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Snapshot
Chain of Evidence
Blood Moon
Whispering Death
Signal Loss

THE DRAGON MAN

GARRY DISHER

I wish to thank the CIB and uniformed officers of the Victoria Police who gave freely of their time when I sought background information for this book. Any deviations from standard police procedure are mine (the notion of a regional homicide inspector, for example).

And I owe a great debt of gratitude to my editor, Carl Harrison-Ford, for showing me how to make this a much better book.

First published in Great Britain in 2007 by Bitter Lemon Press
Published in this edition in 2025 by Viper,
an imprint of Profile Books Ltd
29 Cloth Fair
London
EC1A 7JQ

www.profilebooks.com

First published in Australia in 1999 by Allen & Unwin
New edition published in Australia in 2006 by The Text Publishing Company

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 80522 432 7
eISBN 978 1 80522 433 4

For Helen Sargeant

Sometimes it felt as if he were prowling the roof of heaven, riding high through the night, the stars close above him, nobody about, the teeming masses with their petty concerns tucked safely into their beds. He was as restless as a fox. He seemed to have a channel through life at times like this, a path through the broad darkness that was the Old Peninsula Highway, nothing and nobody to beset him. Down he went, the whole length of the slumbering hook of land, to where it reached the ocean, and then back again, to the far easterly tip of the city, where there were lights again, and the stench of humankind, and where he lived in a loveless house. He turned at a roundabout, headed on down toward the ocean again.

He came upon her about halfway along the highway. Other cars at night were almost an affront to him, but they were always gone in a flash, just a pair of headlamps, scarcely registering. This car had stopped, parked on the gravel forecourt of a roadside fruit and vegetable outlet, a massive barn-like shape in the night. He slowed to no more than a walking pace as he passed. The car looked forlorn, its bonnet up and steam rising from the radiator. A solitary bulb high on a nearby pole cast a weak cone of grey-yellow light over a telephone box and the young woman

inside it. She was speaking urgently, gesturing, but seemed to freeze when she saw him passing, and stepped out to get a better look at him. He accelerated away. The image he had of her was of the loneliest figure at the loneliest spot on earth. World's end. Amen.

He turned around at the next intersection, and when he reached her again he turned in off the road, steering close to her poor, hangdog car. Good. She was alone. He drove past her car until he was adjacent to the phone box, then wound down his window. He didn't want to alarm her by opening his door and getting out.

She was hovering in the phone box. He called across to her: 'Everything okay? Phone working? Sometimes it's been vandalised.'

He sounded like a local. That would help. He saw her wrap her arms about herself. 'Fine, thanks. I rang a breakdown service. They're on their way.'

He happened to glance away from her and at her car. He stiffened, looking back at her in alarm: 'Did you have someone with you?'

She froze, began to tremble, and her voice when it came was no more than a squeak. 'What do you mean?'

'There's someone in the back of your car, behind the seat.'

She edged toward him. 'Who? I didn't see anyone.'

He opened his door, put one foot on the ground. 'I don't like it. Did you leave the car unattended at any time?'

'The station car park. It's been there all day.'

'There have been cases...' he said.

He got out then, keeping his door open. They were both eyeing

her car, ready to flee. 'Look,' he said, 'you'd better hop in with me, slide across to the passenger side.'

She weighed it up. He was careful not to look at her but to let her see the anxiety on his face. Then, as she came toward him, he moved away, edging around his own car and toward hers.

Her hand went to her mouth. 'What are you doing? Come back, please come back.'

'I want to get a closer look at him. For the police.'

'No!'

Her fear seemed to communicate itself to him. 'I guess you're right.'

'Just get me away from here!'

'Okay.'

It was as easy as that. Inspired, really. That first one, last week, she hadn't been a challenge at all. Drunk, half-drugged, hitchhiking, she'd been too easy. At least he'd got to use his head a little tonight. His headlights probed the darkness as he carried her away, high above the rottenness that was always there under the light of the sun.

1

Detective Inspector Hal Challis showered with a bucket at his feet. He kept it economical, but still the bucket overflowed. He towelled himself dry, dressed, and, while the espresso pot was heating on the bench-top burner in his kitchen, poured the bucket into the washing machine. Couple more showers and he'd have enough water for a load of washing. Only 19 December but already his rainwater tanks were low and a long, dry summer had been forecast. He didn't want to buy water again, not like last summer.

