subject with her.”

“You trust him?”

“He’s a man of the cloth.”

“So? And by the way, he expects us to turn up at church each Sunday. I’m not into all that religious stuff.”

“It might do you some good. You wanna help me with this report? The surf’s mush.”

“Yeah right, what’s this ‘do me some good’ crap?”

Just as the boys finished the report, and agreed that it was comprehensive but not biased, they heard a familiar voice at the front door. “Hey, guys! Anyone home?”

“Hey, Cody, come on in, mate—and leave your board on the verandah. How did you get out here?”

“Hitched a ride,” the spiky mop grinned. “I always get a ride when I’m shirtless, hehe.”

“Careful, mate, you might end up getting more than a ride.”

“Anyway, the surf’s crap. What are you guys up to?”

“Bugger all, mate,” Dickson replied as he sealed the envelope containing the report. “And your timing is perfect.”

“Another message for Doris? Hey, my mom said she saw you blokes at church today. I didn’t know you were churchies.”

“Is your mom a regular?”

“No, not really... she goes sometimes to pray for me, so she says, hehe. She says teens need all the help they can get. So, I guess I better not swear around you guys, huh?”

“That’s up to you, Cody. Swearing is dumb, anyway; it’s peer pressure crap.”

“All my mates swear. If I didn’t swear like they do, they’d call me a wuss.”

“Exactly.”

“I’m a wuss?”

“You’re being pressured.”

“So you blokes *are* churchies?”

“No,” Mick smiled, “just mature.”

“Ouch! Anyway, I was kinda hoping I could sleep over tonight. That’s if it’s cool, I don’t wanna interrupt anything. My school togs are in my bag outside, and a toothbrush. I can even help cook dinner—I’m a whiz with toasted cheese sangers.”

“How about lasagne alla Bolognese?”

“Huh?”

“Does your mom know the Rev. Tom Samuels?” Mick interrupted.

“Kinda. She said there’s a rumor he’s gay, and some of the guys at school reckon he molests altar boys.”

“Do you believe in rumors?”

“Maybe not,” Cody admitted, a little embarrassed. “But I’ll tell you what I don’t believe; I don’t believe in labels. Guys do stuff, you know, but I don’t think they should be labeled. Anyway, is it cool if I sleep over?”

The conversation over dinner encompassed a variety of topics of interest to teens; girls, sex, bikes, cars, surfing, school, music, movies—but eventually focused on the Spiropoulos honey. “It’s organic,” Cody explained, “that’s why it tastes so different. It’s awesome! Tony...”

“You know Spiropoulos?”

“We’ve met. He was at Doris’ house one day when I was skinny dipping in the pool. Hehe, his eyes nearly fell outta their sockets. I think Doris had a fair bit of explaining to do, hehe.”

“Was Horace there?”

“Away on some kinda biz. So, anyway, we got to chatting and he told me about the farm. It’s fulla rainforest stuff and native plants, so the bees do their thing and he collects the honey. Cool, huh?”

“Have you visited the farm?”

“Not yet, but he gave me an invite. He says he’s immune to the stings but strangers need to wear the whole protective thingy.”

“Do you think Spiropoulos would mind if we tagged along?”

“I’d need to check, but I reckon it’d be cool. Tony’s real proud of his honey. Doris gets hers free but everyone else has to pay for it. Do you reckon Tony and Doris might have a thing going?”

“Who knows? What do you think?”

“She’s a bird and he’s a beekeeper... birds and bees. Get it? Besides, I don’t think Doris and Horace get along all that well.”

At 11:30, Mick bade the guys farewell and rode home. Dickson checked the spare room to ensure that everything Cody needed was in order. “Time to turn in, mate,” he said, “sleep well.”

“But it’s only early! I figured maybe we could chat a bit longer, like out on the verandah or something—or maybe walk along the beach. Anyway, I dig your company, and Mick’s too. You guys are outtasight.”

“How do you know? We hardly got a bloody word in.”

Chapter 6

The two shirtless and barefoot lads strolled along the beach at close to midnight, leaving a twin trail of perfect footprint outlines in the freshly wetted sand. Dickson asked Cody what he'd meant earlier by 'guys do things'.

Rather than answer the question directly, Cody side-stepped, "Are you and Mick best mates?"

"I don't have a better mate, if that's what you mean. Actually, I'm not sure what 'best mate' really means—I don't have anything to compare it to."

"Does Mick ever sleep over?"

"Sometimes."

"In the spare room?"

"I don't think I like where this conversation is headed, bro."

"My mates sleep over all the time, in my room," the spiky mop happily revealed. "My dad puts out the spare mattress but my mates don't bother to use it."

"What are you driving at, Cody?"

"I guess I'm kinda doing a research thingy. I'm sorta curious about other guys and, you know, how close they are."

"Are you gay?"

"Like I said, I don't believe in labels."

"Are your mates gay?"

"They've all got girlfriends."

"And you?"

"Yep. Her name is Steph and she's awesome. She's got cute tits, like puppy dog noses."

Dickson remained silent and pensive for a minute or two as the pair occasionally stooped to inspect a shell or toss a stick into the boiling wash.

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

"About what?"

“Mick and I. He’s my best friend but I don’t know how to ... how to respond.”

“To what?”

“Sometimes he hugs me ... you know, like spontaneously ... and I just stand there, arms dangling at my sides, feeling awkward. Then Mick feels awkward as well, and backs off, usually with a sheepish apology.”

“He apologizes for hugging his best mate? Shit! That is so uncool, man. Do you have any idea how the bloke must feel? He probably feels rejected or something, and maybe guilty as well because he worries that it’s his fault.”

“You’re forgetting something—if I respond with a hug, what kind of message would that send?”

“You sound like my mate, Mark. He was like that to begin with—all bent outta shape and terrified of expressing emotion, unless it was aggro.”

“I was raised by my gran. She was great, don’t get me wrong, Cody, but she had this thing about men being men. You know, tough, independent, strong, masculine... all that macho crap. She used to tell stories about my dad and what a real man’s man he was, and that I owed it to his memory to be just like him.”

“And are you?”

“Not sure. My parents died when I was a small child. The funny thing is, my Aunt Flo says my dad was a very gentle and sensitive man... not effeminate or anything, but... well, different to my gran’s perspective.”

“Have you ever considered just being yourself?”

“Maybe I would if I knew what that was.”

Next morning, after each of the boys had showered, Dickson rustled up scrambled eggs on toast. Cody insisted on making the coffee. “Sleep well?” the shaggy blond asked the mop as they ate.

“Like a log. Thanks for letting me sleep over, Dickson. Can I ask you something? What’s the deal with the Finks?”

“Sorry, mate, it’s confidential.”

“That only makes me more curious.”

“That’s what killed the pudgy tat. By the way, do you know Barbara Thorne?”

“Lemmon Lips? She’s a teacher at school. Why?”

“Just wondered.”

“Yeah, right, you’re being all damn secretive again. Does she have anything to do with Horace and Doris?”

“That’s what I’d like to know.”

“Lemon Lips is a media arts teacher at school. Her sights are set on becoming the next Spielberg, or so she thinks. She’s got an idea for a television series. When she found out that Horace won the lottery, she approached him for funding. He toyed with the idea for a while, which meant she got her hopes up—and even bragged about it to the other teachers and students—but then Horace gave her the thumbs down. She’s still totally pissed off about that.”

“How do you know all this?”

“It’s all over school, mate. Everyone knows.” Cody placed his knife and fork neatly on the plate, then patted his belly. “Good tucker, mate, thanks. I’ll help you clean up.”

After delivering Cody to school, minus his board, Dickson phoned Mick and asked him over to the house for a conference.

“We’re going back to school,” he announced when Mick arrived. “It’s open day this afternoon; all parents and citizens are invited to meet the teachers and inspect the facilities.” Then Dickson informed Mick of what he learned about Barbara Thorne.

“Sounds like she harbors a grudge, alright... sounds like a bitch as well. Anyway, surf’s up, let’s catch a wave before *school*.” Mick noticed the extra board on the front verandah, and asked if it was Cody’s.

“Yep, he said he’d collect it later.”

“Another excuse to visit, huh?”

“Is that a problem?”

“Nope, just the opposite—I like the guy.” As the pair trotted down to the waves, Mick added: “Did he sleep in the spare room last night?”

Barbara Thorne was quite small in stature, and wore her brown hair in a bun. However, she exuded an air of authority that bordered on intimidation. Her feet were encased in sneakers that appeared to be a child’s size, and her mouth was unusually thin-lipped. “Are you boys interested in media arts?” she asked as they introduced themselves.

“We’ve heard a lot about you,” Dickson answered, “all of which is most complimentary, of course.”

“Really? From whom?”

“The students and others, such as Horace Fink.”

“It’s time for a short break. Would you like to join me in the teacher’s canteen for a cuppa?”

Soon afterward, the group was seated at a table, sipping their tea. “How do you know Horace Fink?” Barbara demanded as though she was entitled to an answer.

“Well, we don’t really... we just know people who know him.”

“I see. Are you aware of his reputation?”

“Uh, yes... kind of.”

“He’s a man... Let me rephrase that, he’s a creep who should be avoided at all cost. He makes promises he doesn’t keep. He’s a liar. He’s a cheat. His

word means nothing to him. He's the most despicable person I've met."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"You mentioned you know people who know him—what have they told you about him?"

"Reverend Tom Samuels said he was a troubled man."

"Troubled! Ha! What a joke! Fink causes trouble, he creates it, and he brings trouble to those foolish enough to trust him." Barbara went on to explain the professional relationship she had with Horace before her dream was shattered. "I made a fool of myself," she said. "I had every confidence in both my television project and Fink's support. I spread the word as if it were a fait accompli, and then, out of the blue, the lying bastard reneged."

"Have you tried to attract interest from other funding sources?"

"Ha! You're kidding, nobody will touch my project with a barge pole, not after blabber-mouth here got carried away. I'm a laughing stock, a joke. So I'm puzzled about those to whom you refer when you say you've heard complimentary things about me."

"Have you considered suing him for breach of promise?"

"With what? I'm on a teacher's salary. Besides, there was no contractual arrangement, nothing legally binding. If you need to substantiate my version of the story, go talk to Simon Swan, he's a local cameraman, a stringer for some of the television networks around here, and involved in quite a few projects of his own. He operates his own digital editing suite, Swan Video, at Cundletown. If you boys are really interested in media arts, I suggest you talk to him. He's a fountain of knowledge, and tell him I sent you. But phone first, he's a busy man, often on call. He's filmed quite a few

of the school's concerts and other events. He was to be the chief cameraman on my project."

The more Dickson learned about Horace, the more tempted he was to meet the man himself. "There must be another side to this coin," he told Mick as they walked through the school gates, only to be accosted by the spiky mop.

"Hey, guys, what's cookin'?"

"Just visiting the school, Cody."

"Yeah, right, I saw you with Lemon Lips earlier. So what's the story here?" Before his friends could answer, the mop continued: "Yeah, I know... confidential. The envelope is still in my bag, I'll give it to Doris when I get home."

"Like a lift?"

"Thanks, but I'm waiting for my mate Mark. We'll do our homework together at my place. He's a real brainbox, hehe, so I plagiarize his answers. Cool, huh?"

"What about your board?"

"I'll collect it later, maybe tomorrow, if that's cool."

Back at the beach house, Dickson and Mick discussed the question of how they might meet Horace face to face despite Doris' strict instructions that Horace remain totally unaware of their mission. Nonetheless, both boys agreed that the 'other side' of the story could be vital to their investigative endeavors.

"But how?" Mick asked.

Just before dinner, Dickson answered his cell phone. It was Doris. After discussing the report about Barbara Thorne, Dickson asked when Horace was due to leave for New Zealand.

"He's booked on the 8am flight to Sydney airport tomorrow morning, but I still prefer you not to visit this house unless it's absolutely essential, and even

then, go via next door over the back fence. By the way, what does Cody have to say about all this cloak and dagger routine?”

“He’s obviously curious.”

“I’ll have to invent some sort of red herring to satisfy his curiosity and steer him away from the truth. But that won’t be easy—he’s a bright boy.”

Chapter 7

Most aircraft accommodated at Taree airport are small private planes. The terminal, a single story brick building, is no larger than a couple of average houses. Dickson and Mick parked their bikes at 7:45am and entered the reception area, where they helped themselves to coffee from the dispenser machine. A balding man, whose remaining black hair was carefully but conspicuously combed across bare scalp, sat next to his suit case and hand luggage.

“G’day,” Dickson smiled as the boys sat beside the man, “nice morning for a flight.”

“No luggage?”

“We’re waiting for a friend to arrive from New Zealand.”

“New Zealand? That’s where I’m headed... on business. Have you been there?”

“No. Actually, I’ve never been outside of Oz.”

“I travel a lot... mostly business.”

“Oh?”

“Entrepreneurial... nothing in particular, and everything in general. I’m basically an investor. However, I am trying to market an invention of mine,” the man said as he produced a small bottle from his black leather briefcase. “I’ve got others—you can keep that one and give it to your girlfriend.”

“Perfume? Does it have a name?”

“Not yet. I’ll leave that to the marketing gurus once I get commercial interest... *if* I get commercial interest. It seems the last thing the world needs right now is another new perfume. My wife wears it and loves it. By the way, my name is Horace.”

The boys introduced themselves. “You must be Horace Fink—we’ve heard about you.”

“You have?”

“You’re famous around these parts.”

“You mean infamous,” Horace laughed. “Are you boys locals?”

“I live out of town,” Dickson explained, “just north of Old Bar in a beach shack.”

“The old weatherboard house right on the beach? The one on the dirt road? Well, well, well, what a coincidence, I’ve had my eye on that old house as an investment—not the house itself, but the property. Do you rent it?”

“Own it. My gran left it to me.”

“Own it?” Horace’s attention was diverted by an announcement that his flight was ready to board. “Must go, great to meet you young blokes. I’ll contact you when I return in about a month.”

As the boys watched the man carry his bags out to the tarmac, Mick shook his mate’s hand. “You’re a genius, Dicko, a bloody genius.”

Outside the terminal, parked next to the Suzukis, was a 4WD van with ‘Swan Vi’ painted on the side. The open sliding door covered what the lads assumed to be ‘deo Productions’. A short, stocky man stood at the open side door and greeted Dickson and Mick as they approached. “Got a spare minute?” the man asked. “My offsider’s running late and I could use a hand to carry this stuff into the terminal.”

Dickson took the large tripod while Mick carried a heavy metal box. The man elected to take care of the Sony broadcast camera, which appeared to be worth a lot of money. After locking the van, the three entered the airport building. “Outside on the viewing platform,” the man beckoned as the boys followed. Once the equipment was placed on the platform, the man thanked his helpers and shook their hands. “Simon,” he smiled. “Simon Swan. I owe you blokes a beer.”

“I’m Dickson Bottoms and this is my mate, Mick Morris. Can we help you unpack?”

“She’s right, mate, my offsider should be here soon. You guys fly in from somewhere?”

“Nope, just checking out the scene. We had coffee with a bloke who’s on his way to New Zealand... Horace Fink.”

“Fink? You friends of his?”

“Just met him.”

“Well, don’t meet him again. That bloke is bad news in big flashing neon letters. He got me all fired up about a television project one time, then backed off. Asshole.”

“He seemed pleasant enough.”

“Oh, yeah, ‘seem’ being the operative word. He’s a bloody crook... a user.”

“So what’s the story here? Are you making a film or something?”

“Corporate video. A bloke with a couple of Cessna Caravans runs a cargo operation.”

“Sounds interesting.”

“You fellas ever been in a video production suite before?” The boys shook their heads. “Tell you what,” Simon said as he handed Dickson his business card, “ring me later and drop in for a beer or two, and I’ll show you how to make movies.”

“Cool! That’ll be fascinating! Thanks a stack, Mr. Swan.”

“Simon.”

As the boys swung a leg over their respective Suzuki saddles, Mick reached over and shook his mate’s hand. “Two birds with the one stone, mate!”

“Yep, a Fink and a Swan!”

Following a late breakfast, Dickson sat at the computer and wrote another report, to which he would

add the result of their meeting with Swan later that afternoon.

“We’re making progress,” Mick commented as his friend saved the document.

“Are we? If Fink was murdered today, who would you suspect as the culprit?”

“Someone in New Zealand,” Mick laughed. “Yeah, you’re right. Everyone we’ve spoken to so far hates the guy but as to the means, motive and opportunity, I guess that’s still pretty vague. Anyway, if this investigation reaches a stage where we feel pretty strongly about a suspect, will you tell the cops?”

“Tell the cops what? A murder is not a murder until it happens, mate. Besides, that’s a decision I’ll leave to Doris.”

“What’s your feeling about her? If she’s the sole beneficiary of Fink’s will, that kinda points a finger at her. Yeah? How about this scenario: she hires a hit man to kill her husband. The hit man disappears interstate or overseas. Then she uses the evidence we’ve uncovered to blame an innocent party.”

“Interesting scenario, my dear Watson. But I think you’re getting a little carried away.”

“You think so? Anything’s possible, Sherlock.”

The converted shopfront at Cundletown bore no signage or evidence of what lay behind the plain façade. However, the 4WD painted with *Swan Video Productions* was parked half way down a long drive to one side of the shop, with its attached residence at the rear. The entrance was at the side of the building. Dickson’s finger stabbed the button. Above the guests was a small security video camera. The lock clicked and a voice through a small intercom invited them to enter.

“I’m just making coffee,” Simon said as he led the lads through to the rear kitchen. “It’s a special blend

I picked up in Papua. Looks like mud but tastes like heaven. Anyway, I figured you guys might not want to drink beer if you're riding your bikes. I bought a dozen stubbies you can take home with you."

The group took their coffees to the front of the building; the old shop. "I picked this place up for a song," the host explained, "then converted the old shop front into a studio." To the boys, the studio resembled something from a Star Wars spacecraft; knobs, dials, flashing lights and dozens of electronic gizmos all lit softly, and even somewhat romantically, by special concealed lighting. Each of the four walls was carpeted in light gray while the ceiling was fitted with white acoustic tiles. Mounted high at either side of the console area hung giant speakers supplemented by a smaller pair on a shelf above several video monitors.

"No tape recorders?"

"It's all digital, mate. I keep a couple of old betacams for editing older stuff or transferring analogue to digital—other than that, it's all zeros and ones." Simon pointed to a smaller room that featured a large window overlooking the studio. "That used to be the shop cool room. Now it's a voice-over booth. So what do you blokes reckon? Flash or what?"

"Awesome. No signage out front?"

"It's not open to the public, mate, and I don't want any loonies to know there's a fortune in electronics here. Now, let me show you guys how I drive this thing."

Footage of the airport was immediately recognizable to the lads, however they were somewhat bored by the laborious and repetitive process involved in editing. At one stage, when it seemed appropriate, Dickson asked if Simon had the pilot of Barbara Thorne's television concept.

“You want to see it?” Half an hour later, Simon asked his guests what they thought of the idea.

“I’m no expert,” Dickson admitted, “but it looks as good as any other show on TV.”

“Better,” Simon insisted, “but it’s old hat now—been around too long. We missed the boat because of that asshole Fink and his fucking indecision and dilly dallying. Let me give you a bit of advice, my friends, whatever you do in life, stay away from the television business. It’s full of wannabes and experts who wouldn’t know if their asses were on fire. And back stabbers! Oh, yeah, don’t forget the back stabbers.”

“So why are you still in the business?”

“It’s all I know, mate—that and scuba diving. I shoot a lot of underwater stuff—that’s what I did in Papua—footage of World War 2 submerged aircraft. Besides, I’m in my fifties so it’s too late for a career change. And let me tell you something else. Barbara’s concept was my ticket to wealthy retirement but Fink fucked that good and proper. Opportunities like Barbara’s only come along once in a blue moon. I could kill that mongrel Fink bastard.”

Back at the beach house, the lads noticed Cody’s board missing from the front verandah. Then they saw a lone surfer on the back line—the only invitation they needed to hit the waves.

Two hours later, as the sun hung low on the western horizon, three fit and bronzed teens, carrying their sticks under their arms as they trotted up the beach, provided a spectacle the glossy tourist mags would deem an idyllic Aussie scene.

Dickson had rigged a hose supported by a pole in the front yard, under which the surfers showered. “That was a bitching session,” Cody enthused. “You guys are awesome.”

“You were pretty awesome yourself, mate. You wanna hang for a bit? I’ve got another envelope for Doris.”

“I wish you guys would tell me what’s going on with all this shit. She gave me some lamo line yesterday about it but I don’t believe her—not for a second.”

“What did she tell you?”

“Hey, I’m not that dumb ya know. It’s confidential hehe. So, here’s the deal guys, you tell me what this whole thing is all about and I’ll tell you what she told me. Fair enough?”

Chapter 8

Once again, Dickson raised the issue of confidentiality as he distributed 3 Cokes on the front verandah. “Don’t you believe in keeping a secret?” he asked as the spiky mop popped his ring pull and guzzled the spilling brown foam.

“Depends. I reckon it’s cool to tell your best friends a secret provided they don’t tell anyone else.”

“And what makes you think they, in turn, won’t tell their best friends?”

“I don’t get it. What’s the point of a secret if you can’t tell anyone? That’s what best mates are for, right? Anyway, I think I know what this Doris business is all about.”

“Oh?”

“I saw your private investigator ad pinned to your notice board. The only problem is I don’t know what you’re investigating.”

“We’re not investigating anything,” Dickson explained, “only the possibility of something.”

“Like what?”

“If it happens, you’ll be the first to know.”

“THAT’S NOT FAIR!”

“So what did Doris tell you?”

“That you guys are researching material for a project she’s working on.”

“That’s true.”

“So what’s the project?”

“You’re a persistent bugger.” Dickson smiled, took a swig of Coke, then added: “Tellya what, Cody, since you’re playing a role in this investigation, albeit a minor one, if Doris is willing to confide in you, then it’s okay with Mick and me. But you’ll need to ask her, not us. Meantime, when will you be visiting the bee farm?”

“Anytime,” Cody shrugged. “Whenever you like.”

Doris phoned Dickson later that evening to say she’d read the latest report and found the observations interesting. “However, at this point, all we have is evidence that Horace is disliked, and we knew that already. I’d hoped for something more... well, more definitive.”

“Patience, my dear,” Dickson laughed. “All in good time.”

“By the way,” Doris said, “Cody wants to know the full story. According to him, if it’s alright with me, it’s alright with you. Is that true?”

“Yes.”

“What’s your opinion?”

“I think there’s a danger that his curiosity has the potential to lead to a mistaken belief, a wild guess, one that could be more hazardous than knowing the truth.”

“I see—I take your point. I suppose if he’s going to continue to act as our courier, it’s only fair to involve him in the secret. However, your reports still need to remain confidential—I insist on that.”

“No worries. Did Cody mention the bee farm?”

“Tony’s farm? No.”

“Cody said he’d take us there for a visit—he has an open invitation from Tony Spiropoulos.”

“Tony? I don’t think you need to worry about Tony, he’s a good and special friend of mine.”

“And what kind of friend is he to Horace?”

“Yes, of course, I take your point again, Dickson. You’re quite the super sleuth for a blond himbo.”

Dickson was still laughing as he ended the call on his cell phone, much to Mick’s inquisitive frustration. “She called me a blond himbo.”

“Hahahaha! She’s a hoot! But she should have called you a blond hunk.”

“Really?”

“C’mon, Dicko, are you blond or blind or both?”

After Mick left to return home, Dickson grabbed one of Simon’s stubbies from the fridge and sat on the front verandah to contemplate the Fink case. However, he was unable to shake Mick’s comment about his being a ‘blond hunk’. Hunk? I don’t feel like a hunk, he thought to himself. Other guys are hunks, not me. I don’t walk or talk or act like a hunk, so what the hell is Mick on about?

Dickson placed his beer on the floor and dashed inside to check the dictionary: *Hunk: a large lump or portion*. Nope, that didn’t sound right: *an attractive and usually well-built man*.

Attractive? Seated once more on the canvas chair, with its 180 degree view of the night sky and ocean, with barely enough light to silhouette the headlands at each end of the long sandy stretch, Dickson took a swig of the beer. Attractive? To whom? Doris or Mick? Or both? If I am attractive, why is it that I’m not consciously aware of it? Why is it that I don’t see myself that way? Or anyone else for that matter? Sure, Mike’s a good looking guy. I know that. But I’m used to him, so I don’t think of him that way. He’s my china plate—my best mate.

Dickson remembered his comment to Cody as they ambled along the beach the other night: “Have you ever thought of just being yourself?” “Maybe I would if I knew what that was.”

Just before daybreak next morning, Dickson paddled his board out to the backline to watch the sun rise. It was a regular occurrence for the blond youth who loved to witness the world truly at peace, when the

stillness of dawn contrasted starkly with the noise and pandemonium that inevitably followed, as if the rising sun signalled the rest of the world to begin another day of chaos. Certainly, that was the message the gulls interpreted as their cue to resume squabbling.

Otherwise, the only sound was the gentle lapping of the swell against Dickson's board, a sound that would soon surrender to the din of daylight.

"You're keen," Mick smiled as his mate arrived back from the surf. "You shower and I'll fix breakfast."

"Soft yolks," Dickson ordered, mindful of Mick's habit of turning egg whites into blackened crisps.

As the boys ate their sausage and fried eggs on toast, washed down with orange juice, Mick asked the blond why he regularly paddled out at dawn.

"Perspective," Dickson replied. "It keeps things in perspective and, for some reason, it helps me to think clearly. There are no distractions."

"Apart from the occasional bronze whaler."

Dickson ignored his mate's sarcasm. "It's true, Mick, the world is sane for just 30 minutes, then the joint erupts into turmoil again."

"I've been thinking about the Fink case."

"You mean our only case, mate."

"It's like we're treating everyone we speak to as a potential murderer."

"I hadn't thought of it quite that way."

"Think about it, mate. That's the only reason we talk to those guys—because one of them is gonna give Horace the big heave-ho."

"So what do we do? Wait until Horace gets a one-way ticket to heaven and then investigate them? What's the difference between now and then?"

"I dunno—it's just that to be an investigator it's like you gotta treat the whole world with suspicion—

you know, like everyone's guilty until proven innocent."

"You think too much."

"Do I? I'm not so sure about that, Dicko. I sometimes wonder how I'd feel if I thought I was being investigated for whatever."

"Like when your girlfriend's hands are down your pants?"

"Har-de-har. I don't have a girlfriend, nor do you."

"That's not the point."

"How come you mentioned a girlfriend?"

"It was meant to be hypothetical, Mick—even slightly humorous."

"Most blokes our age have girlfriends."

"Most blokes our age are sex maniacs."

"When was the last time you had sex?"

Dickson stood, stacked Mick's empty plate on top of his and headed to the kitchen. "You cooked so I'll wash the dishes."

"So?" Mick asked as he collected the empty glasses and followed the hunk inside.

"It's none of your business."

"I'm your best mate—best mates talk about that kinda stuff."

Dickson ran the hot water and squirted a little detergent into the sink. "This is private, right? A secret between you and me."

"Scout's honor."

"I'm a virgin."

"Me too."

"Really?" Dickson exclaimed with obvious relief. "I didn't know that. I figured, well, you know, being who you are and the way you look and stuff like that..."

"The way I look?"

“Yeah. You look like you could have any girl you wanted.”

“And you don’t? C’mon, Dicko, you could snap your fingers anytime you wanted.”

“I got a feeling I shouldn’t snap them right now.”

Mitre 10 hardware in Taree is a large shop that sells everything from nails and screws to power tools and timber, paint and brushes to gardening supplies and furniture. A large man with a shock of curly black hair approached the boys at the counter and asked how he may be of assistance. Right away, Dickson noticed the name tag on the man’s shirt: Serge Vodkinski.

“We’re shopping for a friend, actually. She needs a few things for the garden; fertilizer and stuff.”

“I hope she doesn’t plan to make a bomb,” Serge laughed as he led the way to the gardening and nursery section. “It’s funny, you know, almost everything we sell here could be used as a weapon of some sort—axes, hammers, knives, fertilizer, picks, you name it, and yet it’s all perfectly legal! It’s a world full of contradictions, mate. You know something, if I wanted to murder someone, I could use any one of a number of items here, return it to the shop after the deed, clean it, put it back on the shelf, and nobody would be the wiser. How’s that for spooky?”

“Are you familiar with Doris Fink’s garden? If you are, you’ll know what kinda stuff she needs. We’re not exactly gardening gurus, my mate and I.”

“Doris Fink?” Serge stopped just short of the gardening section. “Yes, I know her place. What she needs, guys, is a few liters of weed killer to feed her husband. I’d happily help her do it. Listen guys, I’m sorry but I better get back to the counter. I’m afraid you’ll have to make your own choices.”

“By the way, how do you pronounce your name?”

“The way it’s spelled.” And with that, the man left the boys to their own devices.

“And what, may I ask,” Mick inquired, “are we supposed to do with a whole bunch of gardening stuff?”

Later that afternoon, a delivery truck arrived at the beach house and unloaded a range of garden tools, a wheelbarrow, several bags of fertilizer and soil mixes, various potted plants and seedlings, a watering can and a new garden hose.

“Right,” Mick said, hands on hips, “now all we need is a bottle of gray hair dye and a couple of walking sticks.”

“Don’t forget the slippers.”

Chapter 9

Once the boys' horticultural efforts for the day were complete, they stood back, mandatory stubby in hand, to admire their colorful creation. "What do you think?" Dickson asked.

"To be honest, mate, and no offence intended, but it looks like your gran still lives here."

"Gardens are not just for grannies, you macho boofhead. There are more blokes who host TV gardening programs than women. Anyway, I think we did a great job—it brightens up the joint."

"So do you, mate."

"Cut the crap."

"Speaking of flowers, when do you intend to visit the Spiropoulos place?"

Cody waited kerbside as the boys arrived on their bikes outside No. 41. "No way, guys," he said as they came to a halt. "Dark T-shirts are out. Come on inside to my room and you can borrow two of my white ones."

As shirts were removed, Cody noted the scent. "What kinda deo are you guys wearing? You better use my ensuite to wash your armpits."

"What the bloody hell's all this about?"

"Dark clothing and perfume—a major no-no when you're around bees, mate. And if you do happen to get balled..."

"Balled?"

"The bees form a big ball when they attack."

"When???...they attack?"

"Anyway, if you get balled, don't run. Stay still. Don't wave your arms around. If you get stung, don't try to remove the sting with your thumb and forefinger, flick the sting from your skin or you'll release the venom."

“How come I suddenly wanna change my mind about going?” Dickson asked.

His mate agreed: “Yeah, me too.”

Less than 30 minutes north of Taree is Johns River, a quiet village surrounded on all sides by national parks, including Crowdy Bay National Park, a haven for native flora and fauna, as well as large stands of majestic rain forest and massive Moreton Bay fig trees.

The two Suzukis and three riders entered the open double gates of the Spiropoulos property and rode up to the sprawling ranch-style house. A couple of goats scattered from the path of the noisy machines and a small flock of pink and gray galahs took flight. Tony Spiropolous, a tall, lanky man in his late 30s, with a prominent bald patch like that of a monk, emerged from the house and stood on the wraparound verandah as the bikes slowed to a halt. “G’day, Cody. Good to see you again.”

Following introductions, Tony led his guests to a series of outdoor wooden boxes fitted with lids and slide-out drawers that buzzed with insects. Since no honey was scheduled for collection this time, he saw no need to wear a special suit or gloves. “These guys are pretty docile,” he explained, “they’re used to being handled. Did you know bees and ants are related? Distantly, but nonetheless related. They both have a queen.

“So do some of the guys in Kings Cross,” Mick contributed, but was ignored.

“So this is where the honey comb is collected, and is then processed through a special machine called a honey extractor. It’s not overly processed, like commercial honey is, because I like to keep it as natural and organic as possible.”

“We’ve tasted it,” Dickson said, “and it’s very impressive.”

“There’s very little introduced flora around here—it’s almost exclusively indigenous—wattle, bottle brush, varieties of banksia, grevillea, eucalypts... that kind of thing, depending on the season. So our honey is not exactly unique, but pretty close.”

“Our?”

“Sorry, force of habit. My wife and I are separated. I also harvest honey from a number of hives in the forest, but not as often—perhaps once a month. The wild bees can be quite unpredictable so one needs to exercise caution. Would you like to see them? I trust Cody has enlightened you as to your behavior if the bees become a little aggressive.”

Reluctantly, but without an audible word of protest, Dickson and Mick followed the rest of the group along a narrow track through the gum forest, stopping occasionally to inspect a wooden hive. Native flora abounded, and filled the air with a sensual aroma. Shafts of dappled sunlight filtered through the tall canopy and created an atmosphere of privacy, almost secrecy, as if the forest were a sacred place that demanded a certain spiritual reverence from visitors ... Nature’s Cathedral.

“Have you contemplated expanding the operation?” Dickson asked as the group headed back to open, grassy space.

“I had interest from an investor once, but he eventually reneged. He has a habit of doing that... inflates one’s balloon then takes great delight in pricking it with a pin.”

“He’s talking about my next-door neighbor,” Cody chirped.

“Yes, that’s him, the dreaded Horace Fink,” Tony continued, “But I won’t make that mistake again.”

I get by okay with the income from the hobby farm, and I'm my own boss. Things could be worse, you know."

"You live in a beautiful area, Tony, you should be very happy here."

"Yes, I do and I am, and it would be absolutely perfect with the lady I love."

"Your wife?"

"No."