The coffee was ready. As he poured he glanced at an old calendar pinned to the corkboard above his bench. He'd bought the calendar by mail order three years ago, and kept it opened at March. The vintage aeroplane for that month was a prototype of the de Havilland DH84 Dragon. Then the toaster pinged and Challis hunted for the butter and the jam and finally took his toast and coffee on to the deck at the rear of his house.

The early sun reached him through the wisteria with the

promise of a hot day ahead. He felt bone-tired. A suspected abduction on the Old Peninsula Highway two nights ago – the investigation ultimately dumped into his lap. Frankston uniforms had taken the call, then referred it to the area superintendent, who'd rung at 1 a.m. and said, 'Maybe your boy's struck a second time, Hal.' Challis had spent the next four hours at the scene, directing a preliminary search. When he'd got home again at 5 a.m. yesterday there hadn't seemed much point in going back to bed, and he'd spent the rest of the day in the car or on the phone.

A little four-stroke engine was chugging away on the bank of his neighbour's dam. Cows once drank there. Now the cows were gone and the hillside stretched back in orderly rows of vines. Challis couldn't spot his neighbour among the vines, but the man was there somewhere. He usually was, weeding, pruning, spraying, picking. Challis thought of the insecticide spray, of the wind carrying it to his roof, where the rain would wash it into his underground tank, and he tossed out his coffee.

He stepped down from the verandah and made a circuit of his boundary fence. Half a hectare, on a dirt lane west of the Old Peninsula Highway, tucked in among orchards, vineyards and a horse stud, and Challis made this walk every morning and evening as a kind of check on his feelings. Five years now, and still the place was his port in a storm.

As he collected the *Age* from his mailbox on the dirt lane at the front of his property, a voice called from the next driveway, 'Hal, have you got a minute?'

The man from the vineyard was walking toward him.

Small, squint-eyed from the angling sun, about sixty. Challis waited, gazing calmly, as he did with suspects, and sure enough the man grew edgy.

Challis stopped himself. The fellow didn't deserve his CIB tricks. 'What can I do for you?'

'Look, I realise it's nothing, but you know the ornamental lake I've got, over near the house?'

'Yes.'

'Someone's been fishing in it,' the neighbour said. 'After the trout. The thing is, they're scaring the birds away.'

Ibis, herons, a black swan, moorhens. Challis had watched them for half an hour one day, from a little hide the man had constructed in the reeds. 'Do you know who?'

'Probably kids. I found a couple of tangled lines and fish-hooks, half a dozen empty Coke cans.'

Challis nodded. 'Have you informed the local station?'

'I thought, you being an inspector—'

'Inform the local station,' Challis said. 'They'll send a car around now and then, make their presence felt.'

'Can't you...'

'I'm very sorry, but it would look better if you lodged the complaint.'

Challis left soon after that. He locked the house, backed his Triumph out of the garage and turned right at his gate, taking the lane in bottom gear. In winter he negotiated pot-holes, mud and minor flooding; in summer, corrugations and treacherous soft edges.

He drove east, listening to the eight o'clock news. At five minutes past eight he turned on to the Old Peninsula

Highway, meeting it quite near the abduction scene, and headed south toward the town of Waterloo, hearing the screams the dying leave behind them.

He could have been more helpful to the neighbour. He wondered what the man thought of him, a detective inspector and 'New Peninsula'.

The Peninsula. People talked about it as if it were cohesive and indivisible. You only did that if you didn't know it, Challis thought. You only did that if you thought its distinctive shape – a comma of land hooking into the sea south-east of Melbourne – gave it a separate identity, or if you'd driven through it once and seen only beaches, farmland and quiet coastal towns.

Not that it covered a large area – less than an hour by road from top to bottom, and about twenty minutes across at its widest point – but to a policeman like Challis there were several Peninsulas. The old Peninsula of small farms and orchards, secluded country estates, some light industry and fishing, and sedate coastal towns populated by retirees and holidaying families, was giving way to boutique wineries, weekender farms, and back roads populated with bed-and-breakfast cottages, potteries, naturopathy clinics, reception centres, tearooms and galleries. Tourism was one of the biggest industries, and people with professions – like Challis himself – were flocking to buy rural hideaways. Some local firms made a good living from erecting American-style barns and installing pot-belly stoves, and costly four-wheel drives choked the local townships.

But although there was more money about, it wasn't necessarily going to more people. A community centre counsellor friend of Challis's had told him of the growing number of homeless, addicted kids she dealt with. Industries and businesses were closing, even as families were moving into the cheap housing developments that were spreading at the fringes of the main towns, Waterloo and Mornington. The shire council, once one of the biggest employers, was cutting expenses to the bone, using managers whose sense of humanity had been cut to the bone. The adjustments were never forewarned or carried out face to face. Challis's counsellor friend now sold home-made pickles and jams at fairs and markets. There had been a letter, telling her she was redundant, her whole unit closed down. 'Just three days' notice, Hal.'

It was happening everywhere, and the police were usually the ones to pick up the pieces.

Which didn't mean that the Peninsula wasn't a pleasant place to live in. Challis felt as if he'd come home, finally.

And the job suited him. In the old days of murder or abduction investigations he'd been sent all over the state, city and bush, with a squad of specialists, but the Commissioner had introduced a new system, intended to give local CIB officers experience in the investigation of serious crimes alongside their small-time burglaries, assaults and thefts. Now senior homicide investigators like Challis worked a specific beat. Challis's was the Peninsula. Although he had an office in regional headquarters, he spent most of his time in the various Peninsula police stations, conducting investigations

with the help of the local CIB, calling in the specialists only if he got derailed or bogged down. It was a job that entailed tact, and giving as much responsibility to the local CIB as possible, or the fallout was resentment and a foot-dragging investigation.

He didn't expect that from the Waterloo CIB. He'd worked with them before.

Challis drove south for twenty kilometres. The highway ran down the eastern side of the Peninsula, giving him occasional glimpses of the bay. Then the Waterloo refinery came into view across the mangrove flats, bright oily flames on the chimneys, and glaring white tanks. There was a large tanker at anchor. The highway became a lesser road, bisecting a new housing estate, the high plank fences on either side hiding rooftops that varied greatly but were never more than a metre apart. He crossed the railway line and turned right, skirting the town, then left on to a main road that took him past timber merchants, boat yards, Peninsula Cabs, crash repairers, an aerobics centre, the Fiddlers Creek pub and a corner lot crammed with ride-on mowers and small hobby tractors.

The police station and the adjacent courthouse were on a roundabout at the end of High Street, opposite a Pizza Hut. Challis glanced down High Street as he turned. The water glittered at the far end; frosted Santas, reindeer, sleighs, candles, mangers and bells swung from lampposts and trees.

He parked in the side street opposite the main entrance to the police station, got out, and walked into trouble.

'That windscreen's not roadworthy.'

A uniformed constable, who had been about to get into a divisional van that idled outside the station with a young woman constable at the wheel, had changed his mind and was approaching Challis, flipping open his infringement book and fishing in his top pocket for a pen. He's going to book me, Challis thought.

'I've ordered a new windscreen.'

'Not good enough.'

The Triumph was low-slung. On the back roads of the Peninsula, it was always copping stones and pebbles, and one had cracked the windscreen on the passenger side.

'This your car?'

'It is.'

A snapping of fingers: 'Licence.'

Challis complied. The constable was large – tall and big-boned, but also carrying too much weight. He was young, the skin untested by time and the elements, and his hair was cut so short that his scalp showed through. Challis had an impression of acres of pink flesh.

'Quickly, quickly.'

A classic bully, Challis thought.

Then the constable saw the name on Challis's licence, but, to his credit, did not flinch. 'Challis. Inspector Challis?'

'Yes.'

'Sir, that windscreen's not roadworthy. It's also dangerous.'

'I realise that. I've ordered a new one.'

The constable watched him for a long moment, then nodded. He put his book away. 'Fair enough.'

Challis hadn't wanted to be booked, and telling the constable to follow the rules and book him would have been an embarrassment and an irritation for both of them, so he said nothing. The constable turned and made for the van. Challis watched it leave.

'A real prick, that one,' a voice said.

There was a work-dented Jeep parked outside the courthouse. The rear doors were open and a man wearing overalls was unloading air-conditioning vents. Challis glanced at the side of the Jeep: *Rhys Hartnett Air-Conditioning*.

'The bastard did me over yesterday. Hadn't been here five minutes and he booked me for a cracked tail-light. Shouted in my face, spit flying, like I was some kind of criminal.'