"I'm sorry."

"Me too."

After a tour of the processing and bottling plant (a small operation in a farm shed), and with two jars of honey safely stowed in a saddle bag, the trio headed back to the beach house where Cody borrowed Dickson's board to surf with Mick. "You ding that thing, and you're a dead man."

"She'll be right, mate," the cheeky and confident teen beamed. "No wukkers."

Meantime, Dickson sat at the computer and prepared another report for Doris. However, he omitted to include his private thoughts about any possible motive Tony might harbor in relation to Horace Fink's premature dispatch. It would be preferable, Dickson reasoned, to have someone else point a potential finger of suspicion at Tony, such as Doris herself.

"Doris? It's Dickson. I prepared another report. Cody will deliver it later today. He's here at the house surfing with Mick. We arrived back from Tony's farm about an hour or so ago."

"The report is about Tony?"

"Yes."

"What did he tell you?"

"It's in the report. But it's what he didn't say that interests me. I'm wondering if you and I can chat."

"I'll be there in 15 minutes, and I can drive Cody home if you like."

“Have you had lunch?”

It seemed fitting to wheel out the old charcoal fired barbeque to celebrate the new garden. Mick complained about the lack of ocean view but Dickson argued that the ocean wasn't about to disappear, and that they could see it anytime. “Could you do me a fav, Mick, and nick down to the shop for some fresh bread rolls and sausages—the garlic and chilli ones? We're pretty right for everything else. Oh, and tomatoes.”

As the Suzuki disappeared down the road, Cody lamented: “I feel like a bludger, I didn't bring anything.”

“You brought yourself, mate, that's more than enough—and thanks a stack for arranging the visit to Tony's place this morning. Now, you wanna help me set up this thing?”

By the time Mick returned, the garden was furnished with folding chairs, a small table, an Esky crammed with beer and soft drink, plastic plates and glasses, and regular cutlery. Dickson set about making a leafy salad while Mick tended the charcoal. “What did you think of Tony?” Cody asked out of the blue.

“Nice bloke,” his friends chorused.

“Yeah, top bloke—but did you get the impression he's lonely?”

“He lives alone,” Mick commented, “so I guess that figures.”

The attention of the guys was diverted by the arrival of Doris in her shiny black VW Golf, with its top down and her red hair clearly on display in the bright midday sunshine. She was dressed in sandals, knee-length shorts and a button-up shirt. “Just in time,” she smiled as she entered the rear yard, “and, my goodness, just look at all this! You've hired a gardener.”

“Nope,” Dickson responded, “it’s all our own handiwork—Mick’s and mine. We kinda got roped in at Mitre 10 yesterday.”

“And I like your taste in plants—all resistant to salt air and windy conditions, I see. You’re not just a pretty face, Mr. Bottoms... nor you, Mr. Morris.” Then she turned to the spiky mop. “And how are you, Cody?”

“Good thanks, Doris.”

“You mean ‘fine’, Cody, you’re never *good*, as it were, and you know it. You’ve got the whole neighborhood talking about your skinny dipping in my pool.”

“Really? How could they see?”

“Attics, second storey balconies and binoculars.” Doris’s comment broke everyone up, including herself. “And, in addition, I must say that binoculars are not essential.”

Blushing was a rare occurrence for Cody. Nonetheless, this time he managed a brilliant shade of scarlet. “Maybe I should wear Speedos.”

“You do and I’ll fire you.”

After lunch, Dickson explained to his friends that he and Doris needed to discuss business for a while. They stopped by the kitchen to make tea, then proceeded to the front verandah. “I wanted to ask you a few questions about Tony Spiropoulos,” Dickson began.

“Such as?”

“How much in love with you is he?”

“I think it’s important to keep our relationship at an arm’s length. I’m married to Horace and my loyalty to him is non-negotiable. Any friendship with Tony will remain just that—friendship.”

“Does Horace know about Tony?”

“Yes, of course, but that’s all he knows—that Tony is a bee farmer and friend who supplies our honey.”

“Is Tony aware of your unwillingness to part from Horace?”

“Why are you asking these questions, Dickson? Do you suspect Tony?”

“I have no particular bias, Doris. I’m here to investigate matters. The more I know and understand, the better I’m able to do my job.”

“Well, I must say I feel uncomfortable about this line of questioning. However, I’ll be honest with you. At the same time, I insist that this information is strictly confidential—for your ears only, and that doesn’t include Mick’s. Understood?”

“Understood.”

“Tony wants to marry me. If Horace suspected even a hint of infidelity on my part, he would strike me from his will.”

“Aren’t you entitled, as his wife, to half?”

“As his wife, yes.”

“I see. Is Tony aware of your reasons for not divorcing Horace?”

“I haven’t told him as much in so many words, but he’s not stupid. I suspect he knows.”

Chapter 10

Dickson and Doris agreed there was no point in including their latest conversation in the current report, which the shaggy blond handed to his client. Then the pair rejoined the others in the rear yard.

Cody was somewhat reluctant to join Doris for the drive home so soon after lunch but he consoled himself by announcing that he would join his other mates at the 'local' for a surf.

"So what was all that about?" Mick asked when their guests departed.

"You mean our chat on the verandah? Just some background stuff. Listen, Mick, she made me promise not to discuss our convo."

Mick responded with a shrug, then helped his mate clean up the yard and return the various items to their rightful place in the house.

"You're mad at me, right?" Dickson continued. "You're sulking."

"Not mad, just disappointed. I thought we were partners."

"We are partners," Dickson emphasized, "but a promise is a promise. Besides, I think you share the same thoughts as mine about Spiropoulos. I just wanted to check a few things with Doris, that's all."

"If I guess correctly, will you tell me I'm right?"

"No."

"Okay, I figure Spiropoulos wants to marry Doris but Doris won't leave Horace on account of his loot. Yeah?" Mick studied his mate's face for a moment. "Ah ha! I'm right! The corners of your mouth turned up a little. I know you too well, mate. Ha ha! Gotcha!"

"You wanna crash here tonight? There's a movie and barbie at the surf club... all you can eat for

\$12 a head. We can catch up with some of the guys and maybe even meet Miss Right.”

“Spare me the Miss Rights, mate, I’m not ready for chains.”

Old Bar Surf Club is a several kilometre walk from the beach house, but the boys decided to play it safe and leave their bikes at home. When they arrived about 7:30, the front lawn of the club was already populated by a crowd of boardie and T-shirt clad surfers and their girlfriends, some of whom surrounded two large gas BBQs where patrons cooked their own steaks. To one side stood a large table loaded with salads, potatoes in foil, sauces and bread rolls.

Dickson and Mick headed for the manned counter where they handed over their \$12 each and received two large rump steaks. “Keep your docket,” they were told, “if you want seconds, you’ll need your docket.”

“Seconds?” Mick commented as he checked his steak which was as big as the paper dinner plate. “Not bloody likely.”

Drinks were on sale inside the clubhouse, so Mick took care of the beers while Dickson threw the steaks on an almost wholly occupied gas BBQ. “Hey, Dickson!” Dickson looked in the direction of the shout and recognized the spiky mop.

“G’day, Cody.”

“Where’s Mick?”

“Getting some beers.”

“Anyway, this is my girlfriend Steph, and my mate Mark, and his girl Carol. Guys, this is Dickson, the guy I told you about.” Just then, Mick arrived and introductions were repeated.

While the group engaged in small talk, Dickson was impressed by Cody’s friends, especially the girls. Steph was gorgeous and, for that matter, so too was

Carol, which caused Dickson to feel somewhat out of place.

“So you’ve come to see Big Wednesday?” the mop asked. “Mark and Carol don’t surf but they’re cool. Carol reckons Mark looks like a young Michael Jan Vincent, hehehe. Are you guys here with your girlfriends?”

“Uh, no.”

“On the prowl, huh?”

During the walk home at almost 1am, Dickson and Mick discussed the movie and the fact that many of the surfing scenes were not shot in California, where the film was set, but at Sunset Beach in Hawaii. “We weren’t even born then,” Dickson commented. “It’s almost sacrilegious to think that we didn’t invent surfing—like, you know, it’s *our* culture—know what I mean?”

“Listen to those crickets, mate, thousands of ‘em.”

“Are you listening to me? What the hell do crickets have to do with surfing?”

“They’re all chirping for a mate.”

“What about the crickets you don’t hear? The ones who don’t want a mate?”

“All crickets are programmed the same, Dickson, even you must know that.”

“How the hell do you know?”

“What did you think of Cody’s and Mark’s girlfriends?”

“Those guys have damn good taste.”

“So do the girls. Do you really think some crickets don’t chirp?”

“Sure, why not? Sometime you’re unfathomable, Mick. You’ve had way too many beers.”

“Unfathomable? Me? Ha! What a joke! You’re the unfathomable one. Gimme a hug.”

“You’re drunk.”

“GIMME A HUG!” Mick’s noisy demand was met by an arm draped over his shoulder. “That’s not a hug you moron! THIS is a hug!” And with that, Mick wrapped his arms around his mate and cradled his chin in the nape of Dickson’s neck.

Dickson, however, was reluctant to respond, as usual, but remembered Cody’s comment during their walk along the beach. “You don’t hug your best mate? That is so uncool, man.”

Dickson’s arms found their way around Mick’s torso, and began to squeeze. Then his hand patted Mick’s back. “Is that better?”

“You just graduated,” Mick smiled as both boys released their grip. “Now... was that so bad?”

“Sometimes I just don’t understand you, Mick,” Dickson said as the pair resumed their walk along the dirt road.

“There’s nothing complicated about me, mate, it’s yourself you don’t understand.”

Unable to sleep, Dickson rose at about 2am and wandered down the sand to the foaming wash where he sat with his arms wrapped around his raised knees. “You guys can’t sleep either,” he said aloud to the remnants of breakers that whirled and swirled around him. “What’s there to understand about me? I don’t get it. What’s there to understand about you? I bet you guys don’t ask questions like that about yourselves.”

Dickson found himself singing the words to one of his gran’s favorite Irving Berlin songs, “*I’ve got the sun in the morning and the moon at night... got no mansion, got no yacht, still I’m happy with what I got...*”

Later, after sunrise, Dickson searched the back yard for the morning paper which he figured must’ve disappeared behind one of the new shrubs. Then he

heard the paperboy's whistle and saw a rolled paper fly through the air. "You're running late today," he said and waved, but the boy responded only by reaching for his breast pocket to adjust some gadget. Dickson figured it was an iPod. He collected the paper and walked to the boy on his bicycle. "All that loud music will send you deaf, mate." Then he noticed the gadget was not an iPod but a hearing aid controller. "Oops! Sorry, mate, I apologize."

"No worries," the boy said in a voice obviously cultivated without the advantage of hearing. "This thing is useless anyway—I prefer sign." The boy's fingers suddenly burst into a flurry of activity, none of which Dickson understood.

"I'll see you again tomorrow morning."

Dickson returned to the house and heard puking noises emanating from the loo. He dumped the paper on the kitchen table and headed for the computer where he accessed a site for the hearing impaired and downloaded the manual alphabet and numerical charts which he pinned to the kitchen wall.

"You got arthritis or something?" Mick asked when he saw his mate making strange shapes with his hands and fingers, then explained that he didn't want breakfast. "I'm going back to bed."

"How many beers did you have last night?"

"Not sure ... less than a hundred, though."

"You look like you were dragged though a hedge."

Dickson settled for a bowl of cereal with fresh fruit, and spent the next two hours practicing sign language by which time it was 9am. Dickson answered his cell phone.

"Dickson? It's Cody. Have you read the paper?"

"Not yet."

“Page 4—it’s only a small article. Horace Fink’s in Auckland hospital with a fractured skull.”

“What happened?”

“He was attacked and robbed in his hotel room.”

“In his hotel room?”

“Yeah, he says he didn’t lock the door and someone hit him from behind.”

“Do they know who?”

“Horace says he didn’t see a thing. But get this, mate, guess who left for Auckland the day before Horace did?”

“Who?”

“That Ajit bloke—Ian.”

“How do you know that?”

“Ajit’s wife—she’s friendly with Mark’s mom. Mark overheard them talking about it.”

“That doesn’t prove a thing, Cody. It’s probably coincidental.”

“Yeah, right, thanks very much, Code.”

“Sorry, mate, that’s not how I meant it. I appreciate your information, honest, but... okay, I admit, it’s interesting.”

“You guys wanna join me and a few mates today? We’re hiking Middle Brother national park.”

“Some other time, Code, Mick’s hung over. I better take care of him. And thanks again for the info.”

“What did you think of Steph?”

“A real honey, you’ve done well, mate.”

“Maybe I can fix you up with a blind date sometime—she’s got lots of friends. You’re a hot looker, Dickson, with an awesome bod—you should have girls beating a path to your door.”

“Don’t you organize a damn thing without my permission! Hear?”

“Yes, boss, hehehe. Scaredy cat.”

“Hang on a tick... you said Mrs. Ajit is friendly with Mark’s mom. How much have you told Mark about this?”

“Nothing! We were talking about New Zealand and Mark happened to mention Ajit, that’s all. He doesn’t know shit about what we’re doing.”

“We?”

“Okay, we-ish.”

“Don’t open your trap about any of this, Cody, you promised.”

Mick rose at 11am and staggered to the loo. Dickson listened, but heard only splashing and not puking. Next stop, bathroom, then the kitchen. “Yeah, you’re right, Dicko, must’ve been a helluva hedge. I need coffee—strong and black. Why do we do these things to ourselves?”

“We?”

“Don’t be a smartass.”

Chapter 11

“This is the Fink residence. We’re not here to take your call at the moment. Please leave a message after the tone and we’ll get back to you as soon as possible.” Dickson then tried Doris’ cell phone. “I’m on the way to the airport,” she said. “Horace is in hospital.”

“I read the article in this morning’s paper. Have you spoken to him?”

“He lapsed into a coma shortly after he was discovered. The police are treating the case as attempted murder.”

“Any clues?”

“Not yet.”

“Are you aware that Ian Ajit is in New Zealand at Lake Taupo? It’s not far from Auckland.”

“How do you know?”

“Local grapevine. You might check it out while you’re there. Let me know when you get back to Oz.”

Next, Dickson called Mrs. Ajit and pretended to be unaware of her husband’s whereabouts.

“Ian’s not here at the moment. Can I take a message?” Dickson explained his recent meeting with Ian and the subsequent cooking of the flathead. “Oh, yes, he mentioned that—and was most impressed by you young fellows. Ian’s on a fly fishing trip in New Zealand at Lake Taupo. Do you know it? It’s one of Ian’s favorites; the largest fresh water lake in Australasia and very famous for fly fishing... so he keeps telling me over and over.”

“He didn’t invite you?”

“Ha! I can’t stand fishing—he married the wrong woman. Besides, he said he had extra business to take care of. He’ll be back in a few days—I’ll let him know you called. Any message?”

“Just a social call.”

“You’re welcome here any time, Dickson. I’m dying to meet the boys who impressed my husband. Oh! By the way, have you read this morning’s paper?”

“About Horace Fink? Yeah, I met him at the airport the day he left for Auckland.”

“Is he a friend of yours?”

“No.”

“Good, with a friend like Fink you don’t need enemies.”

“Do you know him?”

“Not really but my husband does... or did. Ian doesn’t speak highly of Horace, if I may put it that way. No doubt Ian is aware of what happened, but you can bet your bottom dollar he won’t visit the hospital. He can’t stand the man. Do you know the story?”

“Ian mentioned it in passing when he was here.”

“Did you notice his eyes?”

“Yes, I did. Scary, actually.”

“Ian’s eyes always react that way when the name Fink is mentioned.”

Dickson and Mick took to the surf for the next couple of hours and returned in time for lunch—homemade burgers. “My gran treated me to a burger like this once a week—she called them ‘Nancy’s burgers with the lot’. Her name was Nancy but I always called her ‘gran’. She was an awesome cook.”

“You scrub up pretty well yourself, Dicko.”

“So what do you reckon about the Fink situation so far?”

“Dunno... it’s a whole string of ifs and maybes that become more complex every day. Dicko? Are you sure you’re cut out for this private investigator shit?”

“What else would I do?”

“Open a burger joint—I’ll be the kitchen hand.”

“And what do we do? Close shop every time the surf rocks? ‘Back in 3 hours’?”

“Shouldn’t we be in Auckland right now?”

“How would we explain that to Horace?”

Besides, there’s plenty to keep us busy here in the Manning Valley.”

Conversation gave way to appetite for a minute or two as the boys demolished a huge mouthful of burger. “And what about that sign language chart?” Mick asked before taking another bite. “What’s that all about?”

“The paper boy—he’s deaf, or almost. He spoke to me in sign and I thought it was interesting, even impressive. So I told him I’d see him again tomorrow morning. Hopefully, my sign will be good enough to engage in a bit of a chat.”

“Why bother? You’re not deaf.”

“It’ll make the kid feel good. What’s the matter with you, Mick? Don’t you get a kick outta pleasing other people?”

“I got a kick outta that hug you gave me last night. Did you get a kick outta mine?”

“That’s like comparing oranges and apples—I’m not a very tactile person, you know that already.”

“Did you hug your gran?”

“She said hugging was for little boys and girls.”

“Jeez, thanks a bunch, Gran.”

Taree Wingham Gun Club is a couple of kilometers out of Wingham, along Rifle Range Road. It’s a cleared, grassy area surrounded by native bushland. Back in the 1880s it was used by the Wingham Rifle Corps, and for military training during both world wars. Sundays are always popular with club members and recreational shooters.

“You must be the fella who called,” the branch president smiled as he shook Dickson’s hand and

introduced himself to the two teens. “Let me show you around.”

One of the shooters they met was Clive Farrell, known locally as ‘Bumper Farrell’ after the famous Sydney cop who ruled Kings Cross during the 50s and 60s with an iron fist—literally. Constable Farrell, a handsome man in his early 20s, had little in common physically with his renowned namesake; no cauliflower ears and no ham fists, but he did share the same no-nonsense attitude when he dealt with local hoodlums.

“You can keep those bloody broomsticks,” he said, “I prefer pistol shooting. Besides, it’s more in keeping with my job as a cop. You ever fired one of these things? It’s a standard issue Smith and Wesson.”

“I hate guns,” Dickson said as he eyed the lethal looking pistol, obviously designed for a single purpose.

“You’re in the wrong place, then, mate.”

“No, that’s not what I meant—I mean I hate what people—some people—do with guns.”

“Does it scare you?”

“Yeah, it does.”

“Good. Now hold the thing in front of you at arm’s length, with both hands. Okay, now take careful aim and hit the paper target.”

“Bullseye!” Mick yelled, then took his turn at firing the weapon. Oops! Not so accurate but passable.

Clive had finished with his target practice for the afternoon and invited the boys back to the clubhouse kitchen for a cuppa. “No booze here, guys. Booze and guns don’t mix. So are you guys thinking about joining the club?”

“Not really, we were just kinda curious and figured we’d call in for a sticky beak.”

“You should have been a movie star, not a cop,” Mick quipped as the group sat on a bench outside the

clubhouse to drink their tea and watch other shooters. “You’re too good looking.”

“Are you hitting on me?” Clive laughed. “No, mate, I like my job. Gives me the chance to take my aggro out on society’s trash and keep the peace. It’s a good feeling, you know, to play a constructive role in society.”

“Did you read this morning’s paper,” Dickson asked as if he were simply making idle conversation.

“About Fink? Yeah, but I don’t think it surprised anyone. Do you know him?”

“Not very well, but we hear stuff.”

“Like what?”

“Oh, you know, that he’s not well liked around town—that kinda thing.”

“If he had half a brain he’d move away.”

“That bad? Is he known to police?”

“Let’s put it this way, we’re constantly pestered by people who say we should ‘do something’ about ‘that man’, but you can’t arrest a bloke who’s not broken the law. There’s a local teacher who’s written several long letters about Fink. It’s all hearsay crap but we have to respond with more paperwork, which wastes our time. Someone should shoot her, not him.”

“Change of sub,” Mick interjected, “can I ask you something? Does being a copper make you cynical?”

“Can do, it depends. Guys like you? No worries. I can pick the troublemakers... they’ve got a certain manner about them that stands out like dog’s balls... after a bit of experience, that is. By the way, you guys look like surfers to me. Are you locals?”

“Yep... from the old house on the beach a few ks north of Old Bar.”

“The old weatherboard shack? I know it. I hear tell it’s haunted.”

“It is when Mick visits, and he’s almost always there.”

“I’m a keen surfer myself so don’t be surprised if I drop in some time on my days off... if that’s cool with you blokes.”

“Check first to make sure we’re not doing anything illegal.”

As the boys returned to their bikes, Mick strongly suggested that Dickson’s last comment was a stupid thing to say. “He’s a cop, for Christ sake!”

“So? It was a joke. What the hell do we do that’s illegal?”

“Doesn’t matter. You never say that kinda thing to a cop.”

After spending an hour at Aunt Flo’s villa, searching once more for the missing wedding ring, again with no luck, the surfers rode their Suzukis back to the beach house. It was late afternoon, but they managed another good session in the surf, which compensated for its lack of size with good shape.

While they showered under the hose in the front yard, they discussed the meeting with Constable Farrell. Mick was adamant that having a cop hanging around the house was a bad idea, but Dickson argued that he could be useful in terms of police information.

“What if he discovers what we’re up to with the Fink case?”

“He won’t.”

“You hope he won’t.”

Inside the house, Dickson checked his cell phone for messages, one of which was from Cody asking him to call. Following the howzits and a verbal précis of the day’s events, Cody revealed that Doris had given him the front door key and asked him to keep an eye on the place. “Is there anything you want me to check?”

“That’s a violation of privacy.”

“Bullshit... I’ll just be my usual nosey self and if I happen to find something interesting...”

“Don’t go snooping around, Cody, that’s a breach of trust.”

“Hey, I got the front door key, right? She gave it to me, so she trusts me! Right?”

“She trusts you not to go snooping around.”

“Okay, so if I see something that you guys might find useful and interesting, you don’t wanna know about it, right?”

“That’s not what I said.”

“Hehehehe.”

Mick watched over his partner’s shoulder as the day’s report was typed. “Not a lot of substance there,” he commented.

“What seems trivial or unimportant at this stage, my dear Watson, could take on a whole new meaning with the gathering of new information.”

Chapter 12

After spending an hour in the surf to watch the dawn sunrise, Dickson returned to the house, made coffee, and sat on the rear fence while he waited for the paper boy.

“Good day,” the shirtless surfer said in sign as the boy approached on his bicycle. “I practiced.”

A beaming smile and a flurry of fingers met Dickson’s greeting, but it was way too fast for Dickson to comprehend. “Slower,” he said.

“I – am – impressed! Thank – you!”

“Do you read lips?”

“Yes.”

“Do you surf?”

“No.”

“Would you like to learn?”

Furious nodding was the reply, then another flurry of fingers.

“Maybe one afternoon after school?”

Further furious nodding followed and then, more slowly in sign, “my – telephone - number – speak – to – my – mother.”

“Wait!” Dickson dashed inside and returned in a few seconds with a pad and pen. The boy took them and wrote his number, beaming all the while. Then he blew his whistle and pedaled down the road, turning once to wave goodbye.

While he ate scrambled egg on toast, and sipped a fruit juice, Dickson thumbed through the paper to find an update of the Fink bashing in Auckland. It was a minor article that reported Fink’s condition as ‘serious but stable’. There was also a mention of his wife as having flown to New Zealand to be by his side. ‘Homicide detectives are investigating,’ the article concluded.

The sound of a motorcycle interrupted Dickson's thoughts. He checked his watch: 7:30am. "Had breakfast?" he asked as Mick appeared at the kitchen doorway.

"Coffee at home," Mick answered, then opened the fridge door and peered inside. "I'm starving."

"What else is new? There's some leftover scrambled egg in the pan on the stove."

Mick popped two slices of bread into the toaster. "So what's on the agenda for today—apart from surfing? And ... more surfing?"

"I used sign to speak to the paper boy this morning. He's way too quick for me, though. Anyway, he's gonna drop by one afternoon after school to learn how to surf. He can use my old board."

"You call that assortment of dings a board? What's his name?"

"Name? Dammit! I forgot to ask!"

"So what's so special about this kid?"

"I don't know any deaf people—apart from you when you choose to ignore me."

"He's special because he's deaf?"

"Sure."

"That doesn't make sense."

"You'll see."

Mick grabbed a juice, spooned scrambled egg onto his toast and sat at the kitchen table opposite his mate. "Good ol' bum nuts," he said before a forkful of egg disappeared into his mouth. "Mmmmm! So what's the news with Fink?"

"Serious but stable. Nothing new." Dickson turned the paper around to face Mick. "You know something? This business of solving a murder that hasn't been committed is the pits. It's like leaping about with a butterfly net."

"There's an easier way."

“Oh?”

“You find a grub in a cocoon and wait.”

“Yeah, I can identify with that.”

“Hey, I’ve got an idea.”

Dickson listened with some skepticism to his mate’s suggestion, but eventually warmed to the idea. An hour later, the two Suzukis parted company as each rider headed toward his own separate destination. Dickson was first to return home, and used the opportunity to phone the paper boy’s mom who asked to meet him in person before she gave her consent.

“I’m Dickson,” he said as Maureen Parker answered the door of a small flat at the rear of a large house in Old Bar. The pair shook hands and went inside.

“It’s ideal,” said the petite brunette, who appeared to be late 20s, as she offered him a chair. “The rent is affordable and Paul has a backyard to play in. The people who own the house understand my situation as a struggling single mother on a pension. Paul and I supplement the rent by doing a few chores ... they’re an elderly retired couple. Would you like a cup of tea?”

“Just a quickie, thanks.”

In the small kitchenette, Maureen filled the jug and turned on the power. “I’m a little nervous about Paul surfing. He’s 14 now, you know, and growing up—getting more independent and antsy. I was just 15 when he was born. He has no father to keep him in line.” She took two mugs from a cupboard and smiled at Dickson. “But you seem like a nice young man—maybe you’ll be good for Paul.”

“Do you know Florence Flannigan?”

“Doesn’t everybody?”

“She’s my aunt, well, sort of, she was the younger sister and lifelong friend of my gran’s. If you need a character reference...”

“You’ve just given me one.” Maureen brought the two mugs of tea to the small table and sat opposite her guest. “Paul doesn’t have a male role model in his life. Being deaf, or almost, he lacks confidence. He told me about how you learned sign and spoke with him this morning—he was thrilled to bits. Please take care of Paul, Dickson, he’s all I have.”

“You’re making me nervous.”

“I don’t mean to. I know I can’t keep Paul wrapped in cotton wool, but I worry... as all mothers do, I guess. You can’t pick up a newspaper these days, or turn on the tele, without seeing kids in some sort of trouble ... or worse.”

“You’re right about the cotton wool, Maureen.”

“I take your point. Thank you for your kind offer, and for taking the trouble to communicate with my son. Hopefully, you’re the answer to my prayers.”

“Whoa, Maureen! Hold those horses for a minute! You make it sound like I’m a knight in shining armor or something!”

“You are to Paul. He’ll be home from school in an hour or so. Should I tell him it’s okay to visit you this afternoon?”

“Sure.”

Mick was surfing when Dickson returned to the beach house, which was the only excuse the shaggy blond needed to join his mate on the backline. “How did you go with Barbara Thorne?”

“I hope she’s not a member of the jury at Simon Swan’s trial,” Mick laughed. “Jesus, what a bitch!”

“Ditto Simon. Let’s compare notes later. The paper boy is due soon to learn surfing.”

Paul read the note pinned to the back door of the house and followed instructions. The auburn haired, slender fair-skinned youth walked through the house to the front verandah, collected Dickson’s old board that

resembled a patchwork quilt made of fiberglass, and trotted down to the surf where he was met by the daredevil duo as they glided to shore.

“I’m afraid today’s lesson won’t be very exciting,” Dickson warned. “I’ll teach you how to paddle. You no paddle, you no surf.” Lesson 1 began in the small wash—paddling, duck diving, paddling, duck diving—until the young boy was exhausted and headed to shore on an almost spent wave. Dickson arrived a few seconds later and was surprised to see his student beaming from ear to ear despite being out of breath. “Let’s go back to the house for a juice, and I’ll give you some exercises to strengthen your arms. By the way, you’re turning pink already... next time, sun block for you, young fella, and a T-shirt.”

While watching from the verandah, Mick removed his iPod headphones as the pair approached. “Hey, Paul did pretty well, he’s got natural talent. Oops, sorry, he can’t hear me.”

“He can lip read... just speak a little more slowly.”

Mick repeated his sentence much to the delight of the freckled face that mouthed a few words which Mick failed to understand, let alone the accompanying flurry of fingers. However, the expression of joy on the boy’s face spoke volumes. “I see what you mean,” Mick said to Dickson, “about the reward you get from pleasing other people.”

As the boys sipped their juices, Dickson explained a series of exercises that would improve the strength of Paul’s arms, shoulders and chest. “It’s very important,” he stressed. “The faster you can paddle, the more waves you’ll catch. Let me see your biceps. Hmmmm, not bad but they’ll be twice as big by the time I’m finished with you. Will you be back tomorrow afternoon?”

Nod, nod, nod, beam, beam, beam.

Maureen Parker called later in the afternoon to thank Dickson for his trouble. "I've never seen my son so excited," she said. "He hasn't stopped talking in sign about... well, about everything. He loves your house. I think you've just adopted a puppy dog, Dickson—or perhaps it's the other way around—I hope you realize the significance of that."

"I think I do, Maureen. I've not experienced anything like this before. But don't worry; I'll do my best to live up to his expectations."

Over dinner of cold roast beef and salad, washed down by cold beer, Dickson and Mick discussed their meetings with Thorne and Swan.

"I didn't mention that we were investigating anything," Mick began, "but I did mention the news article about Horace. She shrugged and said it was no surprise, and that if it had occurred here in Taree, she would immediately suspect Simon Swan."

"I thought they were friends."

"So did I. They work together on projects but she was scathing in her criticism. She described him as an 'old woman' with a fiery temper and a hyper-anxiety cot case. She said he flies off the handle for the most trivial of reasons. A 'dummy spitter' she called him. According to Barbara, she tolerates him but only because he's the best cameraman and editor in town."

"Did you get the feeling she wouldn't have been so open and forthright if I'd been present?"

"Yeah—it was like she took me into her confidence because it was a one-on-one situation."

"Ditto with Simon and me, and he was just as scathing about her as she was about him. He used the term 'Lemon Lips' constantly and pointed the dreaded finger of blame at Barbara as chief suspect if an attempt on Horace's life were to occur here."

“So where does all that leave us?”

“That’s not the point, Mick. Where would it leave us if we hadn’t unearthed all that information? Have faith, my dear Watson, the pieces of the puzzle will fit when the time is right.”

“Do you really believe that?”

“What would you prefer to believe? It’s like life, mate, things happen that don’t make a lotta sense. Then, one day, they do.”

“You mean like us being best mates?”

Chapter 13

At the local video store the boys hired a couple of movies for the night: Chinatown with Jack Nicholson and The Maltese Falcon with Humphrey Bogart.

“What’s the point of whodunits when we already know who dun it?” Mick asked as he threw two packs of snacks into the bag containing the DVDs.

“We can learn something from Bogart and Nicholson, that’s the point.”

“This is Old Bar, mate, not Hong Kong or Casablanca or L.A.”

“Thank Christ for that.”

The Maltese Falcon had only just begun when Dickson hit the pause button to answer his cell phone. It was Cody. “Hey, I just checked the Fink house to make sure everything was okay, and I discovered something.”

“Are you sure you should be telling me this?”

“It’s a CD with nudie pics of me, taken from an open window, skinny dipping in their pool.”

“So? Get real, Cody, if you insist on waving that thing around in the breeze, you must expect people to be curious.”

“Horace?”

“What do you mean?”

“Doris knows bugger all about digital stuff and computers.”

“Maybe Horace wants to blackmail you,”

Dickson laughed.

“What—for having a schlong bigger than his?”

“How do you know?”

“Just a guess.”

“So, what are you going to do about it? Tell Doris?”

“No, I’m not gonna do anything.”

“So why tell me about it?”

“Are you mad at me, Dickson?”

“No, but I don’t approve of you snooping about the Fink house, Cody. It’s not right.”

“So who’s snooping? I was tidying a bunch of mags on Horace’s desk when I saw the CD, and it had my name on it. What do you expect? I got curious, okay?”

“Did you put it back?”

“Not right away, I made a copy first. You wanna check it out? You know, as part of your intrepid investigation, hehehe.”

“What kind of mags?”

“Business stuff—financial and shares—oh, and another one about bees.”

“Bees?”

“You know, bzzz bzzz, the little dudes that make honey. Horace was once interested in investing in Tony’s farm, so I guess that explains that.”

During the second movie, Dickson answered his phone again. This time it was Doris calling from Auckland. “Horace is on the improve,” she said, “but he’ll be in hospital for at least another week or so. I’m staying at a nearby hotel.”

“Any updates from police investigators?”

“They’ve had the forensic people in the hotel room, but so far they haven’t told me anything.”

“And Ajit?”

“Nothing.”

Dickson informed Doris of Mick’s and his separate meetings that day with Barbara Thorne and Simon Swan. “That doesn’t surprised me at all,” she laughed. “Let me tell you something, Dickson, those people don’t like Horace, but the sentiment is mutual and, I suggest, with good reason. Horace might have his faults, but he’s not Robinson Crusoe.”

“Is he aware of what’s going on over there?”