Challis steered the conversation away from that. 'Are you working in the police station?'

The man shook his head. 'The courthouse.'

He snapped a business card at Challis. He did it in a way that seemed automatic, and Challis had a vision of hundreds of people walking around with unwanted cards in their pockets. He glanced at it. *Rhys Hartnett, Air-Conditioning Specialist*.

'Well, I wish you were doing the police station.'

Hartnett seemed to straighten. 'You a copper?'

'Yes.'

'Just my luck. I was wasting my breath complaining to you about police tactics.'

'Not necessarily,' Challis said, turning away and crossing the road.

*

The police station was on two levels. The ground floor was a warren of interview rooms, offices, holding cells, a squad room, a canteen and a tearoom. The first floor was quieter: a small gym, lockers, a sick bay. It was also the location of the Displan – Disaster Plan – room, which doubled as the incident room whenever there was a major investigation.

A senior sergeant was in overall charge of the station. He had four sergeants and about twenty other ranks under him, including a handful of trainees, for Waterloo was a designated training station. The CIB itself was small, only a sergeant and three detective constables. There were also two forensic technicians – police members, and on call for the whole Peninsula – and a couple of civilian clerks. Given that over thirty people worked at the station, that shift work applied to most of them, and that the uniformed and CIB branches generally had little to do with each other, Challis wasn't surprised that the young constable hadn't recognised him from his two earlier investigations in Waterloo.

The tearoom was next to the photocopy room. Challis crossed to the cluttered sink in the corner, four young uniformed constables falling silent as he filled a cup with tap water. He looked at his watch. Time for the briefing.

He wandered upstairs and found the CIB detectives and a handful of uniformed sergeants waiting for him in the Displan room. The morning light streamed in. It was a large, airy room, but he knew that it would be stuffy by the end of the day. The room had been fitted with extra phone lines, photocopiers, computers, large-scale wall maps and a television set. Every incoming telephone call could be

automatically timed and recorded on cassette, and there was a direct line to Telstra so that calls could be traced.

Challis nodded as he entered the room. There were murmured hellos in return and someone said, 'Here's the dragon man.' He crossed to a desk that sat between a whiteboard and a wall of maps. He positioned himself behind the desk, leaned both hands on the back of a chair, and said, without preamble:

'On Sunday night a young woman named Jane Gideon made an emergency call from a phone box on the Old Peninsula Highway. She hasn't been seen since, and given that another young woman, Kymbly Abbott, was found raped and murdered by the side of the highway a week ago, we're treating the circumstances as suspicious.'

He straightened his back and looked out above their heads. 'You're Jane Gideon. You work at the Odeon cinema. You catch the last train to Frankston from the city, collect your car, an old Holden, and head down the highway, your usual route home. Picture the highway at night. Almost midnight. No street lighting, cloudy moon, very few cars about, no sense of humankind out there except for a farmhouse porch light on a distant hillside. It's a hot night, the hills are steep in places, your car badly needs a tune. Eventually the radiator boils over. You limp as far as the gravelled area in front of Foursquare Produce, which is a huge barn of a place, set in the middle of nowhere, but there *is* a Telstra phone box nearby. No doors on it, very little glass, mostly steel mesh painted blue-grey. Feeling exposed to the darkness, you call the VAA.'

He slipped a cassette tape into a machine and pressed the play button. They strained to listen:

'Victorian Automobile Association. How may I help you?'

'Yes, my name's Jane Gideon. My car's broken down. I think it's the radiator. I'm scared to keep going in case I break something.'

'Your membership number?'

'Er—'

They heard a rattle of keys. *'Here it is: MP six three zero zero four slash nine six.'*

There was a pause, then: *'Sorry, we have no record of that number. Perhaps you allowed your membership to elapse?'*

'*Please, can't you still send someone?*'

'*You'll have to rejoin.*'

'Jesus Christ,' someone muttered. Challis held up his hand for quiet.

'*I don't care. Just send someone*.'

'*How would you like to pay?*'

There was a pause filled with the hiss of radio signals in the dark night. Then Jane Gideon's voice came on the line again, an edge to it.

'Someone's coming.'

'You don't require assistance after all?'

'I mean, there's a car. It's slowed right down. Hang on.'