“Oh, yes, and doesn’t like it one bit; he wants to get back home. He complained today about the forensic people as if they were meddling in his private business.”

“I don’t understand.”

“He just wants the whole mess forgotten, as if it never happened.”

“How odd—most people would want the culprit brought to justice.”

“Horace hates fuss—he’s not terribly interested in revenge or retribution, and I suspect that’s why he frustrates some people. When he wipes his hands of a particular project, he moves on—finished, gone, bye bye. One of his favorite words is ‘next!’.”

“Do you think people like Thorne, Swan, Ajit and others take offense at Horace’s apparent nonchalance?”

“Absolutely, but it’s partly Horace’s fault. He steam-rolls in full of enthusiasm and praise and then suddenly backs off, which leaves people stunned and resentful. There’s no subtle or diplomatic exit, only an instant and unexplained retreat. Horace is very childlike in that respect; obsessed by something one minute and completely disinterested the next.”

“By the way, do you know anything about Horace’s digital camera?”

“Not really, it’s one of those manual things with all kinds of lenses and whatever. I don’t understand the thing at all.”

Dickson ended the call and turned to Mick, “That’s kinda weird,” he said. “Doris reckons Horace loses interest in a project at the drop of a hat, so why would he keep a book about bees?”

“You’ve lost me. You wanna fill me in on that one?”

Dickson had only just finished his sign conversation with young Paul next morning, when Mick arrived on his bike. “Did you stop by Cody’s house?” the blond asked.

“Yep.”

“You got the CD?”

“Yep. And that little errand just cost you breakfast. What’s on the menu?”

When the boys studied the digital photos, they were puzzled by some of the shots that showed Cody out of focus as if he were not the primary subject. “He’s not a very good photographer,” Mick commented.

“That depends on what he was shooting—notice the backgrounds are in focus. Maybe he was photographing something else and Cody got in the way.”

“The background is bland, just houses and roads and a few trees. Besides, Cody’s name is written on the CD. I reckon Horace wouldn’t know an f-stop from a Vegemite sandwich.”

Over breakfast of sausage and scrambled egg, the sleuths discussed the bee component of the mystery but without reaching any particular conclusion. “I reckon it’s a furphy,” Mick deduced. “We’re starting to place relevance on aspects of the case that aren’t relevant at all.”

“Everything is relevant until proven otherwise, Mr. Morris. Meanwhile, if or when Horace makes an offer on this house, we know what to expect.”

“You’re not considering selling it, are you? Your gran would turn in her grave.”

“No, it’s not for sale, but I figure any negotiations with Fink face to face might reveal something—something about him. It’s our chance to get to know him a little better.”

“Our chance? My name is not on the deed in case you’ve forgotten.”

“You’re my financial advisor.”

“I am?”

The receptionist at Goldstein, Nicholls and Blogg, Solicitors, greeted Dickson and Mick. “I phoned earlier,” Dickson explained. “Dickson Bottoms.”

“You must be Bottoms,” the receptionist assumed as she looked at Mick. “Take a seat—Mr. Goldstein will be with you shortly.”

“This Readers Digest is three years old,” Dickson noted as he perused the magazine rack. “And these chairs look like they came from an op shop.”

“Now you know why Goldstein drives the latest Merc.”

A thin, completely bald man wearing a pin-striped suit and gold-rimmed bi-focals with thick lenses appeared in the hallway. “Mr. Bottoms? Please come into my office.”

The room resembled a mini-library, with leather-bound, gold-embossed books lining large floor-to-ceiling shelves. Goldstein’s solid-timber desk was some sort of expensive antique and his chair, trimmed with polished oak, was upholstered in buttoned green leather. The twin guest chairs, also upholstered in green, but plain vinyl, were nowhere near as ostentatious, and bordered on insult. “My name is Abraham but most people call me Abe. What can I do for you?”

“Horace Fink is a client of yours, Mr... uh, Abe. He made an offer to buy my property, the old weatherboard house on the beach north of Old Bar.”

“Oh? That’s news to me.”

“We met him at the airport before he flew to New Zealand. That’s where he made the offer. It was non-specific, just a general expression of interest.”

“Not so general,” Mick added.

“And how do I fit into all of this?”

“Mr. Fink has a reputation for renegeing on deals. I’d like your advice.”

“You’ll appreciate, of course, that I cannot discuss Mr. Fink’s private affairs without compromising client/lawyer trust. However, given your tender years and lack of experience in these matters, perhaps I can give you some friendly advice. If you wish to sell your property—and, incidentally, I knew your grandmother quite well—I suggest you deal with an experienced agent to act on your behalf. Obviously, if I’m representing Mr. Fink, I can’t represent you, nor can anyone else in this firm. As a friend of your grandmother, let me say this: she would be horrified if that house were to be sold. Nevertheless, it will do nobody any good if it stands there for the next thousands years. Your grandmother is no longer with us, so the decision to sell or not to sell is your responsibility, Mr. Bottoms, and I urge you to give it very serious consideration before you make any decision you might regret.”

“Regret?”

“Take that as you will, my boy.”

“Thanks for your time, Mr. Gold—uh, Abe.”

“My pleasure. By the way, may I ask what your friend’s role is in this matter?”

“He’s my financial advisor.”

“I see—how interesting! I’ve never met a bean counter dressed in floral board shorts and flip flops before.”

“Bean counter?” Mick complained as he tossed a leg over his Suzuki saddle and pressed the starter button. “I’m a private investigator!”

“That’s the last thing Abe needs to hear, mate. Let’s get some lunch.”

The bikes crossed the Manning River over Taree's Martin Bridge and headed south along the highway to Tinonee, then east through lush green forested countryside back to the coast and Old bar where they purchased fresh bread rolls for lunch at home.

"I'm starving," Mick announced as he removed his helmet in the rear yard of the beach house.

"You're always starving. Don't your folks feed you properly?"

"They're contemplating buying a second fridge just for me."

"Where does it all go?"

"I could tell you, but you'd think I was boasting."

"I should learn not to ask certain questions."

Chapter 14

“Did you get the impression that Abe warned against my dealing with Horace?” Dickson asked as he buttered the crusty bread rolls in readiness for a generous helping of salad and cheese.

“You have no intention of selling the house anyway.”

“Abe doesn’t know that. Besides, if Fink’s own lawyer doesn’t trust him, what does that say?”

“Pretty much what Doris said in the first place; that the murder of Horace Fink is inevitable. But how do you explain the attempt on his life in Auckland?”

“Coincidence, maybe. If half the Manning Valley doesn’t like him, what makes you think the Kiwis do?”

“He seemed okay when we spoke to him. Are we talking a Jekyll and Hyde here?”

Maureen Parker phoned mid afternoon to say that Paul’s bicycle had a flat tire, and that she couldn’t afford a replacement. “He won’t be there for his surfing lesson today, I’m afraid.”

“No worries, Maureen, I’ll fetch him on my bike.”

“Are you licensed to carry a pillion passenger? I noticed you’re still a P plater.”

“This is not exactly the Sydney CBD. No one will know.”

“I’ll know.”

Dickson remembered an old bicycle tube repair kit stored somewhere in the garage. Fifteen minutes later, he arrived at the Parker flat. “Don’t tell Paul about this, tell him the tire somehow miraculously self-inflated,” he laughed. “I’ll see him at about 4. Do you have any sun block?”

“No.”

“No worries, I’ll get some on the way home.”

Having already donned his helmet, Dickson was about to depart when Maureen approached the Suzuki. Using sign, she said, “You’ll make a wonderful father one day.”

Mid afternoon, an on-shore wind flattened the surf to mush, which presented a problem for Dickson and Mick, but not for Paul whose agenda was restricted to paddling, paddling and more paddling. When the auburn-haired youth appeared at just after 4pm, the teens were studying the Fink reports once again, hoping to find something they’d missed... perhaps a subtle clue previously overlooked.

“I saw the tread mark of your Suzuki in my front yard,” Paul said in sign, beaming as his fingers spelled the words. Then he threw his arms around Dickson’s neck before retreating to add: “My mom told me a big fib but I know you fixed my bike.” Had the boy’s smile been any wider he could have swallowed a whole dinner plate. “I wish you were my dad.”

Dickson excused himself, rushed to the bathroom, dried his eyes and took a minute to regain his composure. He re-emerged with a squeeze pack of sun block. “Put this on your arms, legs and face, and keep your shirt on.”

Despite the relative monotony of learning to paddle, Paul seemed both enthusiastic and happy. However, after an hour, Dickson knew it was time to quit for the day. “You’re doing much better than yesterday,” he said as the pair made their way back to the house. “Have you practiced your exercises?”

Nod, nod, nod, then Paul flexed his bicep.

“Not bad,” his mentor smiled. “Not too bad.”

It wasn’t until the boy leaned his board against the verandah wall that he was able to use both hands to speak. “Now much longer?”

“Paddling? Oh, maybe a week or so, then I’ll teach you how to catch and ride a wave... but only small ones at first. Meantime, keep exercising.”

Dickson and Mick stood at the rear gate and waved as Paul pedaled off down the road. “That was really cute,” Mick commented.

“What?”

“The way Paul threw his arms around your neck. I think you’ve won a heart, mate.” Once Paul was out of sight, the teens returned to the house. “So what’s the problem, Dicko?” Mick continued. “You seem kinda serious; aren’t you pleased?”

“I’m pleased, just confused. Maureen must have told Paul what she said to me in sign before I left.”

“Which was?”

“That I’d make a wonderful father. For Christ sake, man, I’m 18! What the hell do I know about being a father? I was raised by my gran! This whole thing with Paul is getting out of hand, Mick. It’s not what I expected.”

“You’re a private investigator, Dicko, you’re supposed to expect the unexpected.”

“I need to make a private call, Mick. If you’re staying for dinner, you can fix it.”

“No problem—my speciality—take away pizza.”

As the sound of Mick’s Suzuki faded, Dickson sat on the front verandah and phoned a friend. “G’day, Tom—are you sure it’s okay to call you Tom? I feel a little disrespectful.”

“Dickson? I recognize your voice. I didn’t see you in church on Sunday.”

“I knew you’d say that.”

“Your penance is three Hail Marys. And to what do I owe the pleasure of this call?”

Dickson explained the situation with Paul. “You know, I just wanted to be friendly but now... now it’s kinda sticky or, at least, getting that way.”

“Sticky? Why? Because the boy has become attached to you? Answer this question, Dickson, why do you think the boy likes you?”

“Because he wants a father.”

“No, no, no, no, no, my son. He likes you because you are you. Being a father has nothing to do with it—likewise a brother or any other blood relative. Do you get my point?”

“Uh, no, not really.”

“Are you his father?”

“No.”

“Are you his brother?”

“No.”

“So what are you?”

“Ah! Yes, Rev, I see what you’re getting at! I’m his friend!”

“Yes, and that’s all that’s required of you, so don’t get confused about your role, my dear boy. Just be yourself. The only responsibility you have to that child is to be his friend, and to continue to treat him exactly the same way.”

“But what about Paul’s perspective—what about the way he sees me?”

“Let him see you as he wants. He’s a child with a child’s imagination, but even a child knows the difference between fantasy and reality. Just because he sees you as a father figure doesn’t change the fact that you’re not related. He’ll grow out of it.”

“When? And what if in the meantime he expects too much?”

“Let him know the parameters, let him understand that you also have a life and that having a

piece of you is better than none. Don't spoil him, don't encourage expectations that are unrealistic."

Predictably, the conversation got around to Horace and the situation in Auckland. "As I said at our first meeting, Dickson, Horace is a troubled soul, and troubled souls attract further trouble, just as happy souls attract further joy. I can't say that I'm surprised at what happened to Horace—saddened, yes—but not surprised. Have you spoken to Doris?"

"Yes—she's concerned, of course, but like you she doesn't seem surprised."

"Will I see you next Sunday?—you'll love my sermon, and I'll serve tea afterward in the presbytery."

"It's a date. Oh, and by the way, Tom, do you know anyone who actually speaks well of Horace?"

The appetizing aroma of freshly baked pizza filled the kitchen as Dickson opened the cardboard lid. "What is it?"

"Supreme—double everything," Mick replied while he searched the fridge and grabbed two beers. "My shout. Time to pig out, man."

The pair sat at the small table and quickly demolished a slice each without speaking, stretching the mozzarella to breaking point, then washing it down with a swig of icy cold beer. "So what's new?" Mick asked as another slice hovered in readiness to be devoured.

"Robert Down—we'll be visiting him tomorrow."

"Another suspect?"

"On the contrary, he speaks well of Horace, and that's why I want to meet him."

On the way to Wingham, the two riders paused at a T intersection to inspect a row of old drums, milk cans and other rusty containers that served as mail boxes for local farms. They then rode along a rutted,

dirt track, obviously frequented by 4WDs, until they arrived at the O'Reilly property. As is customary in the country, Dickson closed the gate after they entered the property, and repeated the action each time they proceeded to a new fenced paddock. In a few minutes, they reached the ramshackle farmhouse perched on a hill.

An old woman sat on a rocking chair on the wraparound verandah, shelling peas. "Paddy's gone into town," she said without being asked, "and he won't be back for an hour... probably longer if he goes to the pub."

"We're actually looking for Robert Down."

"Bob? Does he know you're comin'?"

"No."

"Then you better hightail it outta here before he shoots you."

"You mean with a gun?"

"Winchester bolt action."

Both boys took two steps backwards. "Is he in the house?"

"Lives in a shack across the creek yonder." The woman checked the position of the sun. "He's probably cleanin' the milkin' shed."

"Can you contact him?"

The woman placed the bowl of peas on the verandah floor, stood, cupped her hands to her mouth and yelled, "Cooooooooooooooooooooo!" Some seconds later, the same sound traveled back across the paddocks and reached the ears of the boys. "He'll be here in a minute," the woman continued, then resumed her seat and shelling.

"I'm not sure this is such a good idea," Mick said in a hushed voice. "Maybe we better skedaddle."

"Wuss."

The unmistakable sound of a Harley Davidson became clearer and louder as the motorcycle approached. The rider was dressed in khaki overalls and sported a shaved head and full orange beard. His nose and ears were infested with silver rings. A couple more sprouted from the edges of his bushy eyebrows for good measure. “These blokes giving you trouble, Mrs. O’Reilly?” he asked without taking his steely gaze off the boys.

“They’re here to see you.”

“I don’t know you blokes so piss off, and get those Jap sewing machines out of my sight.”

Desperately trying to hide his nervousness, Dickson mentioned the Rev. Tom Samuels. “He said you can talk with the animals, so...”

“The Bishop? He sent you here?”

“Well, not exactly, but he said you were a very interesting person and...”

“You’re not taking those Jap buzz boxes anywhere near my shack, ya hear? You’ll have to walk. Head for that hill over yonder and you’ll see the shack. I’ll be in the milking shed. You can help clean if you wanna.” And with that, the Harley turned and rumbled off toward the hill.

Chapter 15

The job of collecting and bagging cow manure and hosing the floor was given to Dickson and Mick, both of whom privately wondered why on earth they chose to suffer this indignity. “So, you’re a friend of the Bishop,” Robert Down said. “He’s a top bloke. I took him for a spin on the Harley one time and he was white as a sheet when we got back to the presbytery. Haha! So you young-uns are here because he told you I talk to the cows. Well, it’s a fact. They know their names and they understand what I’m saying. When they crowd around the feed trough, I tell the pushy ones to piss off and stop being so bloody impatient. ‘You’ll all get fed,’ I say to them, ‘so stop buggerizing around.’ They’re no different to dogs and cats, ya know. And when you look into those big brown moo-cow eyes with their long lashes, you realize the lights are not only on, but there really *is* somebody home. By the way, the cows with no white specks in their eyes are the most placid and give better milk.”

“You make me feel guilty about eating beef, Robert,” Dickson admitted.

“Bob. Call me Bob. Bob Down, haha! I eat beef, no worries. When a cow’s dead it’s dead, mate. That’s when the lights are out and nobody’s home. Nature is nature, and blokes like me weren’t designed to eat grass.”

Once the clean up was finished, Bob invited the boys to his shack for a drink. “I make the stuff meself—it’d kill a brown dog—true!—but I’m not a brown dog, haha! The Italians call it grappa—it’s 100% spirit made from grape skins.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t have any,” Dickson suggested as the trio approached the front door of the shack. “We’re riding.”

“On those rice rockets? That’s not riding, mate, that’s bloody farting.” The first thing the boys noticed inside the dilapidated corrugated-iron building was a coffin. “This is open plan living,” Bob chuckled as he pointed to various corners of the large single room. “Kitchen there, bed there, couch there and bits and pieces over there. The thunder box is out back.”

“A coffin?”

“Why not? Listen, mate, when the lights are out and nobody’s home, you’re not in a position to choose a coffin. Right? Sometimes I sleep in it... sort of acclimatizing myself to my final resting place. And the Harley’s coming with me in the same hole. Besides, that coffin is where I keep my Winchester. I guess Mrs. O’Reilly told you about that.” Bob grabbed an old blackened percolator, spooned in coffee, added water, and placed it on a kerosene cooker, which he lit with a match. “The idea is to throw the grappa down the hatch all at once, then drink the coffee. Take a seat, boys, and tell me what else the Bishop said about me.”

“He mentioned your friendship with Horace Fink.”

“One of the finest gentlemen God ever put breath into is Horace. He’s been very good to me. I went through a tough time a few years ago—ended up in the slammer for a year. Horace helped me out, got me this job and loaned me the dough to buy the Harley.”

“We heard Horace is not very well regarded in town.”

“Horace and I have that much in common,” Bob guffawed as he stroked his orange beard. “Maybe that’s why he took to me. One of his conditions was that I resign from the Rebels.” Bob took a minute to pour three coffees into enamelled metal mugs, which he placed on the coffee table situated in the middle of the

room. Then he opened the antique, round-shouldered fridge door and produced a billy can of milk and a scoop. “Straight from the teat, mate, non-homogenized, non-pasteurized, just as the calf drinks it. Sugar?”

“One.”

“One and a half for me.”

“Now, where was I? Oh, yeah... the Rebels. Let me tell you something, mate, you don’t resign from the Rebels—no way—not unless it’s in a box. But I arranged a friendly chat with one of the higher-ups and managed to ‘retire’ from active duty provided I didn’t join another club.”

“Why did Horace stipulate that as a condition?”

Bob postponed his answer while he poured three nips of grappa into small glasses. “He knew what went on in bikie clubs—you know, the anti social stuff. He said I needed to settle down. I’m 50, mate, too old for all that aggro crap.”

“You must have some amazing stories to tell.”

“Yeah, I do, but if I did, I’d be strung up by the cobbler’s awls. And now, my friends, time for the nectar of the gods. Straight down the hatch, no buggerizing around, then sip the coffee.” Bob watched the boys as they threw the contents of the small glasses down their throats. “Well?”

“Feels like I’m on fire,” Dickson wheezed as he made a desperate grab for the coffee. “Whoa!”

“Me too,” Mick agreed. “Jesus! I’m glad I’m not a brown dog.”

Bob pulled up a stool and arranged himself opposite the boys. “So, what’s this visit all about?”

“Have you heard the news about Horace?”

“I don’t read the paper and I don’t listen to the news. I live alone and that’s the way I prefer it. The world can go hang itself.”

Dickson explained the story of Horace's situation in Auckland. "The cops are treating it as attempted murder," he added.

"If they find the bastard who did it, he's dead meat—I'll see to that. Even if he's in jail, I'll arrange to have him eliminated." Bob poured himself another grappa, put it to his lips and tossed it down. "You got Horace's contact number? I don't have a phone here, but I can use Mrs. O'Reilly's. So, is that the reason you came here—to tell me what happened to Horace?"

"Partly. We've met a lot of people who say uncomplimentary things about Horace. When Tom told us you were his friend, we thought... well, we figured maybe you might tell us the other side of the story."

"Why?"

"We met Horace at the airport before he flew to New Zealand. He expressed interest in buying my house—the old weatherboard place north of Old Bar."

"Let me tell you something, boy, Horace is the kinda bloke who can read a person's character like a book. If he smells a rat, you're finished. Look at me, what do you see? Shaved head, beard, piercings, buck teeth? Horace looked beyond that, he looked inside me and he liked what he saw. And I'll tell you something else; all those fuckwits who don't like Horace have something in common—they're assholes, and they resent the fact that Horace knows it. It's like the bloke has x-ray vision and, for that matter, so do I. Haha! Horace is kinda like my cows, I talk to them and they talk to me through their eyes." Bob stood, gathered the empty mugs and glasses, and took them to a bench near the kerosene cooker. "I got things to do, boys. Maybe I'll take a ride out to the beach house sometime."

Dickson and Mick trudged their way across the grassy fields as they headed back to their 'rice rockets'. "Scary bloke," Mick commented. "No way I'd wanna

be on the wrong side of that fella. Do you think he meant what he said about ‘eliminating’ Horace’s attacker?”

“He’s a former Rebel and probably still has contacts—if you get my drift. But I don’t understand how a bloke like Horace ever got involved with Bob—those two are from different planets—no, make that galaxies.”

“Maybe we should talk to Doris.”

Back at the beach house, Dickson worked on the latest report before the teens took to the surf until shortly after lunch. Then they visited Aunt Flo’s villa. Once again, their search for the missing wedding ring proved fruitless.

“Have you thought about putting an ad in the local paper?” Dickson enquired as the trio sat down to scones and tea. “The ring could be anywhere.”

“Do you know what a hunch is?” Flo asked.

“You should you know—you’re in the detective business. I’ve read every Agatha Christie novel and she always talks about hunches.”

“You have a hunch? About what?”

“The ring is still here in this house—I just know it. What I don’t know is exactly where.”

Later that afternoon, Paul visited the beach house for his training session. The boy experimented with catching a few short rides while lying flat, chest-down on the board. “Pretty soon,” Dickson said with an encouraging grin, “I’ll teach you to stand. By the way, when’s your birthday?”

“Four weeks, three days and... uh... about 7 hours.”

“But you’re not counting.”

Dickson and Mick relaxed on the front verandah with a beer each as the sun began to set behind them.

“Are you staying for dinner?” the blond asked. “I think I’ll do a bolognaise.”

“You know I love your bolognaise, mate!
Woohoo!”

“Don’t your folks get peeved about your always being here?”

“Not really. I’m an adult.”

“But it’s like you’re never at home.”

“That depends on what you mean by home. I feel like this place is my home.”

“I’m not sure how to take that.”

“Hey, if I’m intruding, just say so and I’m outta here.”

“That’s not what I meant, Mick, and you know it. I enjoy your company but... well, I never thought about it as being permanent—I mean like 24/7. Am I making sense?” His mate took a swig of beer and stared at the sea. “Okay,” Dickson continued, “let me explain: when you leave for home at night, it’s like I own myself again. I enjoy the solitude. BUT, and this is important, I look forward to hearing the sound of your Suzuki again in the mornings and the sight of your goofy face at the kitchen doorway. Do you see where I’m coming from here?”

“Can I tell you something, Dicko? I can’t imagine not having you around. I feel kinda lost when we’re not together, like I’m not the whole me. You know? I think of us as brothers—two peas in a pod. The sum of the something or other...”

“The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.”

“Yeah—so my question is, how important am I to you?”

“Compared to what? You’re losing the plot, Mick. How can I compare you to anyone else when there is no one else?”

“Why isn’t there anyone else?”

“I don’t know, for Christ sake! There just isn’t. To be honest, I kinda worry about your dependence on me; it makes me nervous.”

“I get the feeling I shouldn’t stay for dinner. We might end up arguing.”

“You’ll not only stay for dinner, Mick, and, by the way, that’s an order, I’ll also teach you how to make bolognaise MY way. It’s about time you learned how to feed your dumb face without resorting to take away pizza. And that’s that—don’t argue.”

“I don’t understand you at all, Dicko.”

“That makes me more interesting.”

Chapter 16

Dickson placed a carrot, a stick of celery, an onion, a couple of mushrooms and two garlic cloves on the chopping board. “It’s about time you learned how to make spag bol, Mick, so get chopping, but only use half the carrot.”

“Which half?”

“Jeez ... and wrap the half you don’t use in alfoil—it keeps better.”

“Do I peel the onion first?”

“I really don’t believe this! Let me show you.”

Dickson painstakingly took Mick through the various processes, then showed him how to rock the knife backwards and forwards over the diced vegetables to chop them finely. “Okay, now we fry them in a pan on moderate heat with a knob of butter and a dash of olive oil. Give them a couple of minutes, then throw in the minced steak.”

When that was done, Mick stood over the pan and used a wooden spoon to separate the steak and hammer the lumps into fine pieces. “You can buy ready-made bolognaise at the supermarket for just a few bucks, you know.”

“It’s crap. This is the genuine article. Okay, now you’re ready to add the chunky tomato pasta sauce.”

“You cheated! It’s in a bottle!”

“Now pour it in... all of it.” As he continued to follow Dickson’s directions, Mick added three bay leaves, ground pepper, a few shakes of Tabasco and a pinch of salt. “Turn down the heat to simmer, put the lid on the pan and that’s it for about half an hour—then we cook the pasta.”

A tsunami? In Australian waters? It wasn’t possible. Or was it? An earthquake near the Solomon

Islands had already caused damage to the local South Pacific region.

IDN23900

TOP PRIORITY FOR IMMEDIATE

BROADCAST

NSW TSUNAMI WARNING

*Australian Government Bureau of Meteorology
New South Wales*

For people in coastal areas of New South Wales, Lord Howe Island and Norfolk Island.

An earthquake of preliminary magnitude 8.1 occurred at 06:40 am EST this morning near the Solomon Islands, [epicentre 8.6S, 157.2E] and may have generated a tsunami.

At the time of this warning a Tsunami has been detected. Further monitoring is taking place to determine the extent and severity of the threat.

A series of waves associated with this tsunami may impact Australia later this morning, reaching Norfolk Island from Midday [Norfolk Island time], Lord Howe Island from 11:00 am [Lord Howe Island time] and the NSW coastline starting from between 10:15 am EST and midday. [Sydney region most likely around 11:30 am EST onwards].

Dangerous waves and currents may affect beaches, harbors and rivers for several hours from the time of impact and low-lying coastal areas could be flooded. The waves can be separated in time by between ten to sixty minutes and the first wave of the series may not be the largest.

The NSW State Emergency Service advises that:
· *People at the beach should leave the beach, and any areas exposed to surf, and move to higher ground.*

· *People in boats in shallow water should immediately return to land, secure vessels and move to higher ground.*

· *Boats and ships at sea should move to deep water and not return to harbor until advised that it is safe to do so.*

· *If you see the sea go out like a very low tide then immediately go to high ground.*

· *People should keep listening to the local media for updated information and advice and follow instructions and advice from emergency services*

“Did you hear the news?” Mick asked next morning, almost breathless as he entered the kitchen. “We gotta get outta here!”

“Don’t panic.”

“Don’t panic? This house could become a pile of flotsam, mate!”

“Bacon and poached eggs?”

“How the bloody hell can you talk about breakfast at a time like this?”

Dickson placed a number of bacon rashers in a hot pan. A moment later, the irresistibly appetizing aroma of the sizzling strips reached Mick’s nostrils. He checked his watch. “Okay, bacon and poached eggs, but make it snappy!”

“I had a sign chat earlier with Paul—the tsunami warning hadn’t made the morning papers, so I told him about it.”

“He freaked, right?”

“Nope.”

“What the bloody hell is the matter with you two? Who do we know with a truck? We need a truck—we need to move all your stuff to higher ground—like pronto! That wave will hit in about three hours from now.”

“What wave? There is no wave. Besides, this house has been here for over 100 years, what makes you think it’s gonna be wiped out in just a few hours?”

“You’re crazy—you know that? Stark raving crazy! Well, I’m taking control here, Dickson. If you won’t do it, I will!”

A friend’s truck arrived at the beach house at 8am. Mick and his friend immediately began to load the vehicle with furniture and various other household items not bolted to the floor. And Dickson? He sat on the front verandah drinking coffee while he scanned the ocean horizon. By 10am the truck was loaded.

“Dickson? You’re not thinking straight. You’re in shock or something. It’s time to get our asses outta here, dammit!”

“Have you checked the bureau of meteorology’s website?”

“The computer is packed away on the truck. Now, listen, are you gonna get your dumb ass outta here or do I have to drag you?”

Dickson reluctantly agreed and the boys headed out back to their Suzukis. Both engines roared into life, but Dickson took a minute or two to gaze at the old house before he finally followed his mate along the dirt road.

Issued at 1208 on Monday the 2nd of April

A series of waves and sea level rises associated with this tsunami may further impact eastern Australia today, reaching Norfolk Island, Lord Howe Island and the NSW coastline starting from between now and early

afternoon. Unusual waves and currents may continue for several hours after the time of initial impact.

Impact on the Sydney region could occur anytime from now through until mid afternoon.

Issued at 1353 on Monday the 2nd of April

Only small rises in sea level, [of the order of 10cm], were associated with this Tsunami on the NSW coast and it no longer poses a threat to the coastline or Islands.

Unusual currents may continue to affect beaches, harbors and rivers mouths over the next 24 hours.

The NSW State Emergency Service advises that people can return to normal activity with caution.

No further warnings are expected be issued for this event.

The beach house was back to normal at 3:30pm, with all furniture and fittings returned to their usual place. Dickson and Mick took a beer each to the front verandah and sat on the old canvas chairs. “What went through your mind when you hesitated on the Suzuki,” Mick asked.

“My life,” the shaggy blond shrugged, and took a swig of beer. “My whole life...all the images of my growing up here, my gran, the aroma of Gran’s home cooking, the surfing, my room...everything. I didn’t want to believe that it could all be wiped away in one fell swoop.”

“Your life is more important, mate.”

“Is it? What’s life without a past? This house *is* my life, Mick. Isn’t that the way you feel about your home?”

“No, not really.”

“Maybe because it’s safe and your folks are still there. My gran is gone and I don’t think I could handle the house going as well. It would be like being robbed of all the memories—like waking up one day with amnesia and not being able to recall anything about your life.”

“Is that what you’ll tell Horace Fink?”

“Eventually, but I need to get to know him a little better first. Besides, he may change his mind after the tsunami thing. You know something, Mick? I’ve always felt safe here, this is my home, my security, it’s where I belong. The tsunami may have fizzled but the idea of something like that happening has screwed my brain. I’m not sure I’ll ever feel safe here again. Do you understand?”

“Maybe... If you feel the same way about losing the house as I do about losing you, then, yeah, I think I understand.”

Paul arrived shortly afterward, ready for his surfing lessons. During his time in the surf, the boy sensed something different about his tutor’s mood, but waited until the lesson was over before he mentioned it in sign. “Something is troubling you,” his fingers said once the boards were stacked against the verandah wall. Dickson’s only response was a shrug and a smile as he stood beneath the shower hose. Once the showers and toweling were completed, Paul repeated his comment.

“I’m not sure you’d understand,” Dickson replied in a mix of sign and lip reading.

“Try me.”

Mick was out back working on his bike, so Dickson grabbed two Cokes from the fridge and took

them back to the verandah where he explained to Paul his concern about a possible tsunami and the damage it might cause to the house.

“My mom says I can’t run away from my deafness, so I have no choice but to deal with it.” It took Dickson a moment of puzzlement to realize the point his little mate was making. “She says if she’d known that I would be born deaf when I was still inside her, she might have decided to abort the birth.”

“That’s unthinkable!”

“That’s what mom says—unthinkable—she says I’m the most wonderful gift from God. Do you believe in God?”

“Not in the traditional sense, no. I agree with Maureen that you’re a wonderful gift—probably more than you know—but I’m not sure about some bearded bloke up there wrapping presents.”

“Mom also says that worrying about something that hasn’t happened or maybe won’t happen doesn’t do any good. So I figure if you worry about a possible tsunami, it’ll spoil all the fun... and mine too!”

“You look forward to coming here, don’t you.”

“I told my friends at school,” the auburn haired lad beamed, “and they’re jealous, big time.”

“Do they treat you as an equal?”

“Most do, some don’t. They play practical jokes, like sneaking up behind me.”

“What does Maureen say about that?”

“She says don’t react—if I spoil their fun they’ll stop doing it.” Paul paused for a sip of his Coke.

“Dickson? How come you’re such a nice person?”

“That’s easy, mate—because you’re a nice person, and so is your mom—she’s a very special lady.”

“You should marry her.”

“WHAT??? No offence, mate, but... well, uh, I'm kinda sorta... uh, too young or something.”

“Wuss.”

“Hahaha! Anyway, you're right, there's no point getting my knickers in a knot about something that may or may not happen. But I can tell you one thing, China, that tsunami warning sure brought home to me what's really important in my life, so I suppose that's a good thing.”

Chapter 17

Cody Callaghan phoned later that afternoon just to say g'day and ask how things were going. "What things?" Dickson enquired. "You mean the tsunami? Yeah, that worried me for a while. Hey, listen, mate, can you do me a fav? Can you check those pics Horace took?... the backgrounds, not you."

"Backgrounds?"

"No offence, mate, but I'm not sure Horace was photographing the python."

"Bullshit."

"Just check the backgrounds, okay? Humor me. I'll phone back in about an hour."

As Dickson ended the call, Mick asked what was on the menu for dinner.

"Grilled seaweed."

"Har-de-har."

"I dunno, Mick, I'm not all that hungry after today's drama. Maybe I can do something with leftovers—like jaffles—or an omelette."

"With chips? No one makes chips like you do, mate."

"My gran did."

The next call came from Doris Fink who advised that she and Horace had booked a flight back to Australia on Saturday. "But," she explained, "Horace will be in Concord Hospital in Sydney for further observation. He might be there another few days."

"And you?"

"I'll be back in Taree Sunday morning."

"How's the police investigation?"

"The forensic people found a few hairs and bits of other material, but nothing that matches anyone they know of—they checked all the hotel staff for DNA. At the moment, it's a dead end."

“Not quite.”

“Yes, my faux par, sorry. Perhaps we can get together for a chat on Sunday for lunch? I also need to update your pay check.”

Dickson broke 4 eggs into a bowl, whisked them, added chopped onion, tomato, mushrooms, leftover chicken and ham and a generous fistful of grated cheese. At the same time, Mick peeled two large potatoes and sliced them into chip-size lengths which he placed into a wire basket in readiness for stage 1 of the process.

“What now, Dicko?”

“Straight into the deep fryer.”

“It’s not turned on!”

“That’s the whole point, Mr. Wannabe, place them in cold oil THEN turn the heat to medium.”

The chips were allowed to partially cook until they’d sweated a coating of sugary starch. Dickson shook the basket to free them of excess oil, and scattered them over a sheet of newspaper to cool. After turning the fryer temperature to three-quarter heat ready for stage 2, Dickson took a frypan, added a knob of butter and heated the pan on low.

Method: pour omelette mixture into a slightly hot pan, replace lid to allow steam to cook the surface of the mixture simultaneously with the base (to prevent burning). Turn off heat after 30 seconds and use the pan’s residual heat to finish cooking.

During that time, the cooled chips were ready for stage 2: *return chips to deep fryer and hot oil, carefully. Cook until crisp.* “It’s the sugary starch that forms a crisp coating,” Dickson explained as he shook the basket and tossed the chips. “That’s the sound you want, mate, like a pile of dry twigs, except these are fluffy in the center.”

The boys enjoyed a chilled glass or two of dry white wine with their meal, then Dickson phoned Cody.

“You might be right,” the spiky black mop admitted, “just about all the pics have one thing in common—bees.”

“Bees? I didn’t see any bees.”

“It looks like a small cloud that keeps changing position... I’ve seen those swarms at Tony’s farm a couple of times. If you want, I could check with Tony to see what he thinks.”

“Of what? The python or the bees?”

“Hahaha! Yeah, maybe that’s not such a good idea—I don’t want Tony thinking that maybe Horace is gay or something, or quizzing me about whatever.”

“So you’re pretty sure it’s a bee swarm?”

“Not hundreds, but it looks like it could be.”

“Why the bloody hell would Horace photograph bees?”

“Search me—maybe he was hoping for a decent pic, but the swarm is too far away. Hey, Dickson, you’re the detective, not me. Maybe it’s got something to do with that bee farming book I saw at his house. Yeah?”

“Could be—who knows? By the way, Doris will be back in town this Sunday.”

“Yeah, she phoned and told me. Hey, she thinks you’re one helluva hottie, Dickson.”

“Yeah, right.”

“True! I reckon her panties were wet when she sang your praises, mate. She’s in lust, hehehe.”

“Cut the crap, Cody. When are you coming out this way for a surf?”

“Tomorrow after school? Is it okay if I bring a friend?”

Dickson and Mick relaxed on the front verandah and discussed Cody’s comment in relation to bees.

“The thing is,” Dickson pondered aloud, “bees and honey seem to be some sort of recurring theme here. Why that is, I have no idea.”

“Coincidence?”

“Probably, but you must admit, it’s curious.”

Cody’s friend Mark is an impressive youth, not just physically but in terms of his entire demeanor. The impression he gave Dickson and Mick when they met the second time was that here was a young man destined to go places. He oozed confidence and success but not ego. Both Mark and Cody wore straight black hair, but Mark’s was cut short, and he stood a little taller. His T-shirt hid little of his well-developed chest, and hung loose over his obviously flat stomach. His shorts revealed a pair of muscular and powerful legs that matched his strong tanned arms.

The pair had hitched a ride to the beach house. “It took a while,” Cody explained, “not too many drivers have room for a surfboard. Mark doesn’t ride—he body surfs.”

When Paul arrived shortly afterward for his regular surfing lesson, Mick and Cody volunteered to be his coach for the afternoon while Dickson acted as Mark’s host. They took a beer each to the front verandah and watched the boys in the surf. “You remind me of Code’s surfing mate, Steve,” Mark commented. “He looks a lot like you.”

“Cody’s a very likable bloke.”

“He can be a real pain in the ass but, yeah, he’s one of a kind. He and his folks have helped me a lot.”

“In what way?”

“I was... how shall I put it... antisocial... a bully with a major chip on my shoulder. Cody changed all that... not at first, but eventually. His middle name is ‘Persistence’.”

“And his folks?”

“They showed me what a real family is like... my dad split when I was just a kid... now it’s just my mom and me. I’ve not spoken to my dad—if you can call him that—in ten years. He lives in Perth. Cody’s dad, though, is the coolest, the best, and he treats me like a son but not as a kid, as an equal. And what about you?”

Dickson explained the death of his parents when he was a child, and being raised by his gran.

“So it’s just you now?” Mark asked.

“Yep, just little ol’ me. I have an aunt... my gran’s younger sister.”

“Girlfriend?”

“Nope.”

“You should get a girl, mate, it’ll do you good... unless...”

“Unless what?”

“Nothing. Anyway, it’s a good thing you’re doing for young Paul. That’s the kinda thing Cody does—always helping people—when they’re not on the wrong end of his fists, that is.” Mark paused to shake his head and grin. “He can be pretty damn fiery, that bloke.”

“That’s what he says about you,” Dickson laughed.

When the surfers returned to the front yard to shower under the hose, Cody was full of praise for Paul. “He’s got natural talent,” he said. “It won’t be long before he’s riding 20 footers. His only problem is he has no bloody fear. You’re gonna need to keep your eye on this bloke, Dickson. He’s crazy!” It was a comment that caused Paul to beam with pride.

As the guests prepared to leave, Dickson and Mick offered Cody and Mark a lift into town. “I’ll race you!” Paul said excitedly in sign. “Give me five minutes’ start.” The redhead jumped onto his bike and

took off down the dirt road, pedaling for all he was worth. When the Suzukis began to catch up, both riders slowed a little to ensure that Paul won the ‘race’ by a whisker, then they dropped their pillion passengers at Old Bar, from where they would hitch a ride back home.

“Hey, Dickson,” Cody said before the group parted company, “have you spoken to Paul about his deafness?”

“Not in great depth, no.”

“It occurred to me in the surf that he couldn’t hear the sound of the waves and all the other sounds we take for granted.”

“He wears a hearing aid.”

“Not in the surf. Can you imagine that? Lots of furious action with no sound? It must be eerie. How do you explain sound to someone who hasn’t experienced it? Like the whooshing of the green room when you’re inside, and then the silence that follows for a few seconds before you hear the roar of the crashing falls again?”

“Did you discuss it with Paul?”

“I wasn’t sure how to approach it—I don’t know how sensitive he is to... well, you know. I’d like to get to know him better—he’s a great kid.”

All four shook hands and then separated.

“What’s for dinner?” Mick asked as he and Dickson entered the supermarket. “How about fish and chips?”

“We had chips last night.”

“So?”

In the beach house kitchen, Dickson placed two filets of barramundi on a hot, oiled griddle while Mick attended to stage 2 of the chips. “What do you think of Mark?” was Mick’s unexpected question.

“Impressive.”

“How impressive?”

“Almost as impressive as you.”

“Really? Do you mean that?”

“Isn’t that what you wanted to hear?”

“That was below the belt, Dicko.”

“Listen, Mick,” Dickson said firmly as he turned the filets, “I don’t compare you to anyone else. Okay? You’re you and Mark is Mark. Do you have a problem with insecurity or something?”

“Maybe I do. It’s just that you don’t say much—I mean, about us, about me.”

“Actions speak louder than words, Mick.”

Chapter 18

One particular aspect of the assault on Horace Fink in Auckland troubled Dickson. As he and Mick sat down to dinner he asked his mate and partner why Horace didn't see his attacker or have any clue to his or her identity. "And what the hell was a stranger doing in his hotel room in the first place?"

"Maybe it wasn't a stranger."

"It puzzles me why Horace has not given police one single clue about the attack."

"Maybe he prefers not to."

"Why?"

"You're Sherlock and I'm Watson, remember?"

"He said it was a business trip. I wonder if Doris has a list of his appointments. No, that doesn't add up—if she had, she would have given the list to police but, as she said, the investigation is at a dead end." Dickson took a forkful of barramundi, chewed and swallowed while deep in thought, and then added: "Business trip? What if that's just an excuse for something else?"

"Like what?"

"I don't know. But don't you think it's strange that he's always going on business trips but has no business other than investments in stocks and shares? He's left behind a trail of disappointed hopefuls. He promises the world and delivers nothing. Perhaps it's just a ploy to make Doris think he's actively pursuing opportunities..."

"Which are not necessarily related to business?"

"Precisely, my dear Watson. Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"That he's a closet gay on the prowl? But that's just a hunch, mate, I'm not sure why that occurred to me—there's nothing so far to indicate his sexual preference, not even the photos of Cody."

“We need to be careful here,” Mick, “we don’t want to lose the plot. All the people we’ve spoken to thus far have not expressed any dislike of Horace for reasons related to sexuality; it’s all to do with money.”

“What do you expect them to say? That they’re pissed at Horace because he knocked them back when they got a bit too cosy for comfort? Nobody’s gonna admit that, especially not to the likes of you and me.”

“What are you saying? That whatever motive a potential murderer might have need not necessarily relate to money or business issues?”

“Go figure, Dicko. Besides, Tony wants to marry Doris, and that Vodkinski dude is still pissed about Doris giving him the flick.”

“Why does this detective business have to be so damn complicated?”

At 7, the boys watched the television news and learned of the massacre at Virginia Tech; 33 shot dead and 15 injured by a gunman who turned the gun on himself after the senseless shooting. “The right to bear arms,” was Dickson’s subdued comment as he watched horrifying vision of the mayhem. “I wonder what the American public thinks about the first amendment right now.”

"Second."

"Second what?"

"Amendment. The first is free speech, freedom of religion, freedom of the press and that kinda stuff. The right to bear arms is the second."

"What makes you so sure?"

"I got a mate in Ohio."

"You never mentioned that before. Who?"

"Jason Dean...he knows everything."

"Does he know about the third amendment?"

"What's that?"

"Mick Morris is a smartass."

"Hahaha! Anyway, the killer was obviously mentally deranged."

"That didn't stop him from exercising his right to bear arms."

"What about Bob Down? He owns a Winchester."

"If the cops found out about it he'd be fined and maybe even jailed... unless he's got a license, which I doubt."

"But Bob's not the type to go on a bloody rampage."

"How can you know that? Martin Bryant didn't look the type to massacre 35 people at Port Arthur in '96. Actually, when you think about it, if we're supposed to be honest, law-abiding citizens we should inform the authorities of Bob's rifle."

"I'll leave that to you, Dicko."

"Ditto, Mick. Weird, huh? The old Aussie tradition of never dobbing in a mate. I think Bob's aware of that, which is why he doesn't mind who knows about the Winchester, so long as it's not the cops."

"The African lion and the wild cat look so much alike, yet they are different. An ancient African theory explains it this way. The same lioness gives birth to numerous cubs some of which are truly lions at heart and some of which are not. How does the mother lion know which is which? Months after the birth of the cubs, just before they are weaned, the mother lion leaves the den and then, in an unsuspecting moment, she jumps into the den with a thundering roar as if she was an enemy attacking the cubs. Some of the cubs stand up and fight back the presumed enemy while others flee the den with their tails between their legs.

*The cubs that hold their ground to face the danger
prove themselves to be real lions. Those that run away
prove to be mere wild cats, false lions.*

*“Ah! I see one of my dear flock dozing during
my sermon. Never mind, I forgive you as the good Lord
forgives me—besides, you can go to my web site later.”*

Mass was followed by the tea ceremony in the presbytery. “Shorts and flip flops again, I see,” the Rev Tom Samuels said as he spooned loose tea into the warmed silver pot. “Do you lads ever wear anything else?”

“Sometimes nothing at all,” Mick joked, and received an elbow from Dickson.

“That could vastly improve the general attendance in church on Sundays,” Tom smiled. “I’ll see what I can do about appointing you as altar boys.”

“Come to think of it,” Dickson laughed, “why aren’t there altar girls?”

“For the same reason there are boy choirs—I’ll leave it to you lads to figure that one out for yourselves lest I be struck by lightning before I finish pouring the tea. Butterscotch fingers anyone? And it’s okay to dunk them in your tea when I’m not looking. I suppose you’re aware of that terrible shooting massacre in Virginia.”

“How does religion explain that kind of senseless tragedy?” Dickson asked as Tom seated his more-than-ample butt at the table.

“Explain? Explain what? Some things are inexplicable my young friend. There is no logic to such a tragedy, at least none that humans understand. If you endeavor to explain various mysteries of life, you risk getting into the area of superstition, such as primitive cultures did when they worshipped false gods like the

sun and the moon. There are some things we need to accept because they exist and not for any other reason. Albert Einstein said that joy in looking and comprehending is the greatest of all Nature's gifts. But, I ask you, how much of what Einstein comprehended represents all that remains to be comprehended?"

"I don't get it, Tom, if God is all powerful why does he allow these terrible things to occur?"

"The operative word in your question, Dickson, is 'allow'. How do you know that God 'allows' these things to occur?"

"I think I understand what you're saying, Rev, but your sermon today was about cubs proving whether or not they are true lions or just wild cats. With respect, I can't help thinking that religion runs away from the search for truth as well as reasonable explanations for the things we are yet to comprehend. You know, it's like religion says, 'Oh, well, that's the way it is and God knows best, so lets all carry on with our prayers and whatever'."

"You're a thinker, Dickson, and I have no quarrel with that. But the road you have thus far traveled is short by comparison to the one you will ultimately travel. By all means ask questions, by all means search for truth and meaning. I have every confidence in you boys—every confidence. In the meantime, what's the latest with Horace Fink?"

Dickson and Mick took turns to bring Tom up to speed with what they knew about the case so far. "What we can't figure is why Horace seems to be unwilling to give police any meaningful information that might help the investigation. And please don't say Horace works in mysterious ways!"

Dickson's joke tickled the old man. "You also have a wicked sense of humor, my friend, and I have no quarrel with that either. However, mystery is the

condiment of life—without it, life would be boring. Now tell me this, are you saying that Horace may have something to hide? That’s a possibility, of course; however I have no idea of what it might be.”

“Do you know anything about his business trips?”

“Only that they never result in any business. More tea?”

“Do you find that curious?”

“Obviously you do, Dickson.” The group paused to watch the golden brown liquid fill each of the porcelain cups before Tom continued. “Yes, I admit, it is curious, but keep in mind what curiosity did to Sylvester. Besides, it’s none of our business.”

“How can you say that with certainty?”

“Touché.”

On the way home, Dickson and Mick called into Aunt Flo’s place where they once again searched for the missing wedding ring, albeit without success. “I’ve made a list of all the places it could be,” she explained. “It must be here somewhere.”

“How much does it cost to hire a bulldozer for the day?” Mick joked, then realized his audience was not amused. “What we really need is a list of the places we’ve missed so far in our search.”

“We’ve searched every square millimeter of this place,” Dickson insisted.

“If we had,” Flo said smugly, “we’d have found the ring.”

The boys stopped at the market to get provisions for the afternoon barbecue; sausages, steaks, eggs, bread rolls, salad and drinks. While there, they met Robert Down. “I’ve just come from your place,” he said, “but you weren’t there. I left a note pinned to your back door.”

“We were at church.”

“Church? With the Bishop? Did he mention me? He’s always at me for not going to Mass, but... well, I get weird looks from the rest of the congregation, if you know what I mean, and the Harley kinda looks out of place in the carpark. Anyway, you blokes don’t look like churchies—could have fooled me. I thought all surfies were into sex, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll.”

“We’re not churchies,” Dickson explained, “at least, not regular. We like Tom and enjoy a bit of a chat. He’s a top bloke ... for a priest. By the way, have you met Doris?”

“Doris Fink? No, not really. I get the feeling she doesn’t like me—I’m a bit too downmarket and scruffy for her tastes.”

Bob’s comment caused Dickson to dismiss his idea to invite the biker to the barbecue. “That’s too bad, considering your friendship with Horace. He’s back in Oz, by the way... in Concord hospital for observation. Doris expects him home by about mid week. Can I ask you something, Bob? Do you know much about Horace’s business trips?”

“Yep.”

“And?”

“And nothing.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to pry. Listen, mate, Mick and I have a few things to do this afternoon. Maybe you can call around another day. We’d like to see you again.”

“You sure I won’t upset the neighbors?”

“What neighbors? There aren’t any.”

Chapter 19

As the Harley thundered out of sight, the boys returned to the task of filling their saddle bags and backpacks with groceries. “Bob knows something about Horace’s business trips,” Mick said.

“Whatever it is, he’s not about to dob in his mate,” Dickson commented, “and he’s certainly not the type I’d choose to mess with.”

Guests began to arrive at 12.30pm; first Cody and Mark, then Doris in the company of Tony Spiropoulos, followed by surprise guest constable Clive Farrell who apologized for gate crashing the barbecue. However, Dickson and Mick made him welcome and insisted he stay.

“I wish you hadn’t done that,” Doris told Dickson quietly. “Farrell knows my husband and he’s probably wondering what I’m doing here with Tony, not to mention you and Mick.”

“You’re Cody’s neighbor, right? And Tony is Cody’s friend, right? Cody invited both of you to the barbie separately, right?”

“He did? Oh, I see! Yes, he did—of course—separately. Silly me! I’ll just have a word to Cody to make sure he understands.”

Farrell was introduced to Spiropoulos by Dickson as ‘our bee person’. “Have you tried Tony’s honey? It’s awesome!”

“So is this,” Tony smiled as he reached into his Esky and handed a jar to Dickson. “It’s honey mustard sauce for the steaks—home made, of course.”

“What’s in it—apart from the obvious?” Farrell asked as he checked the label and read the ingredients. “Oh, I see—Dijon mustard, honey, parsley, vinegar, chilli, peppercorns—sounds great!”

When Clive Farrell was introduced to Cody and Mark by Doris, she made sure to refer to him as ‘constable’ in order that the boys were aware of his profession. “Just call me Clive,” the cop smiled and offered his hand to the teens. “I’m out of uniform and not here to arrest anyone.”

“Would you?” Mark asked.

“Depends on the circumstances. That’s quite a handshake you have there, Mark.”

“So, if someone here were to, say, smoke a joint...?”

“They wouldn’t smoke it in front of me.

Besides, smoking dope isn’t a crime in itself. If a person carries a commercial quantity and/or sells it, then it becomes my business. Why do you ask, Mark?”

“Just curious.”

“Are you into surfing?” Cody interrupted as he shook Clive’s hand, hoping to lighten the tone of the conversation. And from that point on, the topic of surfing became the focus. Mark, disinterested in airs and floaters, turned his attention to Doris who was not only the lone female at the gathering but also a very good looking woman.

“Where’s your girlfriend?” she asked.

“Out with her girlfriends doing the hen’s only thing.”

“So you’re at a loose end?”

“In more ways than one,” the handsome lad grinned. His less than subtle remark prompted Doris to seek immediate refuge in introducing Mark to Tony.

Cody, meanwhile, was curious about Clive’s profession. “I guess you get asked this question all the time, but what’s it like to be a ... police officer.”

“You mean a copper? I love it, it’s very satisfying. A bit like surfing in a way, hard work but rewarding.”

“In what way?”

“Keeping crooks off the streets, settling disputes, helping little old ladies.”

“Isn’t that a little like being a dog catcher? They’ll never run out of stray dogs.”

“True, but imagine if there were no dog catchers.”

“You seem like a pretty normal sort of bloke.”

“Why shouldn’t I be?”

“I dunno... kinda like inviting a priest to a wild teen party, hehehe. No one can swear.”

“Cops tend to socialize among themselves, Cody, not exclusively but mostly.”

“Like we’re the enemy or something?”

“I’ve been a cop for only a couple of years but I’m aware of the unease a cop creates among the general community.”

“Like a teacher patrolling the school grounds.”

“Yeah, something like that... or the tax man at a business meeting. Do you have any plans for the future?”

“Marine biology—I love the sea and everything in it. I’m sure I was a dolphin or something in my last life. What do you think you were?”

“Good question, mate. Maybe a leper, hahahaha!”

As the afternoon drifted along, Dickson eventually seized the opportunity to speak with Doris, alone. “Did Horace mention the success or otherwise of his business dealings in New Zealand?”

“He rarely talks about his private business with me.”

“Do you find that odd?”

“Not really. I don’t talk with him about my life either.”

“What on earth *do* you talk about?”

“Whatever is in the newspaper or on the tele, local goss, things that don’t relate specifically to either of us as individuals. Actually, Dickson, I prefer it that way. The last thing I want is to be bored to tears with the reasons for his regular trips. I’m just thankful for the long absences.”

“I don’t mean to be too inquisitive, Doris, but don’t you ever question—at least in your own mind—the fact that the business trips never result in any new business?”

“Why should I? To be brutally honest, I don’t give a damn. Besides, the last thing Horace needs is a nagging wife. He would interpret that as meddling.”

“You’re not even privately curious?”

“Perhaps a little now and again, but I’m also aware of the consequences of knowing more than I should—or need to.”

“Which are?”

“That I might loathe him even more than I do now.”

“What prompted you to visit him in Auckland hospital?”

“His reaction if I’d chosen not to perform my wifely duty.”

“So you would have preferred to stay home?”

“You’re the detective, Mr. Bottoms.”

When Paul arrived later in the afternoon for his surfing lesson, Doris and Tony decided to leave, which was the perfect excuse for the rest of the guests (and hosts) to head down the beach to the surf. Everyone except Mark, who preferred to body surf, rode boards, each taking a turn to teach Paul a few new tricks.

By the onset of sundown, only Dickson and Mick remained at the house. Clive Farrell had offered Cody and Mark a lift, complete with surfboard, into town.

“That was quite a day,” Mick commented as he and his mate cleaned up the yard in preparation for the kitchen detail. “And Tony’s steak sauce was awesome! By the way, Cody said something interesting today.”

“About?”

“The Fink’s bedroom.”

“Bloody hell, don’t tell me Cody’s been snooping around Doris’ bedroom!” Dickson led the way into the house as the boys carried various items into the kitchen.

“Nope, nothing like that. You know that local painter bloke—the one who drives that old red Holden van with the wide wheels and V8? He’s doing some work at Cody’s place and they got to talking. Seems the painter worked on the Fink house a while back. He was painting the bedroom ceiling when he noticed something. It was a miniature camera lens. So he checked another part of the room and saw a miniature microphone.”

“Are you serious?”

“That’s what Cody told me.”

As Dickson began to wash the dishes, he took a moment to ponder the revelation. “So who was responsible for the installation of the spy equipment, Doris or Horace?”

“Has to be Horace. I guess he wants to keep a check on his wife’s activities when he’s away on business... or whatever he’s away on.”

“Or he gets a buzz outta watching his own performance.”

“Or someone else’s.”

“I wonder if... I wonder if Doris and Tony Spiropoulos...? Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

After such a big lunch, neither boy was hungry so they settled for roast beef sandwiches and a beer. “Jeez, did you notice the way Mark turns heads?” Mick

asked. “When he stripped off for the surf, I could hardly believe his definition—cut and chiseled like you don’t see very often.”

“He works out—three hundred sit ups and three hundred push ups every day. He’s also a boxer. He mentioned all that stuff when he was here last.”

“Narrow hips, tight buns...”

“Cut it out, Mick.”

“Why?”

“You sound like you’ve got the hots for that guy.”

“I only have eyes for you, Dicko.”

“STOP THAT!”

The boys took their sandwiches and beer to the front verandah where they discussed the possible ramifications of Cody’s revelation about the spy equipment in the Fink bedroom. “If the murder of Horace Fink is, as Doris insists, inevitable, what on earth has the camera got to do with it?”

“Maybe it hasn’t—like I said, Horace is just keeping an eye on his missus.”

“Or is she keeping an eye on him?”

“What for?”

“I dunno, mate, but I’d love to get my hands on that video... if it exists. You know something, Mick? I can’t help thinking that a murder is inevitable, but not necessarily the murder of Horace.”

“Whose then?”

“One of his enemies.”

“And who is the potential murderer? Horace?”

“It’s a possibility.”

“That’s the damn trouble with this bloody case... way too many possibilities. It’s like trying to back the winner of a horse race.”

“And if you were a betting man...?”

“I reckon the most obvious and logical scenario is that Doris and Tony form a pact to bump off Horace. Doris gets the money and Tony gets to marry her. Simple.”

“Too simple.”

“Not really, put yourself in Doris’ shoes... figuratively speaking, of course, hahaha. Doris hires you and me to investigate various suspects in the hope that we will discover evidence that takes the heat and focus off her plot with Tony. Yeah?”

“It’s a possibility.”

“STOP SAYING THAT! It’s more than a possibility, it’s a probability. Think about it, Sherlock, who has the most to gain from Horace’s murder?”

Chapter 20

A black 1951 Wolseley 6/80 entered the driveway of the beach house. Horace Fink alighted, observed the two Suzukis and a bicycle, and approached the back door. “Anyone home?” After several attempts to alert someone to his presence, Horace stepped through the back door and followed the hall to the front verandah where he took a seat and watched the boys in the surf. He checked his watch: almost 5pm. Horace then wandered around the exterior of the house, inspecting the size of the block. He was obviously more interested in the land area than the building itself.

At 5:30, the boys—two bronzed Aussies and one whitewashed carrot-top—returned to the house to shower. “This is our friend Paul,” Dickson explained. “We’re teaching him how to surf.” All four shook hands. “Can I offer you something to drink, Mr. Fink?”
“I’d kill for a light beer... and call me Horace.”

As the guest sipped his beer and watched the boys take turns under the shower hose, he explained that his visit was business rather than social. “I don’t mean to be rude, Dickson, but I’d prefer to speak to you in private. If now is not convenient for you...”

“No, no, no, it’s fine, Horace. I’ll just see Paul out.”

When Dickson returned to the front verandah with two Cokes, one for Mick, he remarked on the Wolseley. “Beautiful car, Horace; it’s in magnificent condition—a genuine classic.”

“It was my father’s. I’ve always been fond of that model—it featured quite often in those old black and white Scotland Yard movies I watched as a kid on Saturday afternoon television.”

Mick made himself scarce in order that Dickson and Horace might chat in private. "This is a prime piece of real estate," the balding man said, "ideal for what I have in mind."

"Which is?"

"Development."

"I'm listening."

"I understand from what I've heard around the traps that you have no intention of selling the property, Dickson—that you have been approached on previous occasions. Is that correct?"

"Depends."

"On what?"

"On what you have to say."

"I see... Mr. Poker Face," Horace smiled. "A man after my own heart. What I'm proposing, my friend, is this: you keep the property and the title. The house will be demolished and, in its place, I provide the finance to build a block of apartments, one of which is yours to occupy for life at no cost. In return, I collect the rents from the remaining apartments for a period of 25 years after which time the entire estate reverts back to you, lock stock and barrel. So, basically, the land remains yours and you have the right to occupy the apartment of your choice. Meanwhile, I collect the profits. How does that sound?"

"Interesting."

"Is that all you have to say?"

"For now it is, I would need to discuss the matter with Mick before I make any decision."

"I see, so you and Mick are...?"

"No. We're best mates and partners."

"In what?"

"In... in... various endeavors. That is, we have plans... business plans... sort of. Nothing concrete yet."

“Be careful of partnerships, Dickson. Partnerships are the only ships guaranteed to sink.”

“Thanks for the advice, Horace. By the way, any news about the attack in Auckland?”

“I’d rather not discuss it, Dickson. It’s over and finished as far as I’m concerned.”

“And the business trip?”

“Obviously, I didn’t get the chance to pursue anything. Another time, perhaps. Thanks for the beer and the chat. I’ll look forward to our next meeting. I find you to be an impressive young man, Mr. Bottoms. Quite impressive.”

Before Horace departed, he took the time to show the boys his prized Wolseley in great detail. “They don’t build cars like this any more,” the proud owner boasted.

“If they did, it wouldn’t be so special,” Dickson grinned.

“Very astute observation, my friend.”

As the boys returned to the house, Mick asked the usual question about what was for dinner. “Chicken a la Mick,” Dickson replied.

“Chicken a la... what?”

“BBQ chicken from the chicken shop. I’ll see you when you get back—I’ll take care of the vegetables and gravy.”

As Dickson prepared the potatoes and broccoli he pondered his conversation with Horace.

Partnerships are the only ships guaranteed to sink. Isn’t Horace’s proposal a partnership? It seemed a contradictory comment to the blond chef which he nonetheless dismissed with a shrug. After all, he had no intention of selling the house.

“So what was the business chat all about,” Mick asked as he entered the kitchen and placed the bagged

chicken on the old red Laminex bench top. “As if I needed to guess. You said no, right?”

“I said I’d discuss it with you.”

“Discussion over—you’re not selling the house.”

“Don’t you even want to hear his offer?”

Dickson went on to tell his mate about Horace’s proposal. “So,” he concluded, “I get to keep the title and one of the apartments.”

“And share your private sanctuary with umpteen other people? They might all be boring old farts who complain about barbecues and noise. Dickson? Are you considering Fink’s proposal?”

“Considering is not deciding, Mick.”

“Then why bother to discuss the idea with me?”

“Because your opinion is important to me.”

“How important?”

“Stop stressing, mate. By the way, Paul said he had something important to tell me about Horace.”

“What?”

“He didn’t say—he said he would tell me tomorrow afternoon.”

By this stage, Paul’s skill at riding the surfboard had improved remarkably as had his confidence. Other surfers were intrigued by the way the young red-head used sign on the back line to express his sheer delight after having ridden a wave. Even when he was dumped into the washing machine, which was quite often, his face beamed with joy. He was a natural. His strength and muscle definition had also improved noticeably. Now all he needed was a tan.

“You can get it in a bottle,” Dickson joked as the trio showered.

“I want to look like you and Mick,” Paul’s busy fingers said. “I want to be bronzed like all the other surfers. I want to be a hero!”

As the boys relaxed with a Coke on the front verandah, Dickson asked his little mate what it was about Horace Fink that he had to tell. “I saw him the other day when my mom and I were eating lunch in the park. He was sitting at a bench nearby with another man, the one with the beard and all the piercing and the Harley Davidson.”

“They’re friends.”

“Not so friendly... they were arguing.”

“You heard them?”

“I read their lips.”

“Could you see what were they arguing about?”

“The bearded one was very aggressive—he said he couldn’t afford to pay back the loan.”

“What loan?”

“He didn’t say, but he said that if the other man insisted on getting his money back that he would tell people about his trips.”

“Trips?”

“Yes, trips. The other man stood in anger and waved his finger at the bearded one. I couldn’t read his lips right then but he stormed off in a huff.”

“Why are you telling me this, Paul?”

“Because he seemed like a bad man to me—both of them did. I was frightened and thought I should warn you. Do you owe money to the man who was here yesterday?”

“No, but thanks for telling me—and being concerned for me. I appreciate that, mate. You’re a good lad... and... a hot surfer!”

Once Paul had pedaled his way down the road, Mick expected Dickson to phone Doris right away.

“She might know something about the loan to Bob.”

“I’d rather speak directly to Doris after I have a chance to think about it. Actually, I’d rather speak to Bob first.”

“I’ve got a better idea.”

When Tom Samuels answered the phone he was both surprised and delighted to hear Dickson’s voice, and even more surprised to be offered a ride on the pillion seat of Dickson’s Suzuki. “Goodness me! I’ve never been on a motor bike!”

“First time for everything, Rev. You can borrow Mick’s helmet.”

The odd couple arrived at the beach house at 6:30. Mick had already prepared the meatloaf and vegetables which were in the process of baking. “Mmmm! Nothing like the smell of home cooking,” Tom remarked as he entered the kitchen and placed two bottles of altar wine on the table. “If you don’t mind, lads, I’d like a glass of something rather robust to steady my nerves after that terrifying trip on the back of that ... thing.”

Dickson poured a double scotch on the rocks and invited Tom to the front verandah while the meal remained in the oven to cook. “It’ll take about an hour,” he explained. Dickson and Mick settled for a beer each.

“Do you always issue dinner invitations at such short notice?” Tom asked as he settled into a canvas chair. “My, my, what a stunning view this is—you boys are indeed fortunate. You must be on better terms with the Lord than I am. However, I am mindful of the tenth commandment.”

Dickson’s plan was to ease the Rev. into chatting about the relationship between Bob Down and Horace Fink as if the subject were to raise itself by coincidence. “Mr. Fink made an offer the other day.”

“Oh? You mean to buy this property?” Dickson briefly explained the details to Tom, who seemed most intrigued. “I hope you tread warily, my friend,” the Rev. continued. “Horace’s reputation in business is less

than impressive. As a matter of fact... no, perhaps I shouldn't discuss that."

"What?"

"A personal matter between Horace and a friend of his."

"Robert Down?"

"You know him?"

"We've been to the farm and he's been here at the house."

"Oh, so you must know about the problem between him and Horace—terrible affair."

"Yes, it is."

"And all the more reason you should exercise extreme care when dealing with Horace in any business venture."

"So who told you about the problem—Horace or Robert?"