There was the sound of more coins being fed into the phone. *'I'm back.'*

The operator's tone was neutral, as though she could not sense the black night, the isolated call box and the young woman's fear. *'Your address, please.'*

'Um, there's this shed, says Foursquare Produce.'

'But where? Your membership number, that's the Peninsula, correct?'

'I'm on the Old Peninsula Highway. Oh no, he's stopping.'

'Where on the highway? Can you give me a reference point? A house number? An intersecting road?'

'It's a man. Oh God.'

The operator's tone sharpened. *'Jane, listen, is something going on there where you are?'*

'A car.'

'Is there a house nearby?'

'No.' She was sobbing now. 'No house anywhere, just this shed.'

'I'll tell you what I'm going to do. You—'

'It's okay, he's driving away.'

'Jane. Get inside your car. If it's driveable, find somewhere off the road where it can't be seen. Maybe behind that shed. Then stay inside the car. Lock all the doors and wind up all the windows. Can you do that for me?'

'Suppose so.'

'Meanwhile I'll call the police, and I'll also send one of our breakdown vehicles out to you. You can rejoin the VAA on the spot. Okay? Jane? You there?'

'What if he comes back? I'm scared. I've never been so scared.'

Her voice was breaking as her fear rose. The operator replied calmly, but there was no comfort in her advice: *'Get in the car, lock the doors, do not speak to anyone, even if they offer help.'*

'I could hide.'

Clearly the operator was torn. The Victorian Automobile

Association had been taping its emergency calls ever since a member had sued them for offering wrong advice which proved costly, with the result that operators were now careful not to offer advice of any kind – but a young woman alone on a deserted road at night? She deserved wise counsel of some kind.

'*I don't know*,' the operator confessed. *'If you think it would do any good. Hide where? Hello? Hello?'*

There was the sound of a vehicle, muffled voices, a long pause, then the line went dead.

'The rest you know,' Challis said. 'The VAA operator called 000, who contacted Frankston, who sent a car down there. They found Jane Gideon's car. The phone was on the hook. No signs of a struggle. They searched around the nearby sheds and orchards in case Gideon *had* decided to hide herself, but found nothing.' He glanced at his watch. 'Uniforms started searching the area at daybreak yesterday. Our first task will be a door knock.'

He paused. 'It's early days, so try not to let one case colour the other, but we can't discount the possible links between Kymbly Abbott's murder and Jane Gideon's disappearance. Since I'm already working on Abbott, I've brought her files with me. Any questions so far?'

'What are the links, boss?'

'The Old Peninsula Highway for a start,' Challis said. He turned to a wall map. It showed the city of Melbourne, and the main arteries into the rural areas. Pointing to a network of streets which marked the suburb of Frankston, on the south-eastern edge of the city, he said, 'Kymbly Abbott had

been at a party here, in Frankston. The highway starts here, a few hundred metres away. Abbott was last seen walking toward it, intending to hitch a ride home.' He traced the highway down the hook of the Peninsula. 'She lived with her parents here, in Dromana. They own a shoe shop. I have her leaving the party at one o'clock in the morning, possibly drunk, possibly stoned, so her judgement would have been shot. No-one at the party gave her a lift, though I will be talking to them all again. Her body was found here, by the side of the highway, just seven kilometres south of Frankston. We're appealing for witnesses, the usual thing, did anyone see her, give her a lift, see someone else give her a lift.'

'But that suggests our man's also prowling in Frankston itself, not simply up and down the highway.'

'I know. Or he lives in the Frankston area and was just setting out somewhere, or lives down here and was on his way home. Now, other similarities. Both incidents happened late at night. Both victims are young women who were alone at the time.'

He passed out crime-scene photographs. They showed Kymbly Abbott like a cast-aside rag doll in death, her throat and her thighs swollen and cruelly bruised. 'Raped and strangled. If that was the first time for our man, he might have been on a high for a few days, eager to try again on Sunday night.'

'Slim, boss,' someone said.

'I know it's slim,' said Challis, showing some heat for the first time, 'but until we've got more to go on what can we

do but use our imaginations and think our way into what might have happened?' He tapped his right temple. 'Try to get a feel for this guy.'

'What about the VAA mechanic?'

'He got there after the police did. He's in the clear.'

A detective said, 'I got called to a Jane Gideon's maybe six, seven months ago? Here in Waterloo. She'd had a break-in. A flat near the jetty.'