"Robert, of course. Horace never discusses his business dealings with me—or Doris, for that matter. I asked her if she knew about it and she didn't. However, she was most curious but I was reluctant to tell her what I know. In any case, she doesn't like Robert at all and I'm sure she would not show any sympathy toward the man whatsoever."

"Do you?"

"Of course! I'm not mankind's judge, I leave that to the dear Lord. And now, if I may, I must visit the little boys' room."

Chapter 21

Dickson and Mick took advantage of the warm and starry night and moved the kitchen table and chairs to the front verandah where they served the evening meal, complete with a bottle of red altar wine. “It’s not a bad drop,” Tom explained as he uncorked the bottle, then took a sniff. “I’ll just let it breathe a little.”

“Would you like something for starters?”

“Perrier would be nice. My, my, I can’t get over the position of this house. Were you worried about the recent tsunami?”

“Terrified.”

“I don’t blame you... reminds me of the ride over here.”

“You arrived safe and sound.”

“That, my friend, is because I recited the entire Rosary as I clung on for dear life. I hope you don’t mind, Dickson, but I’ll phone a taxi for the return trip. Besides, I don’t want to be responsible for any damage I might inflict on your rear suspension. Actually, I must say that’s the first time I’ve ever prayed inside a helmet.”

As the conversation meandered throughout the meal and covered many different topics, Dickson waited patiently for the Rev. to reintroduce the subject of Robert Down’s dilemma. Meanwhile, Tom couldn’t resist touching on the matter of religion and God’s creation. “Do you boys believe in creation, or the ‘Big Bang’ and evolution theory?” Both boys chose the latter option in unison. “I see. Well, God saw fit to give us all a free will so I suppose it’s your prerogative to use it as you wish.”

“Is that the way you chose your path in life, Tom?”

“I didn’t need to, I simply followed in my parents’ footsteps.”

“So you didn’t exercise free will.”

“No, not per se.”

“Does that sound to you like you never used your free will to make a choice?”

“You’re splitting hairs, Dickson.”

“You’ve never been tempted to deviate from your belief?”

“Would you like me to vacate the pulpit next Sunday and introduce you as the guest speaker?” No one could resist a hearty laugh at Tom’s joke, including the Rev. himself. “After all, Jesus also wore sandals when he delivered his sermons. However, Dickson, I do admit that you have a point. Blind and unquestioned faith in any circumstance can be negative. By the same token, it’s impossible to be both the devil and an angel at the same time.”

“You don’t know Dickson like I do,” Mick grinned.

“Goodness—or God, if you like—is in both of you boys—trust me, I know about these things.”

“Do you see God in Robert Down?”

“Why do you ask?”

“He’s pretty rough around the edges and he used to belong to a bikie gang.”

“Sometimes, Dickson, God takes a vacation.”

“And the Devil steps in?”

“The Devil never misses an opportunity. How much do you know about the situation between Horace and Robert?”

“You mean the loan?”

“Ah, so you do know.”

“It would be cool to know how you feel about the problem, after all you’re a man of the cloth.”

Dickson gambled on the fact that the Rev. had

consumed quite a bit of wine as well as port with his coffee, and might consequently be more inclined to speak freely.

“It began honourably enough. \$100,000 dollars is a lot to pay for a prize bull but I can understand the reward potential of putting it to stud and profiting from its services. At \$5,000 a service—which I’ve always thought an amusing term—it wouldn’t take long to recoup the capital. Obviously, Horace thought so too or he would not have lent Robert the money. And that was where Horace made his mistake; he should have purchased the bull himself instead of leaving the transaction dealings to Robert. When the sale fell through because of a higher bid, and Horace demanded the return of his money, Robert should have obliged and then discussed Plan B with Horace afterward.”

“Yes, I agree.”

“It was a terrible mistake.”

“Dreadful.”

“And as you know it led to this disaster.”

“It certainly did, but we’re all wiser in hindsight, Tom.”

“Very true, Dickson. I wonder I might have another port?”

“By all means.”

Tom was far more rosy-cheeked than inebriated and thoroughly enjoyed the company and atmosphere. “As you’re no doubt aware, my friends, Plan B was to purchase the farm and use the \$100,000 as a deposit. But when that also fell through, and the O’Reillys reneged, Robert’s gambling problem got the better of him, exacerbated by that horrendous home brew he makes. He offered me a glass one time and I almost expired on the spot.”

“He didn’t blow it all, though.”

“No, no, no, not all of it, and he’s convinced that he can recoup his losses by gambling the remainder, or at least some of it. And that’s what happens, my friends, when God takes a vacation and the Devil moves in.”

“‘Vacation’ seems a strange word to use.”

“We’re God’s hosts; it’s up to us whether or not we invite him into our hearts.”

“Have you tried to talk some sense into Robert?”

“When Robert refuses to listen he refuses to listen. By the time he realizes the gravity of his mistake it will be too late.”

“And then?”

Tom drained the remaining port in his liqueur glass and shrugged, “That’s anyone’s guess.” He checked his watch. “My goodness, how time flies! I’ve had such a good time I didn’t realize how late it is—way past my bedtime.” Tom went on to thank the boys profusely for their generous hospitality, then used his cell phone to call a taxi.

“You’re a genius,” Mick said as the taxi drove away, “a bloody genius.”

“Compared to what or whom?” Dickson asked, and led the way back inside the house.

“The Rev. has no idea that you and I were ignorant of all those details about Robert. As far as he was concerned he told us what we already knew. Ha! I don’t believe it!”

“You make it sound like trickery.”

“No, not trickery. Tom opened up of his own volition, and you didn’t tell one single lie. Anyway, the bottom line is that we now know the full story.”

“Do we? Let’s sleep on it and discuss it tomorrow.”

Dickson, however, couldn't sleep so he busied himself by writing another report for Doris. After that, he took a stroll along the beach in the glow of a full moon whose pale yellow luminescence flooded the ocean and danced like a thousand fairy lights on the undulating peaks of the chop.

Life can be so simple, he thought, so why do we humans have such a penchant for complication? For a while he entertained the idea of quitting his private investigator role in order to pursue something less complex and demanding. This business is with me 24/7 he thought—I have no life outside of the Horace Fink affair.

A larger than average wave swept ashore and enveloped his bare feet to a height above his ankles. During its rapid retreat, it caused the boy's feet to sink a few inches into the sand. "I wonder how far I'd sink if I stood here too long," he said aloud, then compared that situation with his professional one.

Next morning, over breakfast of cereal and fruit, Dickson and Mick discussed Tom Samuels' revelation the previous night. "I included that information in the report for Doris," Dickson admitted.

"Do you think that's wise? What if it sparks an argument between Doris and Horace?"

"What's the point of a report without all the information we've gathered? Anyway, I included a warning to Doris about keeping mum about this, and to discuss the issue with you and me before she goes any further."

"As far as Bob Down is concerned," Dickson continued, "what Tom knows about the situation was revealed in confidence to a priest. Bob thinks that only he and Horace are aware. If either Bob or Horace discovers that the situation is known to 'outsiders' it could lead to ... who knows what?"

“Have you delivered the report to Doris yet?”

“Not yet.”

“I think you should deliver it in person, Dicko, as in invite her over here or arrange a meeting somewhere in private.”

The black VW Golf convertible arrived mid afternoon at the beach house. It was no surprise to Doris to see the boys out surfing. She felt sufficiently familiar with the boys to help herself to a glass of cooking sherry while she sat on the front verandah and watched the spectacular gymnastics display out on the waves.

When the lads returned to shower under the hose, Doris complimented them on their youthful agility and skill. “If Horace were out there I’d need to call the rescue helicopter,” she laughed. “You chaps are a joy to watch, and I don’t mean just in the surf. If only I were 16 again.”

Once towelled, Dickson gave Doris the report to read while he and Mick changed into dry shorts and grabbed a beer each from the fridge. By the time they rejoined their guest on the front verandah, she was reading the report a second time.

“I’m not sure what to think of this,” she said, shaking her head. “However, I am annoyed that Horace would go ahead and blow all that money without firstly consulting me. Sometimes he forgets that we’re married, either that or he doesn’t care.”

“What do you intend to do about it?”

“Do? What can I do? As you suggested, Dickson, it would not be wise to discuss this with either party. I suppose I could discuss it with Tom Samuels but I’m not sure what benefit might result from that. Besides, he may be cross with you for speaking out of line. Any suggestions, Mr. Holmes?”

“I’m tempted to speak to Bob Downs, but I don’t quite know how to broach the subject without getting my head blown off.”

“We can’t have that, darling, you’re far too handsome for that. I like your head where it is.”

“I’m not too sure about that,” Mick chirped, and received an elbow in the ribs. “Ouch! Touchy, touchy.”

“However,” Doris resumed, “I think a meeting between you boys and Mr. Down could be most beneficial. You know, a woman rarely proposes to a man. Instead, she manipulates the situation to inspire the man to propose to her. Call it devious, if you will, but it works.”

Chapter 22

The note Robert Down previously pinned to the beach house door, but found no one home at the time, contained the phone number of the O'Reilly farm. Dickson left a message with Mrs. O'Reilly and gave her his own cell number.

Meanwhile, the boys cooked dinner of meatballs, eggs and chips, the latter responsibility given to Mick if he were to hone his new culinary skill.

The meatballs—which were Dickson's forte—consisted of mince meat, flavored with a packet of powdered chicken soup, chopped onion, celery and carrot, then shaped and coated in breadcrumbs ready for the griddle.

"We still know very little about why Horace was attacked in Auckland," Mick said as he peeled the potatoes.

"Except that the cops are treating it as attempted murder."

"Yeah, but who was the attempter?"

"Ian Ajit was nearby at the time. Maybe we should talk to him. Come to think of it, we should check the whereabouts of our other 'suspects' as well."

"What if one of them hired a hit man?"

"Yeah, right, at ten or twenty thousands bucks? None of them has that kinda dough."

"Doris has."

"You're getting carried away, my dear Watson."

"What about Simon Swan? He's not short of a quid."

"I checked—he was on a film shoot in Papua, New Guinea."

"You checked? Why him?"

“Because he has legitimate cause as a cameraman to travel overseas at short notice—an almost perfect alibi.”

“And the others?”

“No, I don’t have a credible reason to phone them out of the blue, Mick. We’ll need to be more discreet. We can’t afford to raise any suspicion.”

“This is so damn crazy, Dicko, who ever heard of a couple of teen surfers getting involved in this whole cloak and dagger bullshit?”

“Don’t judge each day by the harvest you reap but by the seeds you plant.”

“Robert Louis Stevenson.”

“Smarty pants.”

“I’m not dumb you know.”

Next morning, Dickson and Paul had their usual sign chat by the roadside, which reminded the blond of his little friend’s upcoming birthday. A short time later, he checked e-Bay on line.

Mick arrived and went straight to the computer room: “Whatcha doin’, Dicko?”

“Looking for a birthday present for Paul—there’s a junior used board for sale at Diamond Beach—fifty bucks—that’s 25 each.”

“Each?”

“Don’t you wanna go halves?”

At about midday, the unmistakable clatter of a muffler-free Harley made its presence felt as well as heard in the backyard of the beach house. Robert Down read the note pinned to the back door and took the invitation to grab a beer from the fridge and wander through the hall to the front verandah where he sat and watched the surfers.

A few minutes later, Dickson spotted the guest and called Mick to return to the beach. As they showered under the hose, Robert shook his head and

belly laughed. “Are we all from the same planet? You guys couldn’t even frighten the crap out of a fly!”

“Is that why you choose the bikie lifestyle?”

“Respect, man, respect is what I get every time I walk into a place. People are too afraid to look me in the eye.”

“To each his own, I guess.”

“This is quite a place you have here, Dickson. No cows, though, and no Harleys, only those pocket rockets that sound like a bloody whipper snipper. Horace tells me he’s offered you a deal to buy this place.”

“Not quite *buy*—he wants to build apartments.”

“Whatever. Watch him, guys, he can be a real bastard in business.”

“How so?” Dickson asked as he towelled.

“That’s kinda personal, mate, a private matter between him and me.”

“I thought you were good mates.”

“We were.”

“And now?”

“Let’s just say we’ve got a problem that needs sorting out, otherwise I’ll sort *him* out.”

“How do you mean?”

“Nobody, not even him, messes with me. That Winchester ain’t just for decoration, you know. Trust me, I’ll use it. Oh, yeah,” the leather-clad beard reiterated, “you better believe it, I’ll use the fucking thing if I need to, don’t you worry about that.”

“Sounds pretty serious. Do you have a license for that thing?”

“Yeah—it’s called a trigger. The cops know I’ve got it but we have an arrangement—they don’t confiscate it and I don’t shoot ‘em.” Robert burst into a belly laugh once more. “See what I mean about respect, mate? Nobody argues with Bob Down.”

“Sounds to me like Horace has no choice but to settle the dispute amicably.”

“He’s too stubborn to listen. Anyway, guys, I didn’t come here to talk about all that dumb shit. I brought three steaks with me—T-bones. You supply the liquid refreshments. Let’s party!”

As the steaks sizzled on the backyard barbecue, Dickson and Mick listened intently to the stories Bob told of his days with the Rebels. “One time, I went home to visit my mom. I’d been outback living with Aborigines for a couple of months. I didn’t wash or shave all that time. So, when I turned up at my mom’s house she didn’t recognize me. ‘You’re not my son!’ she bellowed. ‘Piss off or I’ll call the police!’ It took me forever to convince her that I was who I said I was, hahaha!”

“You must have had some hair-raising experiences.”

“With the gang? Whoa yeah, there was one time I’ll never forget. We were riding in formation along the freeway from Canberra to Sydney. A young guy driving a car behind us decided to show off to his girlfriend. He managed to get the car into the middle of the pack—thought he was part of the gang, the fuckwit. So we closed in on him and forced him off to the side of the road. Then we grabbed our iron bars and whatever else we could get our hands on and smashed the crap out of every panel and broke all the windows. But what I’ll never forget was the piercing screams—the girl was hysterical, absolutely terrified—I’ve never heard anything so... so incredibly chilling. Yeah, no way I could ever forget that. It makes my blood curdle even now just to think about it.”

“Did they report the incident?”

“No. Would you?”

The T-bones were served with salad and washed down with beer. Not surprisingly, the conversation graduated to the topic of motor cycles. “A Harley stamps you as a man,” Bob explained with a mouthful of steak. “When you’re astride a Harley, you’re somebody. They turn heads; people notice you. It’s like the difference between riding a stallion and a mule. You know?—like a Mack truck and a rickshaw. I don’t understand why you guys ride those rice farts.”

“Cheap transport.”

“Transport? Ha! Why not a bicycle? That’s even cheaper,” he laughed. “Nah, Harley’s rule, man.”

“Can you imagine Mike and me riding Harleys?”

Bob took a few moments to contemplate his reply. “Funny you should ask that—no, I can’t—you’re the wrong type.”

“Why is that?”

“Surfers don’t ride Harleys.”

“I rest my case.”

“Case? What case?”

“Never mind—tell me, is Doris Fink aware of the problem between you and Horace?”

“Not unless he said something to her. Why?”

“Just curious.”

“Horace never discusses business with that bitch. Not even his trips interstate or overseas.”

“He said he’s trying to market his perfume.”

“Ha! Yeah, right—believe that and you’ll believe anything. Hahaha! Perfume? I guess he’s gotta tell that bitch something to keep her quiet. The less she knows the better he likes it. If she knew that he’s a...” Bob’s voice trailed off. “Anyway, what’s for dessert?”

“I can whip up a batch of scones.”

“Ha! Scones? No wonder you don’t ride a Harley. Mrs. O’Reilly makes awesome scones, with

brandied cream. You know how to make brandied cream?”

“Doesn’t the brandy curdle the cream?”

“You do the scones and I’ll do the cream.”

When the scones were ready for a hot oven, Dickson and Mick watched Bob whip some thick cream and icing sugar in a bowl. When it formed soft peaks, he gradually folded in the brandy, using a wooden spoon. “And that’s it,” he said, “too easy!”

The feast was devoured on the front verandah accompanied by roast coffee and cream. “That’s a pretty tricky scone recipe you use,” Bob continued. “Mrs. O’Reilly cheats and uses a packet mix.”

“It’s my gran’s recipe—I still have her old cookbooks such as the Country Women’s Association’s Coronation Cookbook. It was published the same year as Queen Elizabeth was crowned... 1953.”

“I’ve crowned a few blokes in my time,” Bob laughed, “but they didn’t hang around as long as the Queen has.” The former bikie contemplated the view for a moment or two. “You want some free advice, mate? Don’t sell this house. Did I tell you I’m trying to buy the O’Reilly farm? The old buggers are dilly dallying, dammit, they’re too old to run the joint anyway. I dunno what their problem is—I even offered them the house to live in for the rest of their lives, rent free.”

“Sounds familiar. That’s pretty close to the deal Horace offered me.”

“There’s a difference, mate; I’m trustworthy and he ain’t.”

“If that’s the case—and don’t get me wrong, Bob, I don’t doubt you—what’s the problem Horace has with you?”

“Loose lips sink ships, Dickson, besides I don’t want you blokes blabbing. Mind you, it would be your last blab, hahaha! You got a Bible here?”

“My gran’s.”

“Go get it.”

Dickson returned with the Bible and both he and Mick followed their guest’s request to swear an oath of secrecy. Then Bob revealed the detail of his arrangement with Horace and the collapse of both deals.

“Why are you telling us this?”

“You asked. Besides, I’d like your opinion. As far as I know, no one else knows about this outside of Horace and me. You guys might ride sewing machines and have clean fingernails and beardless faces but I get the impression that you’re not as dumb as you look.”

“The truth? You should not have gambled the 20 thousand.”

“Too late now, mate. Besides, I reckon I can win it back—maybe even double the money.”

“Or lose the lot.”

“You’re missing the point, Dickson. If I repay the remaining 80 thou I’ll have nothing left, and no chance of repaying the 20, let alone buying the farm. I know how to make that place work. At the moment, the O’Reillys can’t be bothered, they’ve lost interest. I could turn that place into a very profitable business but Horace doesn’t understand that. And he’s in no mood to listen to reason. That’s why I lost my block and gambled the money. I was mad as hell. So, wise guys, what would you do if you were in my Harley boots?”

Chapter 23

Aunt Flo peeked through the Venetians when she heard the thunder of the Harley accompanied by the far less intimidating buzz of the Suzukis. “This is our friend Robert Down,” Dickson explained as they entered Flo’s villa, “he’s here to help us search for the wedding ring.”

“I’ll whip up a batch of Anzac biscuits,” Flo announced, “and make some tea.” Then she noticed a metal box carried by Robert. “Is that a tool box?” she asked.

“Yes, ma’am. Where’s the laundry?”

Within half an hour, everyone was seated at the kitchen table for afternoon tea. “Oops, hang on,” Bob said, “there’s something inside my biscuit—do you put coins in your cookies, Flo?”

“Coins? No! I don’t understand—they’re just ordinary Anzac biscuits.”

Bob placed his thumb and forefinger between his lips, produced a small metal object from his mouth, and held it aloft. “Well, well, well, what do you know about that!”

“My ring! You found my ring! But... what on earth... where... how...?”

“I’ll put your washing machine back together before I leave,” the bearded guest smiled.

“You’re an absolute angel, Mr. Down, well... in rather eccentric clothing, but an angel nonetheless. Thank you, thank you, thank you!” Then Flo, eyes brimming with joyful tears, took the ring, polished it with a paper napkin, and placed it on her wedding finger. “You’ve made me so very happy, Mr. Down. I can’t begin to tell you just how happy.” Then she thanked the boys for inviting Bob to join the search.

“I’m a ring expert,” Bob explained and pointed to the silver jewellery that adorned his eyebrows, nose and ears. “And it was worth it just to meet the woman who makes such delicious cookies.”

Soon enough, Dickson managed to steer the conversation around to Flo’s hobby. “Any tips this week?” he asked.

“Number 10 in the fifth at Randwick on Wednesday—Harley Davidson—it’s 5 to 1.”

“There’s a horse called Harley Davidson?”

“Yes, but don’t you boys go putting your money on it. I’ve told you before, gambling is a dangerous game and, besides, it might lose.”

“Your tips never lose.”

“Well, rarely,” she admitted with a smile, “but there’s no such thing as a certainty in horse racing.”

“Don’t worry, Aunt Flo, I don’t bet... you know that already.”

“So why ask for the tip?”

“I follow them out of curiosity—just to see how accurate you are. So far, you’re about 90% on the money.”

“It’s just my way of making ends meet, Dickson; a few dollars here and there, that’s all, and no more.”

“What’s your system?” Bob asked.

“System? I don’t have a system. A friend of mine knows someone who works in the industry—for a large stable. He apparently gets inside information. That’s all I know—and all I want to know.”

Once again, Bob ordered the boys to stay some distance behind as the trio headed back to the beach house. “I don’t want those things anywhere near my Harley.” When they arrived, Bob stayed for a beer before returning to the farm. “Five to one,” he said as he settled into a canvas chair on the front verandah and

popped a can of Fosters. “Twenty Gs on the nose, that’s enough to pay Horace back and keep the rest for a deposit on the farm. Thanks a million, guys.”

“For what? Mick and I are not recommending anything—the decision is all yours, mate. We take no responsibility whatsoever.”

“Don’t you see? This is some kinda sign... some kinda omen. Your aunt gets her ring back and she mentions a horse named Harley Davidson! That’s more than coincidence, mate!” Bob tilted back his head and poured half the contents of the can down his throat. “This was meant to be, absolutely meant to be—it’s a sign from the gods! Yes!”

As the sound of the V-twin faded into the distance, Dickson and Mick cleaned the barbecue and took a number of utensils back to the kitchen.

“Wednesday,” Mick said, “that’s tomorrow. Do you still have this morning’s paper?” Mick studied the midweek form. “Yep, five to one and barrier 2, 1600 meters; two wins and three seconds from its last five starts. Sounds pretty cool.”

“Who’s the jockey?”

“Darren Beadman. The race is at 3:05. Hey, Dicko, I got an idea.”

Mick soon returned from shopping and placed various items in the fridge and appropriate cupboards as Dickson compiled a report for Doris. “You’re not gonna mention Bob’s secret, I hope,” Mick commented as he checked the computer screen, “we swore on the Bible.”

“Nope—but she needs to know so I gotta figure out a way. Did you put the bet on?”

“Yeppo, ten dollars on the nose—fixed odds—that should cover the cost of Paul’s surfboard. Yippee!”

After a meal of home-made tacos, Mick volunteered to drop the report into Cody's house on the way home.

Next morning, before Mick arrived at the beach house, Dickson received a call from Doris. "You didn't mention the business between Horace and Robert Down," she said.

"You know about that? Bob made us swear not to tell anyone."

"Too late—I questioned Horace about a large sum missing from the latest bank statement. I don't usually see the statements, but he left it on the dining table by mistake."

"How did he react?"

"He was mad, of course, but more embarrassed than angry. Meanwhile, I'd like you to amend the report to include Robert's discussion with you."

"I'm afraid I can't do that, Doris... I promised..."

"But I'm aware of the situation already, Dickson."

"Not from Bob's admission or perspective. Maybe we should meet—you and me—and discuss the issue. By the way, did Horace mention his interest in my property?"

"What interest?"

"Oops, this is getting very complicated. I think we should meet."

Mick arrived next morning as Dickson prepared breakfast of poached eggs on toast. "Sorry I'm a bit late, mate, I saw Horace's Wolseley and stopped for a chat. He said he'd be over later today."

"Here? Dammit! Doris is coming here today."

"What time?"

"She didn't say... sometime this afternoon. When is Horace due?"

“Ditto.”

“Jesus! We could have a major disaster on our hands. Keep your eye on the eggs—I’ll phone Doris.”

The number you are calling is not answering. The phone is either unattended or switched off. Please try again later.

“Bloody hell,” Dickson continued, “Murphy’s Law is at it again. Put your thinking cap on, Mick, we need a plan... and we need it fast.”

During breakfast, Mick checked the latest form guide. “Harley Davidson has firmed, it’s into seven to two. Good thing I got fixed odds at five to one.”

“If it wins.”

“Don’t be negative, Dicko.”

“Okay, so what are we gonna do about Doris and Horace?”

“What can we do? Just keep phoning.”

Dickson checked his watch: 7:45. Cody might still be at home, he thought, and phoned the mop top. “They’re both out,” Cody said after he quickly checked the house next door. “I don’t know where they are—sorry. So what’s the prob?”

“Never mind, mate. Hey, when are you coming around for another surf?”

“How about this arvo?”

“Not this arvo, mate. We’ve got a full book. How about tomorrow?”

“Cool.”

Mick suggested that they vacate the house, pin a note to the back door to explain their absence. But Dickson disagreed: “What happens if they turn up together?”

Every half hour, Dickson tried Doris’ number. “She must have forgotten that she turned off her phone,” he muttered after a string of failures.

“I’ve been thinking about what Bob said,” Mick interrupted as if he weren’t paying attention.

“Remember? He was about to say something about what Doris might think if she knew Horace was a... and then changed the subject. I reckon whatever he was about to say relates somehow to Horace’s business trips.”

“All very interesting, Mr. Morris, but unless it relates to a murder motive, it’s not worth a pinch of rat poo. Personally, I think we’re being inundated with way too many furchies... red herrings. Besides, we have a far more urgent problem on our hands.”

“You’re right—we can’t surf, dammit.”

At midday, Mick turned on the radio to listen to the form guide for Randwick races. Harley Davidson was nominated by the race caller, Ian Craig, as a special to win the Bondi Cup over 1600 meters. “Special? Woohoo! We’re on a certainty!” Mick cried and shook his fists. “We can’t lose!”

“Ian Craig doesn’t bet.”

“He doesn’t?”

“No, he’s too smart for that. Did you hear what he said? Whatever beats Harley Davison will win the race, and that could mean any of the other 15 runners.”

“I wonder how Bob is feeling now. I hope he took fixed odds. It’s in to five to two already. Anyway, I can feel it in my bones, Dicko, winners are grinners.”

“You owe me \$5.”

“No wukkers, mate, I’ll give you the five bucks now which means I keep the winnings. You still want it?”

“No.”

Just after 1pm, the boys heard a car enter the backyard. It was the Wolseley, black and gleaming in the bright sunlight. Dickson tried Doris’ phone one more time without success. Then the board-shorted

hosts welcomed Horace Fink into the house, where they offered him a drink. “Coffee, black, one sugar.” When the trio was seated on the front verandah, Dickson said to his mate, “You were going to do some pruning in the garden out back.”

“I was?”

“Don’t you remember?”

“Oh, yes! Pruning! So I was. Excuse me Mr. Fink, uh, the pruning beckons. I’ll catch you later.”

“Now, Dickson,” Horace began, “down to business. Have you thought over my offer?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“It’s very interesting.”

“Is that it? No decision yet?”

“I’m 18, Horace, this is all new to me. I need to feel 100% confident of making the correct choice.”

“Very sensible, so tell me about your concerns.”

Dickson was about to answer when his cell phone rang. “Excuse me, Horace. I’ll keep this short ... hello?”

“It’s Doris, can I talk?”

“No, I’m quite happy with my current Telco, thank you.”

“I saw the Wolseley and kept driving. Mick was frantically waving his arms. Is Horace there?”

“Yes, their rates are quite cheap and I really...”

“Call me when he’s gone.”

“Okay, not a problem—thanks—bye.”

“Bloody tele-marketers, they drive me crazy too,” Horace commented. “And now, about your concerns.”

“My gran, for one, she would be devastated if I were to sell this house.”

“But you’re not selling, not strictly speaking. Besides, how do you know what your gran would be

thinking now? With respect, I believe my offer is quite generous and benefits all parties equally. I'd appreciate a yes or a no, Dickson. Again, with respect, I don't dilly dally in business. You're either interested or you're not."

Chapter 24

The essence of Horace Fink's blunt statement, it seemed to Dickson, was to take it or leave it. "With respect, Horace, I don't like to be pressured. From my standpoint, it's not as simple as you would have me believe. A decision such as this will affect the rest of my life, and I'm not about to rush into anything as important as what's on offer here. If you insist on an answer right now, at this moment, then I'm afraid..."

"Okay, okay, okay, Dickson, don't get your knickers in a knot. However, I would appreciate an answer by early next week—say Monday or Tuesday. Meanwhile, my friend," Horace said with a wry smile, "be mindful of the fact that I too am capable of changing my mind."

"Is that a threat, Mr. Fink?"

"It's business, Mr. Bottoms—purely business."

The pair shook hands, and headed to the Wolseley parked in the backyard where Mick was diligently pruning the shrubs and roses. "See you later, Horace," he said.

Once the car had purred out of sight, Mick eagerly sought Dickson's account of the business chat.

"I can see now why he is so disliked," Dickson said as his partner followed him inside the house. "If he thinks he has the upper hand, he tries to manipulate you, even dominate you."

"So, did you agree or not?"

"He gave me until early next week to decide."

"And?"

"You already know the answer to that, Mick."

"Stop playing games, for Christ sake! Yes or no?"

"NO!"

“Okay, okay, don’t get mad at me,” Mick said quietly as the blond pressed a few digits on his cell phone.

Doris Fink arrived shortly thereafter. “Tea with lemon?” her host asked.

“Something stronger if that’s alright with you, Dickson.”

“Dry white? It’s in a cask—Berri—but it’s an eminently quaffable drop. And it was on special; two for \$20.”

“Are you hinting at a pay rise?” Doris laughed, and led the way to the ‘office’ on the front verandah. “I’m dying to know what Horace had to say.”

For the next half hour, Doris was informed of all that had taken place between Horace and Dickson. “But you have no intention of agreeing to his offer?” she asked but didn’t wait for an answer. “I don’t blame you, Dickson. If you wanted to build a block of units here, nothing is stopping you from approaching a bank and doing it yourself with the property as equity. And you wouldn’t have to share it with anyone. Besides, I don’t agree with my husband’s bullying tactics either—he’s trying to take advantage of your inexperience in such matters. Now, what about Robert Down?”

“What about him? What he told me was in confidence, Doris, so it’s up to you to tell me what you know.”

“I think Horace underestimated you, Dickson,” Doris smiled. “You’re not silly.” Then she revealed what she had gleaned from Horace about the loan to Robert and the subsequent problems. “So, am I missing anything?”

“Only one thing.”

“Which is?”

Dickson checked his watch. “You’ll know pretty soon—3:05 in fact. Bring the radio out here Mick.”

They’re off in the Bondi Cup. A pretty even start but Harley Davidson dwelt and is relegated to the tail of the field as the pack heads for the first turn. Light Southerly takes the lead, followed by Medaaly Gold, Clangity Jane and Will Strike on the outside, then Wolf Star, Canadian Twilight, Proceedings, Fine Dane, Lanmish, Sheik, Filly Moor, St. Chandon, Wannabe, Sawtooth, Frenetic Flight and Harley Davidson hugging the rail at the tail of the field.

Around the first bend and Clangity Jane takes the lead with Canadian Twilight in hot pursuit and Chandon third. The favourite Harley Davidson is still in trouble at the tail with nowhere to run.

“Ah, shit,” Mick complained, “the bloody nag’s running last! We’ve done our dough for sure!”

“You’re not the only one, mate. Bob’s blown it big time.”

Heading into the final straight now, and Beadman takes Harley Davidson off the rails to the extreme outside as Wannabe surges to a narrow lead in a fierce struggle for supremacy in the home straight. With 200 meters to go in the Bondi Cup, Wannabe just in front of Canadian Twilight who’s now challenged by the fast finishing Lanmish ... and here comes Harley Davidson down the outside with a withering run! 50 meters to go—Wannabe by a nose to Lanmish and Canadian Twilight a close third. Lanmish, Canadian Twilight, Lanmish, but Harley Davidson is swallowing up the field. He’s closing in on the leaders. This is unbelievable! What a finish ladies and gentlemen—Harley Davidson neck and neck with Lanmish and ... they hit it! Oh, dear, from this angle it’s hard to tell ... perhaps Harley Davidson on the outside, but it’s

close... very close. A photo has been called for by the judge ... it's a photo finish. Hold onto your tickets, ladies and gentlemen, it could go either way.

“Jesus!” Mick cried, “this is murder!”

“Shoosh!”

The judge has called for a second print... a second print to separate the first two placegetters. There's not an eyelash between them, ladies and gentlemen, this is one of the closest finishes I've called over the years. And here comes the result... it's... Harley Davidson by the narrowest possible margin! Harley Davidson is the winner of the Bondi Cup by a wart!

Dickson and Mick whooped and danced around the front verandah but were interrupted by Doris who held the radio to her ear. “What does a protest mean?”

“A what?”

There's a protest, ladies and gentlemen—second against first alleging interference over the final 50 meters. The rider of Lanmish has lodged a protest against Harley Davidson for alleged interference.

“Oh, no!”

“Shhhhhh!”

The result of the protest should be known in five or so minutes, ladies and gentlemen, so hang onto your tickets—or try to find the one you threw away in disgust.

“Bloody hell, how can he joke about something like that?” Dickson asked as he wrung his hands. “Bob must be chewing his nails all the way to his elbows right now. I need a drink.”

After delivering three dry whites to the verandah, Dickson and the others listened intently to the radio and remained silent.

Dismissed!—the protest second against first has been dismissed, ladies and gentlemen—dismissed. The

original placings stand and Harley Davidson is the official winner of the Bondi Cup.

Silence quickly erupted into cheers and salutes as three glasses were raised in triumph. "I'm dying to know how Robert fared," Doris said. "That whole silly feud business between him and Horace had me worried. I don't doubt for a moment that Mr. Down has a propensity for settling disputes in a violent manner."

"You said the murder of Horace Fink is inevitable."

"Being a widow is one thing, Mick, being a carer for an invalid is quite another."

"Point taken."

Shortly after Doris departed the beach house to return home, Paul arrived for his surfing lessons; not that he needed any, he'd become quite the grommet expert out on the waves. However, Dickson and Mick were not prepared to let the youngster surf unsupervised... just yet.

Not unexpectedly, Bob Down arrived and sat on the front verandah as the lads returned to the house to shower. "Don't worry, Dickson," he laughed, "I bought two six packs of Stubbies—one for me and one for you—my shout. Yours is in the fridge. Hell, if I drank bubbly I would've bought a six pack of Dom Periwinkle or whatever you call that fancy Frog stuff." As the surfers showered under the hose, their bearded friend continued. "I can't thank you enough, guys, or Aunt Flo. Does she drink bubbly? I'll shout her a dozen. You should have seen me this afternoon hahahaha! I practically rung that radio's neck hahahaha! Yes, I bought a radio specially for the race... first one I've ever owned. I tell you what, I think that photo finish and protest cured my gambling habit for life hahahaha! Never again!" Bob then produced a calico bag and tipped the contents onto the verandah

floor. “Check this out, guys—one hundred and twenty five thousand smackeroonies in neat bundles. You ever see anything so damn pretty? Apart from a Harley, of course, hahahaha!”

Three young jaws simultaneously dropped to the grass. “Cash?”

“The SP bookie was gonna write me a check so I let the Winchester do the talking hahahaha!”

“You better be careful, mate, carrying all that cash around.”

“Horace wasn’t home when I called around to his house. I’ll try again on the way back. Meantime, I want you guys to take this five grand as a token of my gratitude.”

“No, no, no, no, no,” Dickson insisted.

“Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes,” Bob growled and thrust the bundle of cash at Dickson.

“Don’t argue with the man,” Mick interrupted, bug eyed, and accepted the money on his mate’s behalf. “I wanna see what it looks like spread over the kitchen table. Woohoo!”

Dickson invited Bob to stay for dinner, but the man declined. “Another time, mate, I gotta split to the Fink house. Then I got some business to discuss with the O’Reillys. I might even bring the Winchester along hahahaha! Oh, and you can finish the rest of these stubbies. I think I need a good dose of my home brew.”

As the three lads bid farewell to the leathered Harley rider at the rear gate, Paul’s impatience took control and he became a frantic flurry of fingers using sign. Dickson explained the story and the reason for all the money. “By the way, when is your birthday?”

“Two weeks.”

As the boy pedaled down the road, the super sleuths returned to the house and helped themselves to a

beer each. “We should celebrate tonight,” Mick suggested. “Let’s go to some posh restaurant.”

“And spend a small fortune? No, let’s not. We went through way too much stress to earn this money just to fritter it away on a damn feed in a posh restaurant.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right—at least let me spread it over the table. Where’s the camera?”

Chapter 25

The sight of fifty 100-dollar notes arranged neatly on the kitchen table was “a bloody awesome spectacle” according to Mick who aimed the camera several times and took a number of photographs from different angles. “I’ve never seen so much pulchritudinous loot at one time!”

“Pulchrit WHAT?”

Then Mick gathered his share and secured the wad with an elastic band. “It even smells good! Which reminds me, what’s for dinner?”

“Is that all you ever think about?”

“No—but... don’t ask.”

Dickson phoned the young owner of the surfboard for sale and arranged to collect it the following morning before school. Then he sent Mick shopping for various pizza toppings and Lebanese bread.

After the meal, the boys took a walk along the deserted beach as the pinks, reds, golds and purples of sunset slowly faded from the pale blue sky. “What are you thinking?” Mick asked as he studied a shell.

“A front-load washing machine.”

“A what? What’s wrong with the one you’ve got?”

“This whole Fink business is like watching all the clothes tumble around and around. Know what I mean? It’s like a vertical whirlpool—I’m not focusing on anything in particular—there’s way too much happening all at once.”

“Washing machines work in cycles, mate—just hang around for the spin dry to finish.”

“Not a bad analogy, Mick,” the blond laughed.

Next morning, following Dickson’s chat with Paul as the boy delivered the newspaper, the Suzuki

buzzed into life and headed for Diamond Beach. The school boy who answered Dickson's knock at the door was about 15 years old, with shaggy light brown hair that featured sun-bleached straw-colored streaks.

"You're here for the board," he smiled and revealed a set of silver braces. "It's in the garage."

Upon inspection, Dickson noticed a few minor dings which he figured could be repaired easily enough—otherwise the board was in good condition.

"Are you willing to negotiate?"

"Nope. There's another guy interested."

"I see. It'll cost \$10 for materials to fix these dings."

"That's why I'm selling it cheap."

"You're a pretty cluey businessman for a young bloke."

"My dad's a sales manager."

Dickson reached for his wallet and produced a fifty dollar note. "Deal."

Mick had already arrived at the beach house by the time Dickson returned. "Needs a little work," he said as he carried the board down the hall, "but it's cool. Your turn to cook breakfast—scrambled eggs and sausage."

Dickson spent the morning fixing the surfboard dings with resin filler, hardener, laminating resin, acetone, glass cloth and sandpaper. By lunchtime, the basic work was done and ready to be left overnight to harden before the final sanding and waxing.

"Hot dogs?"

"Why not? They're my specialty," Mick grinned as he handed one to Dickson.

"You better get married, mate, or you'll starve to death."

"You available?"

Dickson ignored the remark and eagerly sank his teeth into the toasted bun and frankfurter topped with sweet mustard sauce. “Mmmm, pretty good, actually. You wanna make two more?”

“So what happens with the surfboard? Are you gonna wait till Paul’s birthday?”

“Kind of—he can ride it in the meantime but I won’t tell him it’s his till the big day. Yeah? He can use my old board today while the repairs are hardening.”

Dickson, Mick and Paul were already surfing when Cody arrived and paddled out to join his friends. By 5:30 the foursome was back at the house and showering under the outside hose. “Did you guys see me in the green room?” Cody asked. “Wow, man, what an outtasight ride! Awesome!”

“Missed that one,” Dickson smiled and winked at Mick.

“Yeah, right, you guys are just jealous.”

Paul was due home, so he bade farewell and pedaled furiously down the road while Cody stayed for a juice and a chat. “There’s something I wanna tell you guys,” Cody said as they sat on the front verandah, “but I’m not sure you wanna know about it.”

“Shoot.”

“That’s what I’m worried about—you’ll probably shoot me for snooping.”

“Snooping?”

“Doris asked me to lay some mouse traps in the ceiling—she doesn’t like to use poison bait.”

“That’s not snooping.”

“Well, while I was up there with the flashlight and the traps, I saw a black box thingy and thought it was some kinda alarm or whatever, but it wasn’t. It was a DVR—digital video recorder, and guess what it was attached to?”

“The spy camera?”

“Yeah, so ... well, I got kinda curious.”

“You better not tell us any more, Cody.”

“Okay,” the mop shrugged and gazed out to sea.

“So you checked out the disk at home, right?”

“Yeah.”

“And?”

“You said I better not tell you any more.”

“Strictly speaking, yes, but ... if you’re sure it relates to our investigation, then I suppose...”

“No, I’m not sure about that—I don’t know if it relates.”

“Can you tell us who was in the footage? Doris or Horace?”

“Horace and ... somebody.” Dickson and Mick waited impatiently for Cody to continue without being prompted. After what seemed an agonizing age, he added nonchalantly, “I don’t know the other guy.”

“Guy?” the wide-eyed duo chorused.

“You’re surprised? I’ve always thought Horace was gay—sort of—but I never suspected he was a pedo. I mean, the other guy looked younger than sixteen, if you know what I mean. He was a hottie as well, hehehe.”

“So that’s what Bob Down meant when he said ‘if only Doris knew he was a...’ and stopped short,” Dickson concluded. “Cody, for Christ sake what did you do with the damn disk?”

“Put it back in the DVR. I told Doris I had to split for a while—about half an hour.”

“Did you copy it?”

“No. Anyway, guys, I’d love to hang here but I got homework to do! My dad’s mad at me as it is.”

Dickson took Cody home on the Suzuki, then returned to the beach house, stopping on the way for groceries. “I’ve been thinking,” Mick said as his mate joined him on the front verandah with a beer. “We still

don't know whether Doris is spying on Horace or if Horace gets off on watching his ... whatever."

"I suspect the latter; Doris is not technically minded. What puzzles me is that if Bob Down knows about Horace's 'other' life, what does that say about him?"

"The business trips?"

"Yeah—most likely business with boys, but if Bob knows about it... well..."

"This whole Fink thing gets more confusing every bloody day. On the other hand, Dicko, that might explain who the attacker was in Horace's hotel room and why Horace remains tight lipped about the whole affair."

"So I guess we can rule out Ian Ajit as a suspect."

"Seems that way. Are you gonna include all this stuff in your report?"

Dickson stared thoughtfully at the horizon and took a swig of beer. "I dunno, Mick. It's all getting a bit nasty. What do you think?"

"Doris pays us to investigate."

"But how would she feel if she was aware of the fact that Cody saw the video?"

"Maybe you could leave that part out of the report."

"Yeah, right—how do I explain how we got the info? Hang on a sec..." Dickson punched Cody's number into his cell phone. After a five-minute conversation with the spiky mop, Dickson ended the call and turned to his partner.

"You're a genius, Dicko! But ... I'd hate to be Horace when Doris discovers all this shit about him. How could she live with a dude like that? And sleep in the same bed? Yucko schmucko."

“Like you said, she pays us to investigate—what choice to we have?”

“What’s for dinner? I’m famished.”

“Burgers with the lot.”

“And chips?”

While eating, the boys watched the 7 o’clock news. “Same old, same old,” Mick commented between mouthfuls. “We live in a crazy world.”

“We live in a crazy ‘hood.”

“Too true. Do you think we’re crazy—you and me?”

“One of us is.”

Later, Dickson found it impossible to sleep, tossing and turning as his mind raced. He placed his hands behind his head and stared into the darkness of his room, listening to the relentless pounding of the surf which dominated the stillness of the night. After some minutes of contemplation, he threw off the covers and sat naked on the verandah. ‘How can there be billions of stars?’ he wondered. ‘Who or what is out there?’ However, answers were not forthcoming and the lad finally resigned himself to accepting the undeniable existence of mystery—and that some things would forever remain so despite human attempts to explain them.

“What is the purpose of my existence?” he asked.

And the invisible inner voice replied: “There’s a reason for your existence but why should there be a purpose?”

“There has to be!”

“Who says? What is the purpose of seed?”

“That’s all I am? A seed? Are you telling me that procreation is my only purpose? I have no desire to marry and have kids.”

“In that case, Dickson, if you truly need a purpose it’s up to you to create one—don’t expect it to be offered to you gratis.”

“Up to me?”

When Dickson inspected Paul’s surfboard next morning he was happy with his work and gave it a final fine sanding followed by a full wax. “Good as new,” he said to himself when the job was finished.

“What’s for breakfast?” Mick asked as he appeared on the verandah.

“I don’t understand why you’re not grossly overweight.”

“Gimme a break, mate, I’m flat out just keeping myself adequately fed! Besides, it’s all in the genes—my dad is pretty fit for his age as well. So...”

“Cereal?”

“Bleh. How about those American thingies—potato thingamajigs. Hash something.”

“Browns. Sure, here’s the recipe—you want ‘em you make ‘em—enough for two.”

Chapter 26

“No can do,” Dickson informed Mick after phoning the local travel agent. “Flight passenger lists are not available to the public, at least not officially. So I’m not sure how we can check to see who was out of town when Horace was attacked in Auckland.”

“How about unofficially?”

The two Suzukis came to rest in the parking area of Taree airport. After removing their helmets, the boys proceeded inside to the reception area. “I wonder if you could help me,” Mick said to the young lady behind the desk. Because it was Mick’s idea, Dickson left it to his mate to tell whatever fibs he thought appropriate for the ‘cause’. “Some friends of mine travelled to Auckland, New Zealand, recently and I haven’t heard from them since.”

“Have you tried the police or missing persons?”

“Well, I’d rather not make my inquiry official, if you know what I mean—it might upset somebody or cause panic. So, I thought...”

“Do you have their names?”

“Yes, I do—as well as their photographs.” Mick placed the documents on the desk and watched the girl study the material for some time.

“I remember this guy,” she said and pointed to the photograph of Ian Ajit, “but he returned to Taree a few weeks ago.”

“We’re fishing mates.”

“Oh, God, don’t talk about fishing—my boyfriend never stops—drives me crazy.” After a moment’s pause, the girl pointed to a second picture.

“This one looks kind of familiar.”

“Barbara Thorne?”

“Yes, but she didn’t fly out—she was with a guy—a boy about 15—he flew out alone and the woman left the airport after the flight took off.”

“To Auckland? Alone?”

“Via Sydney, yes, he mentioned it.”

“Can you describe the boy?”

“Cute—I remember wishing he was a little older,” she laughed. “He was about my height—175 centimeters—five foot eight, and had straight blond hair—collar length, almost like a girl’s. He was tanned so I guessed he might be a surfer. Oh, and there was a little brown mole on his upper lip. I’m not sure but I think his eyes were blue—maybe green—maybe a bit of both.”

“Do you remember his name?”

“No, sorry. Oh, wait! I think I remember the woman calling him ... uh, Fogsy ... or something like that.”

Back at the beach house, Dickson and Mick discussed the latest development. “Fogsy?” The blonde commented as he boiled water for two coffees. “What do you make of that?”

“Some nickname or other, but my guess is that he’s probably a student at Lemon Lips’ school. Maybe Cody knows him, or of him.”

“That still doesn’t explain why he traveled to Auckland—his trip may have bugger all to do with Horace. You know something, Mick? If ever I write a murder mystery I’ll keep it simple—bang, bang, you’re dead, and it’s all over.”

“I’m dead?”

“He’s dead.”

“Who?”

“The bloke in the story, you dimwit, now drink your coffee.”

Later that afternoon, Paul arrived and was given the new surfboard to ride. “This is too small for you,” he said in sign, “whose is it?”

“A friend’s. He said it’s okay for you to use it. Just don’t ding it or I’ll wallop your butt.”

“It’s awesome! Wow, maybe I can save up and buy one like this for myself some day!”

The boys were showering under the hose when Dickson answered a call on his cell phone. “G’day, Cody, hey listen, I’m a bit tied up at the mo, I’ll call you back in about fifteen. Okay?”

Paul raved so enthusiastically about the board and his rides that Dickson was overwhelmingly tempted to give the little redhead his birthday present right there and then but, with great difficulty, managed to control his urge. “You’ll meet the owner one day, Paul, and maybe he’ll let you have it.”

“Yeah, right—fat chance. And tell him thanks from me, okay. He must be a totally cool guy.”

“Actually,” Mick laughed, “he’s an asshole.”

After the beaming kid had pedaled his way home, Dickson returned Cody’s call. “Sorry, mate, Paul was here. So, what’s up?”

“I saw Doris in the front yard when I arrived home from school, and said hi. Then I asked her what the black box was in the roof space. She said she didn’t know—that maybe it was some gizmo that Horace had installed. So she said she’d ask Horace... and I blew it. ‘No, no, no, no!’ I said without thinking. Then I had to play it cool and make out like I didn’t want Horace to think I’d been snooping. She bought it, thank Christ. Then I told her it had some writing on it—something about video recording—and she got all curious like. Horace wasn’t home, so she asked me if I’d go up to the roof cavity again and check it out. I brought the disk back down with me. ‘What’s that for?’ she asked, so I

told her it was a video recording disk. She was really puzzled and didn't know what to think. Anyway, I didn't wanna hang around so I told her how to play it on the comp and that I'd be back soon to replace the disk in the box. Man, she was ashen faced when I went back there. She didn't say what she'd seen and I wasn't gonna tell her what I knew, so I put the disk back in the box in the ceiling and came home. And here I am."

"Jesus! Talk about a Pandora's box! God knows what she must be thinking now. Hey, listen, do you know a kid at school—straight blond hair, mole on the upper lip—called Fogsy?"

"Yeah, I know Fogsy—Alan Fogarty. He's in the swim team—bit of a poser but not a bad bloke. He's in a grade below mine so I don't know him all that well. Why?"

"How does he get along with Lemon Lips?"

"I see them chatting sometimes in the quad. What's all this about?"

"I'll let you know next time you're here for a surf. How about the weekend?"

"You want me to invite Fogsy?"

"If you want, sure."

After ending the call, Dickson brought his partner up to speed on the matter. "I wonder what Doris will have to say—or whether she says anything at all. We've gotten ourselves into one helluva sticky mess, mate."

"We? We're observers, not participants. Anyway, what's for...?"

"Aaagggghh! How can you nonchalantly brush aside what you've just heard?"

"I'm not brushing it aside, Dicko—the sky hasn't fallen in you know—life goes on. How's a bloke supposed to think on an empty stomach?" And with that Mick opened the fridge door and peered inside. "Dory

filets? Chicken breasts? Mince? Prawns? Hmmm.
Prawn cutlets sound good... and chips?"

"You're hopeless."

"Yeah, but I'm sexy and gorgeous."

"Ha!"

"C'mon, Dicko, admit it—you lust after me."

"Cut the crap, Mick—get serious. Cody said he didn't know the kid in the video, right? What if it was this Fogsy bloke? That might explain why he went to Auckland. What if he's the bloke who attacked Horace in the hotel room?"

"Aren't you jumping the gun a little?"

"Maybe. I dunno, Mick, my brain's trying to make sense of all this complex shit and it's frustrating me to hell. There's gotta be a simple solution somehow, but I'm bugged if I know what it is."

"Rome wasn't built in a day, mate."

"Give the fucking clichés a rest."

"Ooer, you swore!"

"I think I need a change of career—that's if you can call this private investigator bullshit a career—it's more like a sentence."

"You can't quit now."

"I know that, dumb dumb—that just exacerbates the situation."

"You're forgetting something, Dicko. The reason you got into this business was because your folks were murdered in a bungled robbery. One day, you might get lucky and bring the culprits to justice. And while you remain in the business of tracking down the baddies, I figure you've got a better chance of solving the crime that took the lives of your folks. Think of the Fink case as a learning curve."

"You want a learning curve, Mick? You peel and de-vein the prawns and I'll make the cutlets."

"Me and my big mouth."

While Mick attended to the prawns, Dickson grabbed a beer and sat on the front verandah where he watched the glow of the fading sunset. His mind wandered back to his early childhood and what he remembered of the tragedy that befell his parents. He was too young at the time to fully comprehend the magnitude of the catastrophe and, rather, sought desperate comfort in the loving arms of his gran, who raised him as her own. Nonetheless, Dickson formed a mental picture of his father and mother through the stories his gran often told. “They would be very proud of their son,” she said often as the lad matured, “and you would be very proud of them. Live your life for others, Dickson, so that the lives of others will make your own worthwhile.”

“Prawns are ready,” Mick announced as he sat next to his friend on the verandah and took a swig of beer. “So, what are you thinking about? Or is that a silly question?”

“What you said about my folks.”

“Sorry if made you sad.”

“No worries, mate.”

“Listen, Dicko, there’s something I want to tell you but I’m not sure this is the right time or place.”

“Give it a shot.”

“Promise you won’t blow a gasket?”

“No.”

“Last night, I had a chat with my folks and they kinda freaked a little—actually more than a little. I came out.”

“Came what? What are talking about?”

“I told them I was gay.”

“What? Gay? Ha! You’re about as gay as I am, you idiot. What the hell got into you? What a load of crap that is!”

The conversation lapsed into silence for a minute or two as both lads gazed out to sea; their minds frantically searching some kind of rational explanation. Mick finally broke the pregnant hush by asking Dickson what he was thinking.

“Well,” he began with a sigh, without taking his eyes off the horizon, “what does that say about me? If you are what you say you are, how does that affect what your folks think about me? Have you told anyone else?”

“No.”

“I don’t know what to say, Mick.” Dickson shook his head, took a swig of beer, and repeated his statement.

Chapter 27

Dickson found it virtually impossible to recapture the casual and cheerful atmosphere that he and his mate had enjoyed ever since their friendship began. Mick's confession had suddenly changed all that and the evening meal was eaten in awkward silence as the boys watched the television news.

"Me and big mouth," Mick eventually mumbled during the weather forecast.

Dickson pondered the comment for a while and then shrugged. "You never know—maybe it'll come in handy."

The unexpected and seemingly nonchalant aside took Mick completely by surprise. "Bloody hell, Dicko! I don't know whether to laugh or cry!"

Dickson pushed his empty plate to one side and sipped his Riesling. "Neither do I," he said, "neither do I. Listen, mate, this is all a bit sudden. You know?"

"You never suspected?"

"Yes, I guess I did but it was easy to dismiss as ... ludicrous. And now? Now it's different. I'm sorry, Mick, I don't mean to make you feel bad but ... well, I guess it'll take some time for me to adjust. Do me a fav—let's not talk about it for a while; give it a rest; let me get used to the idea. Okay?"

"Okay—as long as you're not mad at me. That would crush me."

"I'm not mad at you, Mick. It's just that I don't want to be pressured—or to feel pressured. I hope you understand where I'm coming from."

"No worries—end of discussion. Thanks, mate."

Doris Fink phoned about 8pm to ask Dickson if she could sleep over for the night. "I was going to book into a motel," she explained, "but I need someone to talk to. Would you mind? And please have a stiff drink

ready.” Dickson was too taken aback to ask questions and agreed to his client’s request. All would be revealed in good time, he presumed.

The redhead arrived half an hour later, carrying an overnight bag. “Thanks,” she said as she took a triple scotch from her host. “I hope I’m not putting you to any trouble. It’s just that... well, I’m not sure where to begin.”

“Take your time, Doris. How about you finish your drink and we take a walk along the beach? That should settle you down ... it does me.”

“I’ll stay here,” Mick volunteered, “and look after the place until you guys get back.”

The three-quarter moon illuminated the fringes of scattered clouds in the starry sky. “Maybe it’s true,” Doris said, gazing at the heavens. “I mean about clouds and silver linings. God knows I need one. You’re lucky living here, Dickson. The beach, the space, the freedom... and walking barefoot. I’d almost forgotten what it’s like to walk barefoot on a beach and have the cool wash envelope and caress your skin. It’s very peaceful... therapeutic even.”

“Yep, I do a lot of thinking and soul searching out here at night. It’s my refuge—my special place.”

“Robert Down repaid the money he owed Horace—in cash! Can you believe that?”

“I saw the money before Bob left here. What a sight that was! He’s crazy carrying all that loot around in a saddle bag, though.”

“Crazy? What do you expect of a person like him? I have no idea what Horace sees in him.”

“How is Horace?”

“That’s why I’m here.” Doris then explained Cody’s involvement with the black box in the ceiling mystery, and what she saw on the video disk. “I don’t know what to do,” she added with a sigh.

“He admitted it? I mean, to sleeping with a minor?”

“No, not per se. He offered me a deal—half the fortune and half the value of the house to buy my silence and to move out. That totals about three million.”

“I know what I’d be doing if I were in your shoes.”

“I’m not wearing any. Anyway, you’re forgetting something, Mr. Bottoms. If Horace is murdered, which I believe is inevitable, I get the lot, including an extra million from his insurance.”

“With respect, Doris, you’re also forgetting something; what if he’s not murdered and lives for another 40 or 50 years?”

The pair strolled a further 20 meters in silence before they about turned and headed back to the house. Dickson broke the suspense by asking if Doris intended to report Horace to the authorities.

“No.”

“Does he know you’re here?”

“I told him I was visiting a friend—that’s all. Dickson? I can’t live with a man like that. The thought of sleeping in the same bed makes me shudder. It’s never been easy but now it’s impossible.”

“By the way, did you recognize the boy in the video?”

“No. He had a mole, though, a small one on his upper lip. Dickson, I’d rather not talk about that—at least not for now, it’s far too distressing. Oh, my God, why didn’t I have the sense to marry someone like you instead of that creep?”

“It’s not your fault, Doris—he wasn’t a creep to begin with—he became one. Actually, I think there’s something else you should know. I’ll include it in the report but I’ll tell you now anyway—if that boy with

the small mole is who I think he is, he was in Auckland at the same time Horace was attacked. I'm not sure if there's a connection yet, but I hope to find out soon."

"You know that boy?"

"Of him."

"Do you enjoy being a super sleuth?"

"*Enjoy* isn't the right word, Doris."

Back at the beach house, Mick was nowhere to be seen. However, there was a note on the kitchen table to explain his absence. Dickson read it, then folded the note and placed it in his pocket.

"Something wrong?" Doris asked as her host pulled two beers from the fridge.

"Sort of."

"If you think it's none of my business..."

"It's a private matter."

"I'm happy to lend a shoulder—after all, I owe you one. And, by the way," she added as she produced an envelope from her bag, "here's another \$1500—consider it a bonus. As to the beer, do you mind if I have a wine instead?"

The pair made themselves comfortable on the front verandah. "I never get tired of sitting here," Dickson mused. "It's the space—the feeling of being part of everything I see—a speck perhaps, in the larger picture—but a speck that belongs. Do you know what I mean?"

"I think so. A sense of belonging is important but I think it's more important to know to what or whom you belong."

"Is that why you attend Sunday mass?"

"Yes."

"I guess this beach is my Sunday mass. The thing is, it doesn't preach—it's just there, drawing me into its infinite immensity as if it were somehow my

home, the place where my soul belongs. I guess I'm not making much sense here."

"On the contrary, Dickson."

"About Mick's note—I think he feels awkward about something we discussed earlier. I was somewhat abrupt—even mildly critical." There was a long pause that Doris chose not to interrupt before Dickson continued. "He came out to his folks last night."

"More power to him."

The blonde turned to study the profile of Doris' face which gazed out to sea. "More power?"

"I take it you were surprised by his confession."

"Not totally. By the same token, I preferred not to know."

"Not to know or not to be confronted by the reality? Mick loves you, Dickson, I've seen it in the way he looks at you."

"I don't get it. We're mates—okay, best mates. We surf together, we spend a stack of time together, we share a lot and enjoy the same things. But..."

"But what?"

Dickson shrugged and took a sip of beer. "I don't know. A while ago you said you were disgusted with Horace."

"What on earth does that have to do with Mick? Mick is gay, not a molester! Besides, Horace and I have been married 12 years and for all that time he's never mentioned anything about his ... preference. He's been living a lie and, in so doing, has betrayed my trust. Can you imagine what went through my mind when I watched that video? By the way, does Cody know what's on that disk?"

"Did he mention it?"

"No."

"Then there's no reason to assume he does."

“You’re right, Dickson. I need to keep this whole matter in perspective. Somehow.”

Over breakfast of scrambled eggs and sausage next morning Dickson asked if Doris had any plans in terms of accommodation. “No, I think I’m too confused. All my things are at the house and... well, it’s the only home I know. We do have a couple of guest rooms. Meantime, Dickson, thank you so much for allowing me to stay overnight—I needed a friend, someone to talk to. It’s funny, you know, you’re almost young enough to be my son but... your maturity is quite impressive. So is your cooking.”

“What about Tony Spiropoulos?”

“If I moved in with him it would be for the wrong reason—escaping Horace instead of embracing Tony.”

“I see.”

“Apart from that, I will not be intimidated or driven into submission by Horace, directly or indirectly. If anyone should move out of the house it’s him.”

“Do you think he will?”

“Highly unlikely.” At that moment, the sound of Mick’s Suzuki announced his arrival. “I should leave, Dickson. Thank you again for your hospitality and understanding.”

“If there’s anything else I can do, just holler.”

Dickson was curious, but said nothing, about the fact that Doris still wore the same perfume despite its being a Horace creation. For some reason, he assumed, she apparently dissociated it from recent events. Both she and Mick met at the rear door and exchanged greetings before Doris drove away in her black VW Golf.

“Sorry about last night,” Mick said as he and his mate entered the kitchen. “I felt...”

“Don’t worry about it—help yourself to leftover scrambled egg—it’s still warm.”

“So what’s the story with Doris?”

Dickson informed the black-haired, brown-eyed teen of the conversations that took place the previous night and again that morning. “She’s still wearing the Horace perfume.”

“So I noticed.”

Chapter 28

Bright and early Saturday morning, Cody Callaghan and Alan Fogarty arrived at the beach house—barefoot, bare-chested, and wearing knee-length floral board shorts. “Rise and shine, boys,” Cody yelled at the back door, then took the liberty of entering the house. He saw no one about, so he knocked on Dickson’s bedroom door. “Hey, Dicko! Wakey wakies! Surf’s up!”

A moment later, the open bedroom door revealed a bleary-eyed blond dressed in boxer shorts that hid precious little of his morning rise. “What time is it?”

“Big night?”

“Too many beers.”

“A few waves will take care of that, mate. By the way, this is Foggy.”

The sight of the small mole on the boy’s upper lip quickly returned Dickson to the reality of the present. “G’day, Foggy, pleased to meet you... I think. I don’t feel too well.”

The new-day sun’s first rays had barely peeked over the horizon as the trio entered the surf and paddled their way to the back line, with waves maybe two to three feet but well shaped and glassy. An hour later, the lads showered under the hose in the front yard where they were met by Mick. “Just in time for breakfast!”

“Cody volunteered to do scrambled eggs on toast,” Dickson announced with a laugh.

“I did?”

“Don’t you remember? We all took one step backwards.”

“But I don’t know how to do scrambled eggs!” the spiky mop protested.

“Mick will give you lessons. Right, Mick?”

Dickson's impression of Fogsy was that, despite a superficially cheerful demeanor, he hid something—something that perhaps bordered on the sinister. "This private detective business is getting to me," Dickson thought to himself, and dismissed his suspicion. Nonetheless, he was keen to extract whatever information he could glean about the boy's association with Horace Fink.

"Mad house you got here," Fogsy said as the group ate breakfast in the kitchen. "I'd kill for something like this."

"I'm considering an offer from a bloke," Dickson said. "He wants an answer early next week."

"You mean an offer to kill you or to buy this joint?"

"His name is Horace Fink. You know him?"

"Never heard of him."

"Oh? I thought just about everyone around here knew that bloke. He's got quite a rep. He made the offer when he returned from a business trip to Auckland. You ever been there?"

"Nope."

"But what about...?" was as far as the interruption from Cody got before he received a glare and a kick on the ankle from the young blond.

"What about what?" Dickson asked Cody.

"Nothing."

"So," Fogsy continued, and brought an abrupt end to his mate's unwelcome intrusion, "are you gonna take the offer or what?"

"I've been warned against it."

"Cool—that saves me from warning you."

"Warn me? Warn me about what, Alan?"

"You'd be crazy to sell this house, mate, totally Loony Tunes. Besides, I don't like the sound of this Fink bloke." Alan gathered the empty plates and took

them to the kitchen sink. “So,” he added, “what do you guys do for a crust?”

“Bit of this and that... odd jobs... handyman stuff.”

“Got any spare work? I could use a few extra bucks and I’m good with my hands.”

“Yeah, right,” Cody laughed as he half filled the sink with hot water, and added detergent.

“Keep your mind above your navel for a change,” Alan snapped. “Is that all you ever think about?”

“And surfing.”

Mick responded to the sound of a car entering the drive and went to the rear door to check. “It’s Horace,” he explained as he returned to the kitchen. Alan suddenly, and without a word of explanation, disappeared down the hall to front of the house, grabbed his board and headed for the surf.

“Good morning,” Horace Fink grinned as he joined the remaining three lads. “I hope I’m not interrupting anything. I was in the area so I thought I’d pop in.” And with that, the balding man placed a black leather briefcase on the table. “I thought you might like to take a look at something to help your decision with regard to our business deal. Go ahead and open it, Mr. Bottoms.”

Dickson obeyed and clicked the gold locks of the case. Cody, still with detergent foam on his hands, came to the table to satisfy his curiosity. “Wow!” he cried, mouth agape. “Bloody hell, how much is there?”

“One hundred thousand dollars,” the beaming guest replied, “and there’s more where that came from. Very pretty, yes? Go ahead and feel it, Dickson—you too, Mick. Take a bundle and flick through the notes.”

“Is this a bribe?” Dickson asked.

“Of course it’s a bribe! However, I’d rather call it incentive, my friend.” Horace returned the money to the case, closed the lid and prepared to leave. “Think about it, Dickson, and I’ll hear from you before Tuesday. Have a nice day, boys.” A minute later, the gentlemanly Wolseley motored down the road and out of sight.

“Has he gone?” Alan asked, still dripping wet from the surf, at the back door.

“What got into you, man?” Cody demanded. “You shot through like a Bondi tram!”

“A what?”

“It’s an expression my grandpa used,” Cody explained to Dickson. “In the old days...”

“Never mind that now. Alan? Is there a problem?”

“Not now, there ain’t.” Then the boy took a cold shower under the outdoor hose.

Dickson privately deduced that being alone with the young blond was the only way to coax him into a suitable frame of mind to confide whatever it was that bothered him. “Listen mate, if there’s something you need to talk about, I’m all ears. Okay? You choose the time and place. No pressure.”

“Thanks—I’ll think about it.”

“Now can I tell you about the Bondi trams?” Cody pouted.

“Sure.”

“It was back when my grandpa was a kid and he used to surf at Bondi Beach in Sydney—not on a board, though, they didn’t have boards back then. So anyway, the beach was always packed on summer weekends and when it came time for people to return home—because not many had cars—they all lined up for the tram ride back to the city. Yeah? And guess what?”

“The trams were full.”

“Hey, it’s my story, okay? Yeah, they were all packed to the rafters so they ignored the queues at the tram stops and shot through. Get it?”

“Fascinating stuff, Code.”

“What’s fascinating, you bloody cynic, is that ‘shot through like a Bondi tram’ became part of Aussie lingo... a colloquialism. At least, that’s what my grandpa said.”

“Does your dad surf?”

“You betcha—styles real good. He still puts a lotta grommets to shame. We surf together whenever we get the chance. I’m real proud of my dad. He surfed as a teen with those big, heavy planks. When he was a lighty, it took at least two grommets to carry the bloody board down to the waves, hehehehe. Yeah, my dad is totally cool. He taught me to surf when I was a little Cody.”

The group hit the surf once more, then returned to the house for lunch. Mick volunteered to ride into town for a few extra groceries. When he failed to return in normal time, Dickson checked the rear yard. “Cody!” He yelled from the back door, “get Alan to phone triple O while you bring my cell phone! Hurry!”

When Cody arrived with the phone, he saw Mick unconscious on the lawn, still wearing his helmet and being attended by Dickson who knelt beside his mate. The blond grabbed the phone and punched in Dr. David Hardy’s number. “It’s an emergency,” he yelled and demanded to speak to the doctor despite his being busy with another patient.

“Hello? Dr. Hardy speaking.”

“It’s Dickson Bottoms, doc, I just found Mick unconscious on the back lawn. He’s been vomiting. I can see redness and swelling on his arm.”

“Have you called emergency?”

“Yes.”

“Can you see a black dot near the swelling?”

“Yes.”

“Use your credit card or a blunt knife to swipe over the stinger and remove it.”

“Stinger?” Dickson wasted no time in following the doc’s instructions. “You mean a bee sting?”

“Probably. Get some ice and cover the swelling.”

Dickson relayed the message to Cody then returned his attention to the matter at hand. “It’s coming, doc. Anything else?”

“Clean the area with soap and water.” Again, Dickson relayed the message to Cody who had just delivered the ice. “Do you have any hydrocortisone cream?” the doctor added.

“I don’t think so.”

“Use a paste of baking soda and water.”

Alan, who by this time had advised Dickson that an ambulance was on its way, was ordered to make a paste of baking soda and water. Both he and Cody raced inside the house and were back at the scene within a minute. Dickson then applied the paste to the wound area using one hand while holding the phone with the other. “It sounds to me like Mick has a sting allergy,” the doctor said, “perhaps even anaphylaxis. You probably saved your friend’s life by your quick action. When the ambulance arrives, let me talk to one of the medics.”

Moments later, the ambulance pulled into the drive and one of the officers took Dickson’s phone. Mick, by this time, had begun to stir and slowly regain consciousness. “It’s okay, mate,” Dickson said as he knelt beside his friend, “you’ll be fine. No worries, mate. I’ll visit the hospital soon to check. Now you behave yourself and try not to molest the nurses.”

“Guys or girls?” Mick smiled before being placed on a stretcher and lifted into the ambulance.

Once the VW Transporter had left the house, Dickson thanked Cody and Alan for their help. “You guys certainly know how to respond to an emergency. I owe you blokes, and so does Mick. Thanks a stack.”

“No worries, mate,” Cody smiled. “Feels kinda good to do stuff like that. Glad we could help.”

“Listen guys, lunch is off, okay. Take a raincheck. I’m off to the hospital—maybe you guys can visit later. Meanwhile, make yourself at home here—this house is your house.”

Chapter 29

By the time Dickson arrived at Taree hospital, Mick had been transferred from emergency to recovery, and had pretty much returned to his normal chirpy self. Dr. David Hardy, a stout man in his mid forties, with gapped front teeth, was in attendance by Mick's bedside. "You did a wonderful job," the doctor said to Dickson, and shook his hand. "Quick thinking saved the day."

"And not only the day, Doc. Thanks for taking the call."

"I've prescribed medication for Mick's allergy. It's permanent—something he'll need to take regularly for the rest of his life."

"I'm glad I'm still around to take it," Mick grinned from his hospital bed. "Whoa! That was way too scary! Never again."

"Only a few percent of people are highly allergic to insect stings, and only a small minority of those are prone to a life-threatening reaction such as yours, Mick. Most of us experience a localized, non-serious reaction. But you'll be fine now—just be sure to take your medication. By the way," the doctor said as he turned his attention to Dickson, "I heard on the grapevine that you're contemplating the sale of your house."

"Not quite."

"Horace Fink is not to be trusted—consider that to be my off-the-record advice."

"You know him?"

"I attended to him here in Taree after the Auckland fiasco. It was my duty as an on-call doctor, but I refuse to accept the man as a private patient. Have nothing to do with him, Dickson. You're still young,

vulnerable and impressionable. You're fair game for a man like Fink."

"May I ask why you feel this way about him?"

"No, you may not. However, you're my patient as well as my friend, Dickson. My father tended your grandmother. Let's just say that I have a vested interest in your welfare."

Mick was released from hospital that evening. Next morning, he traveled to the beach house by bus and foot. What he saw in the backyard startled him. He rushed inside the house. "Dickson? Dickson?" Then he heard the toilet flush and saw his mate headed for the bathroom to wash his hands. "Dicko? What the fuck...???"

"Settle, settle, mate—chill. I'm okay. You had breakfast yet?"

An anxious Mick listened intently as his friend placed bacon strips in a frypan and began the story. "It drizzled a bit when I left the hospital yesterday after seeing you. You know, that light rain that makes the road slippery as all buggery. Anyway, I'm just out of Taree headed to Old Bar. I was on a straight stretch doing about 50 ks in third gear—4,600 rpm. The car in front, about 2 car lengths away, starts to slow, so I slow as well. The bike begins to slide to the left and I lose vertical. I have enough time to say 'oh, shit!' in my helmet before I hit the dirt. I see the top box on the back of the Suzuki slide as I tumble like a rag doll." Dickson paused to turn the bacon. "Oh, the toast—you do the toast, mate."

"No worries."

"So, the bike slides maybe 15 feet when I fall and then I land next to the bike on its side. I figure I was on my knees on the dirt for about two minutes, head down. My knees scream in pain. I keep thinking I gotta get off the road. My face shield fogs but I manage

to open the visor. Then I drag myself and crawl to the kerb where I'm on my back, feet up on the top box, looking like an astronaut crouched in a capsule."

"Jesus Christ, Dicko!"

"I look up and see faces peering down at me—some kid and a bunch of older people. "Are you okay?" they keep asking. Yeah, right. Like I do this kinda thing every day. I get my helmet off and stare at my bike, engine still running. I head for it to turn it off but the people hold me back, and they shut down the engine. The indicator lights are still flashing so I break away and turn them off. Someone brings a chair. Then I realize my gloves are missing and my leg is bleeding—probably got caught under the bike."

Dickson paused again while he broke four eggs into the pan. "So I sit down and watch a couple of people lift the bike back onto its wheels. You know how I feel about other people touching my bike, Mick. Grrrrr. All I wanna know is if it's okay or not. They ask if I want an ambulance. Too late; someone called already and there's a siren on its way, and two cops arrive. 'Name, age, license.' They want to see my knees. So the ambo blokes check me out. The paramedic says I can't refuse treatment so I say, 'I refuse treatment'. The paramedic is pissed off. 'Who do you think you're talking to?' So I'm free to walk around and sign a release form, a waiver. So everyone vanishes except one cop; that 'Bumper' Farrell bloke."

"Clive Farrell."

"That's the one. He says I gotta move the bike off the road. I rock it off its center stand, still in gear because the lever's bent. I grab the clutch lever and nurse the bike to the kerb.

"Dammit, Dicko, why didn't you call me?"

"Call you? You were in hospital, you dickhead. Anyway, I hurt like HELL and the cop's beady eyes are

drilling me, wanting to know if I was wearing my helmet. He accuses me of speeding. I say 50 ks. He asks how can I be sure? I say I pay attention, I was in third gear at 4,600 revs and at 4,600 revs it's 50 kilometers per hour. But he still tries to stare me down." Dickson added butter and milk to the pan, and stirred the egg mixture with a wooden spoon.

"Yeah," he continued, "so I look a mess and I refuse treatment. I stare the cop dead in the eye and tell him not to fuck with me. I'm pissed off. He backs down right away."

"Whoa! You said that to a cop? That's not the Dicko I know."

"I say 'surely you can understand my situation, mate'. He wishes me good luck and I'm alone again. I phone the NRMA for a truck to bring the bike home and the driver gives me a lift. I get home and clean the dirt and crap out of my knees with a toothpick. It's cool, though. My wrist hurts but it's okay. The headlight's bugged, the shifter lever is bent, clutch lever's had the sword, turn signal is stuffed—other than that the bike's just fine and dandy."

"The bike? Bugger the bike, mate, you're more important."

"Oh, bloody hell...", Dickson complained as he noticed black smoke pouring from the toaster.

"What?"

"You burnt the bloody toast, Mick! That's the trouble with you, you don't concentrate!"

"It's my fault, mate."

"Of course it is!"

"No," Mick said as he placed two more slices of bread in the toaster, and lowered the setting. "I mean about the accident. You were thinking about me."

"I was?"

“Yeah, even subconsciously, and that’s why you weren’t concentrating properly.”

“You bloody dingaling! You had nothing to do with the prang. BUT... you can help me with repairs. Give me a lift to the wrecking yard after breakfast.”

Most of the day was spent working on the battered Suzuki. By late afternoon, the machine was almost back to normal, apart from a few scratches and dings. Then Dickson answered a call on his cell phone. It was Alan Fogarty. “Hey, man, I was wondering... I mean, like about your offer.”

“To talk? Sure, any time, mate.”

Dickson explained the situation to Mick, and suggested that perhaps Mick could conveniently find something to do during Alan’s visit. “I think he’ll feel more comfortable talking one on one.”

“Sure, Dicko, no worries. I’ll ride into town and get some touch-up paint and see what I can do about the scratches.”

“Take mine.”

Fogarty arrived late afternoon, after school, and joined Dickson and Paul for a surf.

Once the young redhead had pedaled home, and Mick busied himself with repairs to the Suzuki, the two blonds relaxed on the front verandah with a Coke.

“About Fink,” Alan began after an awkward silence. “I do know him—that’s why I took off when he arrived here. And I lied when I said I’d never been to Auckland.”

“Take your time, mate.”

“You gotta promise me something, though. This convo stays between you and me. Okay? It’s just that I gotta tell somebody. It’s eating me up. You promise?”

“Listen, Fogsy, I want you to be sure about something; that you feel comfortable telling me

whatever it is that bothers you. I can't promise anything if I don't know what it is."

"I trust you—you've got an honest face, Dickson, and you seem like a fair dinkum bloke. Cody says you're a totally cool guy." Alan spent a while in silent contemplation, gazing out to sea before he bowed his head and continued. "Fink molested me."

"Why didn't you report him to the cops?"

"Because ... well, it wasn't like he forced me. He's rich, he promised stuff."

"That's the oldest trick in the book, mate. So, you wanna tell me about Auckland?"

"I heard from a teacher at school that Fink was going to New Zealand on business, so I took the next flight." The boy took a deep breath, then a sip of Coke. "I wanted to kill him. Do you believe that? When I got to his hotel room, the door was open. He was slumped on the floor—bleeding from the head. So I split real fast and caught the next flight back to Sydney. I'm scared shitless, Dickson. People are gonna think I did it; that I hit the bloke over the head. I read about it in the newspaper."

"Do you know who did it?"

"When I hightailed it outta that hotel, I saw a guy—a young guy about my age—part Maori, I think. He had blood on his shirt and he looked kinda freaked out. I only saw him for a few seconds."

"Would you recognize him if you saw him again?"

"I never wanna see that guy again. I never wanna see Fink again. I never wanna see Auckland again. What am I gonna do, Dickson?"

"Would you have killed Fink if the coast had been clear—if someone hadn't beaten you to it?"

"Not sure—guess I'll never know."

"Was anyone else aware of your mission?"

“Only the teacher.”

“I see. Have you spoken to the teacher about what happened?”

“She thinks I’m lying. She thinks I did it.”

“Was she involved? I mean, a co-conspirator?”

“It was her idea. Hey, Dickson, what am I gonna do? I can’t talk to anyone else about this and my brain is fried. I don’t wanna go to jail, man.”

Chapter 30

Dickson explained to Fogsy that he preferred more time to think about the Horace Fink situation before suggesting any plan of action—or indeed inaction—and that the two should get together for another chat in a day or two. Then both lads paused to listen to the unmistakable sound of a Harley arriving. “What the hell is Bob Down doing here?” Dickson wondered aloud as he and his new young friend headed to the back door. In the yard, while Mick repaired scratches to the damaged Suzuki with touch-up paint, he was watched with interest by the bearded biker.

“G’day, Bob, this is my friend Alan Fogarty. Alan ... Bob Down.”

“What for?”

“Bob as in Robert.”

“Oops! Pleased to meet you,” the young blonde smiled as his hand was crushed by Bob’s ham fist.

“Wow, this is a totally mad bike!”

“That ain’t no bike, mate, that’s a cycle.”

“Sickle?”

“That’s what I said.”

“I don’t suppose...”

“Hop on.”

Dickson loaned the boy his helmet, and watched the pair rumble down the road for an impromptu joy ride. Then he checked Mick’s painting efforts. “Bloody good job, mate—excellent. You deserve more money.”

“Cool,” Mick grinned.

“Scratch my last comment.”

“So what was the chat with Fogsy all about?”

“Later—it’s kinda complicated.”

Half an hour later, Bob returned to the beach house, minus his passenger. “I took him home,” he explained as he handed Dickson his helmet. “He said

he'd phone you later, and thanked you for your time today. Nice kid."

"Did he enjoy the ride?"

"Stoked, to use your surfer lingo. Got me to do a few laps of the block so his neighbors could ogle, hahahaha! So what's the story with the rice rocket?"

Over a beer on the front verandah, Dickson told Bob about the accident. Not to be outdone, Mick then related his story about the bee sting. "You blokes sure lead pretty exciting lives," Bob chuckled before his expression changed to serious. "Listen, guys, I'm leaving town. Got a job offer from a dairy farmer in Tamworth with the opportunity to buy shares in his property. Can't handle all that O'Reilly indecision and farting about. So I'm off."

"That's sudden."

"I gave it plenty of consideration. The local gendarmes are not too crazy about the idea, though."

"The cops?"

"I do undercover work," the beard said without thinking. "By the way, not a word of what you just heard to anyone, okay? Or you guys will be six foot undercover, if you get my drift."

"Don't tell us any more."

"Anyway, I thought I'd pop in and let you know. I don't have many friends, but I'd like to think you guys are mates of mine ... despite the rice rockets."

"Thanks, we appreciate that. You got time to stay for dinner? Burgers with the lot."

"I didn't bring any grappa."

"Thank Christ for that!"

After burgers and beers, the trio ambled along the beach in the warm glow of late sunset. Bob's lily-white feet had never seen the light of day, and his toenails were partially distorted by the almost permanent confines of boots. "Don't you breathe a

word of this,” he grumbled as he gingerly picked his way through the occasional scattering of sharp shells. “If my bikie mates ever get wind of this I’ll never live it down.”

“Feels good, though, huh?”

“Different.”

“So tell us how it was with Horace when you turned up with all that loot.”

“I didn’t stay long—his wife was there—we don’t get along.” Bob took a slapstick moment to outrun the incoming wash, then rejoined the boys.

“How can you blokes actually enjoy paddling around in that stuff? Too bloody cold, for one thing.”

“You’ve never surfed?”

“No, and I ain’t about to start now. Besides, I don’t like the idea of doing anything without boots.”

“Hahaha! Now you’re gonna tell us you sleep with ‘em on.”

“You guessed right—and I’ll be buried with the buggers as well.”

“So, this undercover work you mentioned—you ever bust anyone?”

“No way, Jose. I’d be a dead man. I gave the Ds certain information that assisted certain investigations into drug dealing and gang disputes—that kinda thing. It all got a bit too close to home when I accidentally discovered stuff about Horace. That’s one of the reasons I’m leaving town—I know too much.”

“About?”

“Don’t ask.”

“When we first met, you told us that if anyone crossed Horace you’d intervene on his behalf.”

“That was then, mate, this is now.”

“Is Horace aware of what you know about him?”

“No. If he was he wouldn’t have dared ask for his 100 thou back. Anyway, let’s change the subject, fellas. Those burgers were bloody sensational—you’re one helluva cook, Dickson. By the way, and tell me if I’m outta line here, but do you guys have a thing going? Doesn’t matter to me if you do.”

“Not the kinda thing you’re thinking, Bob. We’re close, yeah, very close—best mates.”

“No pussy?”

“Not at the moment.”

“Too much hassle, anyway. I prefer the cows.”

Both Dickson and Mick thought it prudent, in the interests of discretion as well as their own wellbeing, not to pursue the bearded bikie’s last comment.

Bob left soon afterward to tend his herd before nightfall. Mick took the opportunity to quiz Dickson about his conversation with Alan Fogarty. “Do you believe him?” he asked as the pair retired to the front verandah with coffee and home-made cookies.

“I have no reason not to.”

“What if it’s some kinda ploy to throw us off the scent? What if all that stuff about Fink’s already being unconscious is a prefabrication?”

“Possible, but I don’t think so. Actually, I’m more interested in Barbara Thorne’s involvement. Fogsy says it was her idea and, let’s face it, she was at the airport to see him off.”

“Yeah, but all we got is Fogsy’s hearsay. I reckon Lemon Lips is too smart to incriminate herself. Hey, Dicko, these are awesome cookies, mate.”

“Gran’s recipe. And what do you think about Bob’s admission that he knows something sinister about Fink?”

“He didn’t say it was sinister.”

“No—but it all ties in—sort of.”

“Sort of ain’t good enough, mate. It’s all circumstantial.” Mick finished another cookie before continuing. “And what about the house? I reckon you should phone Fink and tell him no deal. Besides, I don’t want him around here again.”

“In that case, we won’t get the opportunity to learn more. I think I should stall my answer for as long as I can. By the way, how are your folks taking your gay thing?”

“Not too good. They don’t say anything directly but the atmos at home is kinda strained. I can sense it. I reckon I might move out.”

“Where will you go?” It took less than a moment for Dickson to figure the obvious answer. “Oh, wait a minute, Mick,” he added quickly. “I don’t know if I’m prepared for that. As much as I enjoy your company I also like my independence.”

“What difference would it make? I’m always here anyway, and I can sleep in the spare room. You won’t see any more of me than you already do. Hey, if you wanna keep the spare room spare, I can bunk down on the couch or whatever. Maybe I can fix up part of the garage as a kinda flat.”

Early next morning, Dickson rented a pantech truck. Then the boys toured various building sites in town to find suitable recycled materials for the ‘flat’. They also called into the Salvation Army store to purchase used furniture. Their final stop before heading home was Taree Hire where they selected a range of power tools and other implements.

After unloading the truck, Dickson drove it back to town and returned to the beach house on his Suzuki. Shortly afterwards, a team of helpers, organized by Mick, arrived: Cody, Mark and Fogsy. The rear yard for the remainder of the day resembled a professional building site with carpenters, painters, plasterers and

various other tradesmen (albeit dressed only in board shorts) going about their business. Part of the renovation necessitated moving items such as the lawnmower and other bulky items from the garage to be stored under the house.

By late afternoon, the garage had been magically and successfully transformed into a small but liveable bedsitter, complete with old but practical furniture, and a carpeted floor. Other facilities such as kitchen and bathroom were available to share in the main house.

“This is so cool!” Cody beamed with pride as the group stood back to admire their handiwork. “Not sure about the pink walls, though.”

“It was cheap,” Mick explained. “Now all I gotta do is fit a side door and window, but that can wait.” Mick walked to his bike and threw a leg over the saddle. “Back in a tick,” he added before fitting his helmet and riding off.

“Where’s he going?” Fogsy asked.

“I think I know.” And with that, Dickson disappeared inside the house to retrieve 5 of his Gran’s crystal champagne flutes.

Chapter 31

Having tidied a few loose ends in his new flat, Mick returned to the house where Dickson typed at the computer. "It's the latest report for Doris," the blond explained. "But there are still more questions than answers. Is Fogsy telling the truth about what he saw in Auckland? To what extent is Barbara Thorne involved? How much does Bob Down know about Horace's 'other life'?"

"You're forgetting the cops, mate. If Bob is an undercover agent..."

"...how much do they know about Horace as well? Yeah, I get your drift."

"Do you also get the feeling you and I know bugger all about this case?"

"That's why we're in the business we're in, mate, and getting paid for it. So what's for dinner?"

"Dinner?" Mick asked with a cocked eyebrow. "Me?"

"I'm worn out, Mick. Your turn to be chef."

By the time Mick returned with pizza and garlic bread from Old Bar, Dickson had completed the Doris Fink report, which he printed, folded and placed in a plain envelope. Then the boys eagerly devoured their meal at the kitchen table and washed it down with a beer.

"Have you thought about rent, Dicko? ...for the flat, I mean."

"What do you pay your folks?"

"Fifty a week but that's for food."

"Tell you what, mate, if you share the house work and the grocery bill, we'll call it quits. How's that?"

"And what about Fink? Fink gets the flick, right? No sale."

Horace and his gleaming black Wolseley arrived just after breakfast next morning as the boys attended to domestic chores. Mick, holding a wet sponge and a can of Ajax, answered the rear door.

“No need for that,” Horace laughed. “The place will be demolished anyhow.”

“Dickson’s in the bathroom—follow me.”

The boys postponed their cleaning duties long enough to make coffee and entertain their guest at the kitchen table. “I’ve considered your offer, Horace,” Dickson began. “However, there’s something you’ve neglected to mention ... who exactly will occupy the apartments? Do you have an apartment in mind for yourself or someone you know?”

“Why, yes, but what does that have to do with your decision, Mr. Bottoms? My wife and I are experiencing a few domestic problems at the moment, and I thought one of the apartments would be a useful retreat for me during times of stress ... a place where I could invite a few friends from time to time. This is an ideal location, Dickson, far away from prying eyes. And don’t worry about my friends—they’re not old fogies. I enjoy the company of younger people, people like yourselves. Younger people are, in some ways, more... uh, shall we say, stimulating.”

“Like Alan Fogarty?” Mick interrupted on impulse.

Horace’s face turned raspberry red before the blood drained to reveal a ghostly white and agitated expression. “Can we discuss business in private?” he glared at Dickson.

“I’m sorry, Horace, but there is no business to discuss.”

“You’re declining my offer?”

“Yes.”

“Is that your final decision?”

“Yes.”

Without another word, Horace Fink stood and made his own way to the Wolseley, which quickly disappeared toward Old Bar in a cloud of dust.

“You’d make a great diplomat,” Dickson said to his mate before he resumed his cleaning work in the bathroom.

“It just slipped out. That guy gives me the creeps.”

“He won’t anymore—you can bet that’s the last we’ll see of Horace Fink.”

Once the housework was finished, Dickson phoned Doris’ cell phone and explained that the latest report was ready for delivery or collection. “I’ll be there at lunch time... say about one-ish? Please note, Dickson, L-U-N-C-H time.”

The boys surfed until 12:30 then tended the kitchen ... savory tuna crepes, tossed salad and a bottle of Chardonnay. Doris arrived at 1:10 dressed in a sleeveless pale-blue blouse that revealed more than ample cleavage, white knee-length Bermuda shorts and chunky cork-heeled sandals. Her long red hair draped loosely over her bare ivory shoulders. “I see that you boys dress for lunch in the same way you dress for everything else—bare feet, bare torso, board shorts and hair that could easily defy even the most determined comb. BUT,” she added before the boys could speak, “I wouldn’t have it any other way. You’re such a refreshing change from the usual lunch crowd and all their mindless gossip. Have you seen or heard from Horace?”

“He was here this morning.” Dickson handed his client the envelope containing the report. “It’s all in there.”

Dickson took the tray of food to the front verandah while Mick followed with the wine and

glasses. Doris was already reading the report as she stepped through the doorway and felt her way, almost blindly, to a chair where she sat down. “Alan Fogarty?” she asked as she lowered the report and reached for a crepe.

“That’s the boy in the video.”

“I see.”

Everyone ate while Doris finished reading the report. “These crepes are absolutely delicious,” she said as she folded the report and reached for another morsel. “Very more-ish indeed.”

“You don’t seem upset,” Mick noted as he poured the wine into Gran’s old crystal flutes.

“I’m beyond being upset, Mick. I just want Horace out of my life ... one way or another. Quite frankly, my dear friends, if someone doesn’t bump him off soon I’ll be tempted to take care of the matter myself. Besides,” she added with an arm stretched in the direction of the sweeping view, “who could be upset here? This is the real world, my young Adonises—the open air, the sea, miles of sandy beach, exquisite company, delicious food and wine... You remind me of Tony Spiropoulos; he loves his farm and the quiet life—he loves nature.”

“He loves you.”

“Yes, he does.” In anticipation of the next comment, Doris asked the question herself: “Why not move in with Tony? Let’s just say that it’s a consideration. He’s away for the next week but I have the key to the house. Living in close proximity to Horace at the moment is uncomfortable to say the least so I might spend a few days at the farm—a well-earned sabbatical.”

“May I ask,” Dickson inquired, “how this current situation affects Horace’s will and testament arrangements?”

“It doesn’t—at least, not yet. Horace’s estate is the last thing on his mind at the moment. That will change, of course, if we divorce.”

“Is divorce something you’ve discussed?”

“No, but I dare say that divorce is something we’ve both considered privately. The marriage is finished, there’s no doubt about that. By the way,” she added as she retrieved her purse from the floor, “here’s another payment.” Doris produced an envelope and handed it to Dickson. “You boys have done a remarkable job—you’ll find a generous bonus in there.”

Dickson thanked his client, then caught a whiff of Doris’ perfume. “You’re still wearing ... uh, the *same* fragrance.”

“You mean Horace’s concoction. I don’t see it as Horace’s—I spent just as many hours experimenting with various formulae as he did, so it’s as much mine. Besides, no one else has it, and I enjoy the exclusivity.”

Without warning, Mick leapt to his feet and brushed away an insect that hovered above the lady’s head. “Damn bee,” he said as he took a few more swings to send the creature on its way. Then he apologized to Doris for causing alarm. “I’m allergic to bee stings,” he explained and checked that the coast was clear before he resumed his chair. “You were saying?”

“About the perfume? It does make the occasional bee somewhat curious, but I ignore them. Once they realize I’m not a flower they buzz off—excuse the pun. Speaking of which...” Doris, stood and brushed back her hair, “I have an appointment with Dr. Hardy.”

“David Hardy?”

“He’s a friend as well as my doctor; we were an item years ago—a lovely man. He’s happily married

with a young family these days but we still see each other socially.”

“Is he up to speed with Horace?”

“Yes. He never liked my husband. ‘That man will be the bane of your life,’ he once warned me. Of course, at the time, I was madly in love and didn’t listen. Meanwhile, I must be off—thank you both for a delicious lunch and wonderful company, as always. I’ll be in touch.”

Paul arrived after school for his surfing lesson; a lesson he didn’t require. The redhead’s proficiency amongst the waves was now more than adequate; at least on par with other grommets his age. After showering with his mentors in the front yard, he was about to leave for home when Dickson tapped the boy on the shoulder, “Haven’t you forgotten something?” he asked in sign.

“What?” Dickson took the surfboard, stood it on its end and grinned at the youngster. “You mean...” the wide-eyed freckled lad continued, “the board? But what if the other guy wants to use it?”

“The ‘other guy’ is you, Paul.”

“Me?”

“Happy birthday.” And with that, Dickson and Mick burst into a rather tuneless but nonetheless enthusiastic rendition of ‘Happy Birthday’ to which Dickson added, “I know it’s not today, mate, but why wait?”

“You mean... it’s mine? This is my stick? To keep? I don’t know what to say! This is awesome!”

“We figure you can use it at your local beach—no need to come here all the time, although you’re always welcome, of course.”

Paul took the board and leaned it against the wall before he threw his arms around Dickson’s neck.

“You’re the bestest friend in the whole world!” Then he hugged Mick. “And you’re the bestest too!”

Chapter 32

Detective Sergeant Rowles introduced himself and his partner to Dickson at the rear door of the beach house. “And this is detective Rocque. We believe Doris Fink was here yesterday,” he said as he flashed his identification.

“Is anything wrong?”

“May we ask a few questions?”

Dickson invited the men into the kitchen where Mick was preparing breakfast. The morning paper lay on the table, still unopened. “What’s this all about, sergeant?” Dickson asked as he offered the men a chair but they chose instead to stand.

“You haven’t read the paper yet?”

“No—went for an early morning surf—just got back.”

Rowles unravelled the newspaper and spread it on the table. “You’re not aware of this?”

The large, bold letters leapt like black tiger paws from the page. “Dead? Doris is dead? But...?” Dickson, with Mick now at his side, scanned the headline and first few paragraphs of the front page. “Stung to death? She was here only yesterday...!”

“Do you recognize this?” Rowles produced an envelope from which he took Dickson’s report. “This was in her bag.”

“That’s confidential.”

“So you *do* recognize it. How well did she know Chris Spiropoulos?”

“They were friends—she had the key to the house.”

“Do you know his whereabouts?”

“She didn’t say—except that he’s away for the week. Are you treating Doris’ death as suspicious? Where was she?”

“In the front yard of the house. What was she wearing yesterday?”

“Uh... shorts, white shorts and a blue top—light blue. But it says here in the paper that she was found wearing a dark top... Dark clothing near bee hives? That doesn’t make sense.”

“Was she familiar with the behavior of bees?”

“I’m not sure—she had never visited the farm before—that’s our understanding.”

“What do you know of her perfume?”

“Her perfume?” Dickson related the story of the perfume according to what he’d learned from Horace and Doris. Mick then added his tale of the hovering bee the previous day at lunch.

“That would seem to match our forensic hypothesis.”

“The bees were attracted by the perfume?”

“On the contrary, Mr. Bottoms—they were repelled by it and became aggressive—so it appears.”

“But why detectives? Why not constables? Are you treating Doris’ death as suspicious?”

“Do you have any knowledge of the current whereabouts of Horace Fink?”

“No.”

“According to this report—the one you wrote for Doris—Horace expressed interest in buying this property.”

“Not exactly ‘buy’, but close enough. Anyway, I rejected his offer. Meantime, what does Horace have to do with Doris’s death?”

“That’s what we’d like to know, gentlemen. Thanks for your time Mr. Bottoms... Mr. Morris. If you think of anything further that might assist our investigation, please get in touch.” Rowles placed his card on the table, then the two ‘suits’ left the house and drove away.

“That’s us out of a job,” Mick commented as he returned to his cooking duties.

Dickson re-read the headline story in the paper. “I didn’t realize you were so sensitive, Mick,” he mumbled sarcastically. “Remember when Cody said he saw a book about bees on Horace’s desk?”

Mick delivered two plates of scrambled eggs on toast to the table and sat opposite his mate. “Yeah, and bees featured in that video of Cody skinny dipping in the pool as well. So what are you thinking?”

“What if Horace understood that the perfume, to bees, was like a red rag to a bull? What if he was also aware of the friendship between Doris and Tony Spiropoulos?”

“What if, what if?”

“I think there might be a connection.”

“Are you gonna share your suspicion with Rocque and Rowles?”

“Not yet. I’d like to speak to Tom Samuels first—according to this newspaper report he attended the scene afterward and gave Doris the last rites before the body was taken to the morgue.”

“How did the Rev know she was there?”

Only a dozen or so faithful trickled from Our Lady of the Rosary church after mass on a regular weekday morning. Dickson and Mick waited outside the church for the Rev to appear at the door after the service. “I can guess what brings you boys here,” he said as he shook their hands and invited them to the presbytery for tea. “Poor Doris—she didn’t deserve to go that way, not that it matters now, of course. She’s in Heaven at peace.” Dickson sat at the kitchen table and remained silently respectful as the lads watched the Rev prepare the silver service and boil the water. “She had already passed away when I arrived after receiving the call.”

“From Horace?”

“One would have thought that he would call emergency first, not me. I arrived before the police and ambulance—Horace was nowhere to be seen. Have you boys heard from him?”

“Not a word.”

“Help yourselves to the sugar and milk, my friends, I can never remember those measurements. However, I do remember that Doris preferred lemon.” The Rev. sat at the table, poured tea into his porcelain cup and stirred it. “It was rather eerie—she was dressed in black, almost as though she were in mourning.”

“What did Horace say on the phone?”

“That Doris was dead. He asked me to phone emergency because his cell phone battery was low. I wasn’t far from the farm at the time, on my way to visit a parishioner.”

“And where was Horace when he called?”

“He didn’t say.”

“He wasn’t at the farm?”

“He must have been—how else would he know about Doris? It’s all very mysterious, my friends, and it appears that you are equally mystified. Have the police visited you? They asked about you.” The Rev listened intently and with some surprise as Dickson related the events of that morning, and those of the previous day. “May the Lord forgive you,” he said at last.

“For what?”

“Using me covertly for information. And now, if you’ll pardon me, I have pastoral matters to attend to. I’ll, no doubt, see you at the funeral service.”

“Tom! That’s not fair!”

“Isn’t it? Not fair, private detective Bottoms?”

The boys rose from the table without finishing their tea, and headed for their bikes parked at the curb. “You should have given him a mouthful,” Mick

growled as they grabbed their helmets but Dickson was in no mood to comment. Upon arrival at the beach house, Dickson took to the surf and spent the rest of the morning seeking solace among the only friends he truly understood—the waves. One after the other they queued to greet him and to challenge him—providing an endless diversion from the world of madness that sought to confuse his mind and sadden his soul. Mick chose to surf nearby, but the two never spoke until they returned to the backyard shower hose.

“You wanna talk about Tom?” Mick began.

“This whole private detective thing sucks,” was Dickson’s abrupt reply.

Shortly afterwards, Cody appeared at the open verandah door. He explained that he’d skipped swim practice for the afternoon; that he was unable to focus on training. “I didn’t know about Doris until I saw this morning’s paper,” he said. “Jesus, that kinda thing never happens to people you know—always to some stranger. Anyway, the Ds were around this morning asking questions—they wanted to know where Horace was. My mom noticed him yesterday—he and Doris drove away somewhere in the old Wolseley. My mom thought it was unusual ‘cause Doris was wearing dark clothing—like she was going somewhere formal or whatever.”

“Have you seen Horace since?”

“Nope—car’s not there either. That’s not surprising, though, ‘cause he’s always away somewhere on business or whatever.”

“Do the cops know about the video?”

“They didn’t mention it. Why? What’s that got to do with Doris’ death?”

Shortly afterward, Dickson and Mick parked their Suzukis at the side of Cody’s house, away from the street. The spiky mop then used his spare key to

enter the Fink house. After making sure the coast was clear, the two super sleuths jumped the fence, entered the Fink property, knocked at the door and were invited inside by Cody. “We should have a search warrant or something,” Mick suggested but his partner scoffed at the idea.

“We’re not breaking in, you dingaling, we’re being invited by someone who has permission to be here.”

As Dickson suspected, after a search of the ceiling, Cody reported that the video recorder attached to the spy camera was empty. In the meantime, Dickson inspected the books and magazines on Horace’s desk. “This is interesting,” he said, noting that the book about bees had the corner of a particular page folded inward: ‘Bee Sting Avoidance and Treatment’ was the chapter title. “It seems Horace took a special interest in bee stings and what motivates bees to attack.” Dickson replaced the book. “I’ll get a copy from the library and read it.”

Next stop was the Spiropoulos farm where the three boys inspected the dried mud of the driveway. “Fresh tire marks,” Dickson noted, “most of them wide radials—undoubtedly tracks left by the cop cars, and some from Tony’s Landcruiser. Ah! Here’s the one I’m looking for!” Mick and Cody followed the direction of Dickson’s pointed finger. “It’s from a narrow cross-ply... I reckon it’s a non-radial, 15-inch pressed-steel wheel. I remember the tread pattern on the Wolseley—all original, right down to the rubber.”

“Horace must have driven Doris here in the Wolseley. But why?”

“Only one person can answer that question, my dear Watson.”

Chapter 33

Back at the beach house, Dickson checked the mailbox and noted the return address on the back of an envelope. "Remind me not to say g'day to the doc in the street," he muttered as the pair entered the house, "in case he charges me for the privilege."

"What are you bitching about?"

"It's the bill for the phone call I made when you were stung by a bee. Ouch! Almost sixty bucks!"

"It was worth it, though." Mick said. He paused in expectation of a response which failed to materialize. "Wasn't it?"

"Are you suggesting the bill is mine? You got stung, not me."

"You made the call. I was unconscious."

"I can arrange a repeat if you're not careful."

"Cool it, okay? I'll pay the bloody thing."

Besides, medical insurance takes care of most of it. Listen, Dicko, I know you're under a lotta stress at the mo, but don't crap all over me. Okay?"

Dickson took a deep breath, decided not to pursue the matter, and peered inside the fridge. "Wanna beer?" Without waiting for an answer, he tossed a can to his mate who caught the flying missile like a pro footballer. "Let's take a walk along the beach and try to unravel this whole Fink mess."

Nature's vibrant color scheme that day was a mix of intense blue, green, white and gold, bathed in burning sunlight that danced and sparkled upon the sea's constant peaks and troughs as though blissfully ignorant of the troubles that darkened the minds of the shirtless and barefoot teens.

"Horace did it," Mick finally deduced. "He tried to set it up like an accident but it was murder."

"Why?"

“What do you mean ‘why’? Is this the Dickson Bottoms super sleuth I’m talking to? You know why as well as I do—Doris knew about Fogsy and the video. She probably suspected something sinister about the Auckland hotel room attack as well. So, it follows that Horace decided to eliminate Doris.”

“Why not eliminate Alan Fogarty as well?”

“He’s probably next on the list.”

“Don’t forget about Mick Morris.”

“Me?”

“You blurted Fogsy’s name when Horace was here.”

“Jesus!” Mick glanced over his shoulder to check that the coast (literally) was clear. “Hey, Dicko, we’re a couple of kids—we’re not equipped to get involved in this kinda serious crap. We need to tell the cops.”

“Tell them what? About a video that no longer exists? That Fogsy flew to New Zealand but decided not to murder Fink at the last minute? About a conspiracy involving Barbara Thorne? About the Wolseley tire tracks at the farm? How do you know the Wolseley didn’t arrive before Doris? Or some time afterwards?”

“Horace phoned the Rev.”

“From a cell phone—Horace didn’t say where he was.”

“He knew his wife was dead.”

“Did he? I’m sufficiently familiar with the law to know that all we have is circumstantial evidence at best, Mick, - hearsay. I also know that Fink has the bikkies to afford a pretty nifty defense silk.”

“So what do you suggest, Dicko, that we just chill out and wait for Horace to bump us off? Remember Rocque and Rowles? They said to get in touch if we thought of something.”

“That sounds like them now,” Dickson joked as he heard a siren approaching from behind. “Hang on—that’s a fire siren!” Both boys quickly about turned to see a rising plume of black smoke.

“That’s near the house!” Mick yelled.

“Bloody hell, that *is* the house!”

The fire crew had already taken positions in the front and rear yards as the stunned and breathless boys arrived. “They won’t help much,” the commander remarked at the sight of the two beer cans. “Is this your house?”

Dickson nodded and noted the several hoses and extinguishers trained on the burning building. Thick acrid smoke billowed from some of the open windows. Occasionally, the choking haze cleared sufficiently to provide a glimpse of red and orange flames licking the interior walls. “How bad is it?” Dickson shouted above the sound of constant crackling and small explosions.

“Pretty bad. Bit early to say yet, but I suspect there’s an accelerant involved.”

“You mean... it was deliberately lit?”

“Not that it needed much... these old weatherboard houses are like a box of kindling waiting for a match. Good thing we got here as soon as we did. Nearly wiped out a car coming in the opposite direction.”

“A car? On this dirt road? What kind?”

“Old thing—shiny black—early ‘50s.” The commander then disappeared inside the hall and sprayed foam from an extinguisher into a nearby room. He was soon followed by two more similarly-equipped firemen who attended other rooms. Within thirty minutes, the flames had been largely subdued, leaving little more than a smouldering, smoking and severely-blackened blistered shell.

By then, two police officers, including Clive ‘Bumper’ Farrell, had arrived. They questioned the station commander for several minutes before turning their attention to Dickson and Mick. “Hey, mate,” Clive began, with genuine compassion, “too bad about the fire—I know how much this place means to you. Are you insured?”

“Yeah.”

“The chief over there reckons it could be arson. Where were you and your mate?”

“Walking along the beach. We heard the siren and saw the smoke.”

“If the chief’s right, there’ll be an inquiry. You’ll be answering a lot of questions—but I’m sure you’re already aware of that. By the way, the house is off limits while the forensic guys do their thing.”

“Who phoned triple zero?”

“Nobody. The chief said they were returning from a hoax call when they saw the smoke. You’re lucky there’s anything left of the house at all—could easily have been a WOFF. Anyway, we’ll need you to make a statement at the station. Rocque and Rowles will want to chat with you as well. How about you blokes pop in later this afternoon, say about 4?”

Florence Flannigan potted in the small garden as Dickson and Mick arrived on their Suzukis. Following the usual ‘howzits’ and hugs, Dickson noticed Flo’s wedding ring was missing from her finger. “I’m very careful these days,” she explained, “and I no longer wear it in risky situations. I put it in a safe place—actually,” she laughed, “so safe, I’ve temporarily forgotten where it is. But don’t worry!” she added hastily, “it’ll come to me. Now, what brilliant timing, you boys must have known that I just baked a lemon meringue pie.”

“Actually, Aunt Flo, I’ve got some bad news.”

“I’ll make tea—I never listen to bad news without tea.”

Dickson waited until the trio was seated at the kitchen table and the tea was served before he made his announcement. “We had a fire at the house this morning.”

“How serious?”

“Very.”

“Is it still standing?”

“Just.”

Flo sipped her tea and collected her thoughts. “As you know, my husband was a war veteran. When ever I complained about something, he would always say, ‘complaining never fixed anything’. So, let’s pretend he’s here now. Is the house insured?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Do you boys have anywhere to stay?”

“We’ll find somewhere.”

“You already have.”

“Aunt Flo, we can’t impose...”

“Don’t ‘Aunt Flo’ me,” she said firmly. “You need a place to stay and I have a spare room. It’s a good thing you’re both boys or one of you would have to sleep on the couch,” she laughed. “Now be a sweetie and get the lemon meringue pie from the fridge—and a large knife—and plates and...”

“Yes, Aunt Flo,” Dickson interrupted as he stiffened in mock salute and rose from the table to follow orders.

“What about your things? Clothes and things ... not that you ever wear much.”

“The house is off limits while the fire people investigate the cause of the blaze. All we have is what we’re wearing.” Dickson returned to the table with the food and utensils and sat down.

“You mean what you’re almost wearing. That’s what my husband used to say about my dresses—back in the days when I was a lot younger, of course. Jack was very formal, you know—your typical sergeant major type. But he was so graceful on the dance floor—the quick step, the fox trot, the tango—he made Fred Astaire look like a cripple,” she smiled. “I’m not sure what he’d have to say, though, about you and your ... informal surfing attire.”

The rest of the conversation centered on the fire, the damage caused, etcetera, however, Dickson took care not to mention possible arson or other matters such as the death of Doris Fink. He saw no need to upset his aging aunt unnecessarily. “You make the best lemon meringue pie, Aunt Flo—even better than Gran’s.” The young blond checked his watch. “Oops! Mick and I need to run an errand—it’s just a statement thing at the police station about the fire—routine stuff. Is there anything you need brought back from the shops? I still have my wallet, thank God.”

The lads had only just entered the reception area of Taree police station when Dickson answered a call on his cell phone. He recognized the voice right away. “We’re fine, Tom—the house isn’t so fine, though. No, no, no, no, mate—uh, Rev—we’re okay for money and stuff—thanks anyway—I appreciate it.”

“I also want to apologize for what I said earlier, Dickson—no, that’s not quite correct—may the Lord... what I mean is, I’m sorry for my attitude. I was a little miffed at the time. I’m sorry if I offended you. If there’s anything I can do...”

“I’ll be in touch, Tom. I’m kinda tied up at the mo. I’ll call you.”

“You’ll have to tell Mick to stop being so butch.”

“What are you grinning at?” Mick asked as Dickson ended the call.

Once the routine statement had been made to Constable Clive Farrell’s satisfaction, the boys were led to another interview room where Rocque and Rowles waited. “Coffee, gentlemen?”

“You got something stronger?” Dickson joked as he and his mate were offered a chair each. Rowles nodded to his partner who returned a few moments later with two plastic cups of steaming coffee.

“Standard issue,” he said as the cups were placed on the table that separated the boys from the Ds. Then Rowles produced a small flask from the inside pocket of his coat and poured a nip into each cup. “Brandy,” he explained. “I think you probably need it.”

“Thanks.”

“And now down to business. We already know that you rejected an offer from Horace Fink to invest in your property. In the meantime, we’re advised by the fire station commander that arson is suspected. The forensic guys are at the house as we speak and we anticipate confirmation of the use of an accelerant to ignite the seat of the blaze at any time now.”

Chapter 34

Cody's father, smiling broadly, answered the door and invited Dickson and Mick inside. "My son's in his room 'hitting the books' as he puts it ... the dreaded homework. Go straight on through."

The spiky mop was naked, which failed to surprise either of his unexpected guests as they accepted his offer to sit on the side of his bed. "So what's cookin'? Lemme guess—surf's up. Dammit, I got homework, guys, a stack of it. I'm grounded for the week. By the way, what do you blokes know about geometry?"

"Later, Code, we got some bad news. The beach house went up in flames this morning." Much to the mop's dumbfounded horror, Dickson related the story of the fire and subsequent events. "We're on the way home after being interviewed at the cop station."

"Home? What home? Hey, guys you can stay here, no worries. It'll be cool with my folks. I'll check..."

The mop rose from his chair but was stopped short by Dickson. "Thanks, Code, but we're staying at Aunt Flo's, at least until we can access the house again, or what's left of it. The kitchen is still okay, I think, and the garage wasn't touched by the fire. We'll be right, mate. Have you seen Horace lately?"

"Zippo, not a sign of him or the Wolseley—neither hide nor hair. The cops have been snooping around next door, though. They quizzed me about a few things but I played dumb, hehehe, and I didn't tell them about the spare key either. Tony Spiropoulos is back in town, though—he's helping the Rev. with the funeral arrangements—11am Friday in case you didn't know. Tony says he'll sell the farm—can't stand to live there any longer."

“How about Fogsy?” Mick asked. “You seen him?”

“At school, yeah. Lemon Lips and Fogsy were having a major confab about something in the canteen. I haven’t spoken to him all that much but I get the feeling he’s a bit jittery about something.”

“Like?”

“Hey, you guys know more about what’s going on than I do. Maybe you can tell me.”

Aunt Flo answered her villa door and beckoned the boys and their backpacks inside. “I’ll have to get you a key,” she said as she led the way to the kitchen where the boys deposited various groceries on the table. “I’ve got a meatloaf and potatoes in the oven—no time for anything special—and I hope you don’t mind pink bedspreads and lace pillow slips.”

Dickson took a private walk around the villa grounds after the evening meal, and phoned Tom. He mentioned what Cody had said about the funeral. “Yes, under the circumstances, tragic though they may be, someone needs to take care of things and I’m afraid Horace is unavailable for reasons best known to him. However, most of the funeral arrangements were already put in place some years ago by Doris with a local parlor. She has a plot in the Catholic section at Dawson Creek.”

“Alongside Horace?”

“Yes, of course. They purchased twin plots together.”

“We need to talk, Tom.”

Next morning, after breakfast, Dickson and Mick rode to Our Lady of the Rosary church in Taree, parked their bikes in Albert Street, and walked to the presbytery. “Right on time,” Tom said as he opened the door, “the kettle’s on. How are you enjoying Aunt Flo’s hospitality?”

“She’s very sweet,” Dickson replied as the boys followed the Rev. to the kitchen, “but... well, I miss the beach house. Hell, I miss everything. I miss my room, I miss my kitchen, I miss the front verandah, I miss the beach... and, not only that, I smell weird because Aunt Flo uses pink soap that stinks like that dried floral stuff...”

“Bouquet-garni... and, if I may say so, I think you smell gorgeous, both of you. But I do understand how you feel about your home and all that is familiar to you. Is the house repairable?”

“That will depend on the insurance assessors, I suppose.”

“A parishioner donated some home-made lamingtons. Would you like some with your tea?”

The conversation lasted a solid half hour, with both lads contributing to the story of the Fink saga, while Tom supplied a myriad of questions. “I think I’ll make more tea,” the ‘chrome dome’ announced. He rose from the table and took the silver pot to the kitchen bench. “I need a little time to digest all that you’ve told me. It’s an amazing tale—like something one might expect to read in a penny dreadful—not the sort of thing one expects to actually happen in a small country town.” Tom filled the kettle and turned on the power. “From what I gather so far, you boys have not revealed all you know and suspect to the police. Is that the case?”

“We feel a certain responsibility to Doris,” Dickson reasoned. “She trusted us.”

“I understand,” Tom agreed while filling the pot with more loose tea. “Rather like the responsibility a priest has to his confessors. So what do you young detectives suggest as a plan of action?”

“We kinda hoped you’d suggest something, Tom.”

“Me?” The Rev. paused while he filled the pot with boiling water, then returned to the table. “Tea needs to infuse, you know. It’s not like instant coffee. And that, my dear boys, is what I suggest you do—allow the information you have divulged this morning to infuse, as it were, until a plan of action becomes clear. God will provide the required wisdom when the time is right.” Dickson’s sudden giggling caused the old man to raise his bushies in surprise. “And what, may I ask, Mr. Bottoms, prompted that unexpected outburst of mirth?”

“Sorry, Rev., it’s just that all of a sudden out of the blue, Mick and I are being overwhelmed by pink bedspreads, lace pillow slips, lamingtons and God.”

The boys called into the local insurance office to collect a claim form, then rode to the beach house to inspect the damaged building in the clear light of day before they returned to Aunt Flo’s villa.

Dickson’s main concern was the extent of damage; was the building a write-off or could it be restored? That outcome, he presumed, would be up to the insurance assessor if, indeed, the claim was accepted in light of arson being involved.

“The entire unfortunate matter could be solved simply by getting Horace Fink to confess,” Flo suggested as Dickson busied himself with the claim form at the kitchen table.

“Why don’t you have a computer?” the blond asked.

“What kind of question is that? I don’t need one.”

“But I do. This filling in forms with a pen went out with Tyrannosaurus Rex. I could do it much faster and more easily on line. Besides, we don’t know where Horace Fink is.”

“You’re a detective, Dickson, and detectives are supposed to find missing people. I see it on television all the time. Actually, I remember a show once that had a plot rather like this one of yours...”

“With respect, Aunt Flo, that was fiction, this is real.”

“As you wish, Dickson, as you wish. I’ll stay out of it.”

“It’s okay, Aunt Flo,” Mick offered in an attempt to cool the situation and restore Flo’s pride, “Dicko’s not himself. You can tell me about the TV show.”

“Well, there was a whole lot of legal complication and investigation by an insurance company about a fire caused by arson, but the onus was on the property owner to prove his innocence.”

“See what I mean?” Dickson interrupted. “In real life, the onus is on the law to prove innocence or guilt, not on the accused.”

“Anyway,” Flo continued, ignoring Dickson’s comment and directing her story to Mick, “all the legal complication and silly gobbledegook ceased to be an issue when the arsonist died.”

Dickson’s pen came to a halt and hovered above the page as he looked up at his aunt. “Died?”

“I thought you weren’t interested?”

“Okay, okay, so I’m interested. What happened when the arsonist died?”

“The insurance company dropped the case and settled the claim. Now, what would you boys like for lunch?”

A crowd of about fifty people, mostly middle-age, congregated in front of Our Lady of the Rosary church just before 11am Friday. A dark-gray early ‘70s Holden Premier hearse, in stunning condition, was parked in the drive. It was attended by two solemn men

in black suits. Cody waved from the crowd when he saw Dickson and Mick. He was with his folks, his friend Mark and a woman who, Dickson assumed, was Mark's mother.

The Reverend Tom Samuels—dressed to the nines in traditional religious garb—smiled as he approached the lads and shook their hands. “I almost didn't recognize you in suits.”

“Saint Vincent de Paul,” Dickson explained before Tom could ask the obvious question. “We did a deal and hired the clothes for the day—five dollars each—we return them tomorrow.”

“Very sensible. I don't suppose you've seen Horace.”

“No, but that's not surprising.” However, Dickson did recognize a few members of the gathering—Ian Ajit, Tony Spiropoulos, Serge Vodkinski, Simon Swan, Barbara Thorne and Dr. David Hardy. “I also don't see any cops here,” he added.

“Of course not, but you can be sure they're lurking somewhere close by... keeping an eye out for Horace.” Tom glanced at his watch. “Well, my friends, it's time to begin proceedings.”

Later, at the Dawson Creek burial, there was still no sign of Horace. “Do you blame him?” Mick asked, reading his friend's mind.

“Guess not,” Dickson replied. “But Rowles is here. Don't look now but he's at the rear of the crowd, about 30 meters away, playing super snoop over by a clump of trees.”

“Figures.”

Dickson and Mick took a detour to the beach house on their way back to Aunt Flo's to check the mail box, and also to inspect the fire damage one more time. The forensic crime-scene tape used to fence the area had been removed, which suggested that the

investigation was now complete except, perhaps, for laboratory examination.

The boys entered the house and picked their way through the blackened rubble and charcoal, which was still damp from water and foam. The kitchen suffered smoke damage but was otherwise reasonably intact. Similarly, the toilet and bathroom had escaped the worst of the carnage. The living room, two bedrooms and hall were trashed, including furniture, bedding, curtains, blinds, floor-coverings and Dickson's computer which resembled a Dali painting. Even the back-up disks were rendered useless. However, the boys were pleased to see the front verandah virtually unscathed, including their favorite old canvas chairs. The pair then inspected the garage. Apart from the lingering smell of smoke, it was fine. "Let's grab a beer," Mick suggested as the boys returned to the house, but he soon discovered that the power had been disconnected. "Dammit! It's warm!" He took two cans to the front yard and placed them under the shower hose. "They'll be okay in a few minutes."

"Oh, the mail box!" Dickson remembered as he headed down the hall to the backyard. He took an envelope from the box, studied the handwriting and rejoined his friend on the verandah. "No return address," he remarked, "just my name handwritten on the front."

"Could be from Paul. He must've been worried when he saw the house on his paper run."

"Jesus! I forgot all about Paul! I'll phone Maureen Parker. Phone! Where's my phone?"

"You left it at Aunt Flo's. Anyway, check what's inside the envelope, you dummy!"

Chapter 35

“This is ridiculous!” Mick repeated for the umpteenth time as the boys removed their helmets after parking their Suzukis. “Tony Spiropoulos’ farm in the middle of the bloody night?” he complained. “What kinda crazy cloak and dagger bullshit is this?”

“It’s 8pm, not the middle of the night.”

“Why can’t we ride through the gate? Why park out here by the road? It’s insane!”

“You’re asking me, Mick? What the hell do I know?” It was obvious, however, to both boys that they weren’t the only recipients of the same invitation; about a dozen cars were also parked by the roadside.

Dickson and Mick entered the property on foot and approached a group of people mingling outside the farm shed used to bottle honey. “What’s this all about?” Dickson shouted from a distance. As he drew nearer, he tried to identify at least one of the faces obscured by the night darkness.

“Is that you Dickson? It’s me, Cody. I’m over here with Fogsy!”

Dickson finally recognized the mop of spiky black hair. “G’day, mate, what’s going on? Who are all these people?”

“Nobody knows what’s going on, not even Tony. I thought he was the one who wrote the note.”

“You got a note?”

“Yeah, and so did Fogsy. ‘Spiropoulos farm, honey shed, 8pm tonight. Park outside fence. Extremely urgent.’”

“Same message I got. Who else is here? And where’s the damn light? It’s pitch black!”

“There’s something wrong with the power. Tony’s checking it out.”

Dickson and Mick moved slowly among the gathering and eventually recognized various people, most of whom, coincidentally, were those named on Doris Fink's list of 'suspects'... Ajit, Vodkinksi, Thorne, Swan, Farrell, Dr. Hardy and others. At last, Dickson came across a bald head that reflected what little light there was. "Tom? Is that you?"

"Dickson? What are you doing here?"

"I wish I knew, Rev. You got a note, right? An anonymous note?"

"Yes, I thought it must have been from Tony Spiropoulos... but Tony's none the wiser. He also received the same note. I've asked around and no one gathered here tonight admits to being the author of the message."

Their conversation was interrupted by the noise of a Harley Davidson, which caught everyone's attention. Once the machine's headlight was extinguished, a black figure made its way toward the shed. "This'd better be fucking important," the voice growled. "And somebody turn the fucking lights on!"

"Bob's not amused," the Rev. commented.

"So what's all this bullshit?" the biker demanded before recognizing Tom Samuels. "Bishop? Is that you? Sorry about the language, mate. So what's the story?"

"No one knows... at least, no one I've spoken to. Tony's checking the power. It's all a mystery, my friend."

"Could I have your attention, please!" Everyone turned in the direction of the voice, which apparently emanated from within the shed.

"If I'm not mistaken," the Rev. speculated, "that's Horace Fink's voice." Again the voice asked for everyone's attention before issuing an invitation to gather inside the building.

“That’s Horace alright,” Bob agreed. “He’d better have a bloody good explanation for all this crap.”

“You can forget about fixing the lights, Tony,” the voice continued from the darkness. “I cut the power for a reason that will soon become clear. Be patient. All will be revealed within the next few minutes.

Meantime, there is a dispenser of surgical gloves in this shed—they’re used during the honey bottling process.

Tony knows where they are—he can find them by feeling his way. Tony? Please get the gloves and distribute them among the guests—one each. Make sure everyone gets a glove.”

“Horace?” Bob Down yelled. “What is all this shit? Show yourself!”

“I will in a minute, Robert, but before I do, I warn you not to approach me. I have a gun, a handgun, Smith and Wesson. If I detect any sudden movement toward me, or any suspicious noise, I’ll shoot wildly. If I miss my attacker, you can be sure at least one of the bullets will find a target. It could be any one of you, so stay put. Once Tony has finished distributing the gloves, I’ll continue.”

“Everyone has a glove,” Tony announced after a few minutes.

“Reverend Samuels,” Horace continued, “are you here?”

“I am.”

“Good. Dr. Hardy?”

“Yes.”

“Welcome everyone—welcome to a night you’ll never forget. This is indeed the night of nights—the grande finale. All of you are about to witness something special, a once-in-a-lifetime event... the inevitable murder of Horace Fink. Oh, yes, I’m aware of the conspiracy, if I may call it that. Haha! My wife told me everything. She hired two private detectives to

investigate the ‘suspects’. Is that correct, Dickson Bottoms and Mick Morris? No need to answer, boys. I know the whole story. According to the boys and my wife, each and every one of you in this shed is a suspect; each and every one of you has a reason to wish me dead. Well, tonight you have the opportunity to turn that wish into a reality.

“But first, let me explain a few things. This Smith and Wesson has been locked in a safe for over a decade. It was used in a robbery a long time ago in which I, unfortunately and tragically as a stupid kid, panicked and shot two people. Those two people were the parents of a young man standing among us tonight... Dickson Bottoms.”

“Noooooooooooo!”

“Stay calm, Dickson. One false move and I’ll fire randomly into the group. I know where you all are.”

“I’ll kill you, you evil bastard!”

“You’ll soon have your opportunity, Dickson. Now, bear with me for a few minutes longer. Yes, I’m sorry. Of course I’m sorry. I’ve lived with the tragic death of those two people all my adult life... the nightmares, the guilt, the shame. I knew that the ballistics people could trace the bullets that caused those unfortunate deaths back to this gun, which is why I kept it safely locked away all those years.

“And Doris? Yes, poor sweet Doris, my darling Doris, God rest her soul. She never knew about the robbery. She would never have married me if she had. But lately, she began to learn certain things about my ... how shall I put it? ... other life. She knew about Alan Fogarty. Who is Alan Fogarty? You’ll find out soon enough—he’s here tonight. I won’t bore you with the grotty details, other than to confess that I hate myself. Yes, I hate myself... so don’t for a moment imagine that any of you have a monopoly in that regard.

“Doris’ death? Yes, surprise, surprise, I am responsible—not directly, mind you, but, yes, I did create a particular circumstance which I calculated would bring about her demise. She knew too much. On the other hand, so do all of you gathered here tonight. You all know too much. When I thought about it, it seemed rather extravagant, perhaps even wasteful, to dispose of all of you like so many laughing clowns in a shooting gallery, so I chose to dispose of myself instead.

“Oh, yes, I almost forgot—you must be wondering why Doris accompanied me to the farm on the day she... died. I told a lie. I told her that Tony and I had reached an amicable agreement—one that would facilitate their getting together with no resistance or interference from me—and that he and I had organized a meeting here at the farm between the three of us to discuss certain details. Unfortunately, I neglected to tell Doris that Tony was absent. Tut, tut. Are you mad at me, Tony? Mad enough to murder me? I begged her to wear dark clothing as a symbol of our parting—as a final favor to me. She humored me. Wasn’t that sweet?

“Will I put the gun to my head when I finish this little speech? No, no, no, no, I don’t have the courage for that. Death by my own hand is not on the agenda, I’m afraid. Besides, I don’t want to deprive you—or one of you—of the pleasure of pulling the trigger. Haha! It’s rather an interesting concept, don’t you think? Doris never mentioned the ‘inevitable suicide of Horace Fink’ so let’s not disappoint her, let’s be true to her word, let’s make it murder.

“Reverend Samuels? Shouldn’t you be trying to convince me to stop this nonsense? Shouldn’t you be praying or something? I don’t hear anything. Why so quiet? Dr. Hardy? I don’t hear anything from you either. You’re a doctor, a man dedicated to the

preservation of life. Why aren't you pleading with me to see reason? Ha! Reason? What a joke. In fact, you're all a joke. Bumper Farrell? Even off-duty and out of uniform, as a police officer you're supposed to uphold the law. Why is it that I don't hear any protest from you? Hahahahaha! I think I can guess.

"I have a flashlight here. In a moment, I shall toss the gun in your direction—be careful, the safety catch is off. Then I will shine the flashlight beam onto my face. That will provide one or, indeed, several of you with the opportunity to rummage around on the floor in search of the weapon. Do me one last favor, please. Whoever finds the gun, take careful aim—I don't want to be wounded. That would be grossly unfair both to me and to Doris. She wanted me dead, not half dead. If you're not prepared to kill me, don't search for the gun.

"Who will be my murderer? Hahahahaha! No one but he or she will ever know. Isn't that deliciously devious? It's a pity I won't be around to enjoy the finger-pointing and suspicions that will torment your feeble minds forever; as well as the minds of the police. Haha!

"And one final thing, ladies and gentlemen, believe it or not I do sincerely regret everything I've done... with one exception, and that is what I am about to do. Thank you all for coming."

In the pitch blackness of the shed, an object was heard to hit the wooden floor and bounce once. Then followed the shuffling sounds of many feet. Dickson felt himself buffeted a few times by lurching bodies involved in a sudden scuffle.

During the invisible melee, a flashlight beam appeared at the far end of the shed, and immediately commanded the attention of everyone present. The beam shone upwards and onto the face of Horace Fink.

Shadows caused by the light gave the contours of the face a ghostly, sinister appearance as it remained eerily calm and expressionless, staring unfocused into middle distance.

A few seconds later, the sound of a metallic click was followed by a loud crack, then, almost immediately, by a second. Fink's forehead exploded. The flashlight beam jerked sideways before it tumbled to the floor. Fink's descending body caused a dull thump as it came to an abrupt halt. A human hand, palm side up, with lifeless fingers curved inward, toppled into the horizontal path of the flashlight beam. All was deathly quiet and still until Fink's Smith and Wesson, thrown by the killer, landed with a thud next to his motionless hand.

"Mister Goldstein will see you now," the receptionist at Goldstein, Nicholls and Blogg announced. She led Dickson and Mick to the lawyer's door, knocked once, then opened it to allow the boys access to the sumptuous oak and green leather interior.

"Good afternoon," Abraham Goldstein beamed and offered his hand. "Please take a seat. It's been a trying time for all of us, and must have been a harrowing experience for you—I mean, being present at that horrendous event." Goldstein waited for the lads to be seated before he continued. "Horace was here in this office on that fateful day, you know, but gave no indication, at least to me, of his intention. He came here on business to make certain changes to his will."

"Did you inform the police?"

"I did later. I told them he was here in my office. However, Horace didn't say where he intended to go following his meeting with me so, obviously, his whereabouts thereafter remained a mystery until... until, of course, the other night. And now you young lads must be wondering what this is all about. Let me

get straight to the matter at hand. Horace changed his will and left his entire estate to you, Mr. Bottoms; shares, cash, house and all other assets ... every single penny. I estimate the total value of Mr. Fink's estate to be somewhere in the vicinity of six million dollars. I'm not certain about the life insurance at this point because of the uh, unusual circumstances surrounding his death. That will be a matter for the court to decide, should you wish to pursue it."

Both Dickson and Mick were lost for words, and exchanged several glances before Dickson managed to speak. "Me? Why me? I don't understand this, Mr. Goldstein. Why on earth would Horace... wait a minute. Of course—ah, yes, I see it now. Horace confessed to the murder of my parents. Now it makes sense—it was Horace's way of compensating me. Did he explain to you why he nominated me as sole beneficiary when he made those changes to his will?"

"My job is to advise my clients, Mr. Bottoms, not to question their reasons. Besides, Horace Fink was not the type of person with whom one argued; especially not someone like me within his employ. Yes, of course, I asked Horace if he understood what he was doing when he made the changes. He said he knew perfectly well what he was doing and that it was none of my business—that it was a personal matter. However, Mr. Bottoms, the changes to Horace's will do contain a certain condition."

"A condition?"

"I'm afraid so." Goldstein adjusted his bi-focals, took the document in both hands and read aloud, "To wit: *In the event of the death of Horace Fink by unlawful homicide prior to the exchange of any monies, property or other assets as a result of this Last Will and Testament it is an irrevocable condition of this document that the hereinbefore mentioned sole*

beneficiary Dickson Bottoms be innocent of any direct involvement whatsoever in the perpetration of such homicide and furthermore be able to prove such innocence beyond doubt in an Australian Court of Law.”

...to be continued in The Fink Curse