'That's her,' Challis said. 'I checked her flat in the early hours of Monday morning to see if she'd simply been given a lift home.'

He put his hands on his hips. 'There's a lot riding on this. Waterloo's not a big place. A lot of people would have known her. They're going to be upset, edgy, wanting results in a hurry.'

He waited. When there were no more questions, he turned to a Lands Department aerial survey map on the wall behind him. 'I want two of you to take a few uniforms and conduct a door-to-door along the highway. Much of it's through farmland, so that helps. I drove along it on my way here this morning and saw only a couple of utilities and a school bus. One 24-hour service station here, where the Mornington road cuts it. Most of the farmhouses are set back from the road, but they'll still need checking out. And certain businesses. A place called The Stables, sells antiques. A couple of wineries. A deer farm, ostrich farm, flying school, Christmas tree farm – they'll be doing increased trade at this time of the year. A pottery, a mobile mechanic – look twice at him, okay? See if he had any late calls on Sunday night and

the night Kymbly Abbott was killed. Also, in addition to Foursquare Produce there are two other fruit and vegetable places with roadside stalls.'

He turned to face them again. 'That's it for now. We'll meet here again at five o'clock. Scobie, I want you to draw up a list of known sex offenders who live on the Peninsula. Ellen, come with me.'

2

'A young uniform tried to book me for a cracked windscreen when I arrived this morning. Beefy-looking, arrogant. Know who it would be?'

As CIB sergeant at Waterloo, Ellen Destry had very little to do with the uniformed constables, but she knew who Challis was talking about. 'That would be John Tankard. They call him Tank.'

'Fitting. Built like a water tank, roll over you like an army tank.'

'There have been a few complaints,' Ellen admitted. 'Someone's been distributing leaflets about him, calling him a stormtrooper.'

She fastened her seatbelt and started the car. They were going to Jane Gideon's flat, and she eased the CIB Falcon out of the car park behind the station and down High Street, toward the jetty. She was reminded by the holly and the tinsel that she'd asked people over for drinks on Christmas morning, and still hadn't bought presents for her husband and daughter.

That brought her by degrees to thinking about Kymbly Abbott and Jane Gideon. No Christmases for them, and an awful Christmas for their families. She tried to shake it off. You could get too close. Challis had once told her that being a copper meant stepping inside the skins of other people – victim, villain, witness – and playing roles – priest-confessor, counsellor, shoulder to cry on. But ultimately, he'd said, you were there to exact justice, and when a homicide was involved that meant exacting justice for those who had no-one else to stand up for them.

She glanced across at him, slouched in the passenger seat, one elbow on the side window ledge, his hand supporting his forehead. At the briefing he'd displayed his usual restless intelligence, but in repose there was sadness and fatigue under the thin, dark cast of his face. She knew that he looked down a long unhappiness, and she didn't suppose it would ever go away. But he was only forty, attractive in a haunted kind of way. He deserved a new start.

He said unexpectedly, 'You like living on the Peninsula?'

'Love it.'

'So do I.'

He fell silent again. She loved the Peninsula, but that didn't mean she loved life itself. Things were difficult with her husband and daughter, for a start. Alan, a senior constable with the Eastern Traffic Division, had a long drive to work each day and resented her promotion to sergeant. 'They're fast-tracking you because you're a woman,' he said. And Larrayne was a pain in the neck, fifteen years old, all hormones and hatred.

The real estate agency which managed Jane Gideon's block of flats was next to a dress shop that had gone out of business six months earlier. A sign saying 'Support Local Traders' was pasted inside the dusty glass window. Ellen double-parked the car and waited for Challis to collect the key. She watched a clutch of teenage boys on the footpath. They wore pants that dragged along the ground, over-large T-shirts on their skinny frames, narrow wrap-around sunglasses, hair gelled into porcupine spikes. They were idly flipping skateboards into the air with their feet, and one or two were spinning around on old bicycles. 'Nerds and rednecks, Mum,' Larrayne was always saying. 'You've brought me to live among nerds and rednecks.'

Challis slipped into the car and she pulled away from the kerb. She slowed at the jetty. Water made her feel peaceful. The tide was out and she watched a fishing boat steer a course between the red and green markers in the channel. Waterloo *did* have a down-at-heel, small-town feel about it, so she could see Larrayne's point of view, but before that they'd lived up in the city, where Alan's asthma had been worse, and the teenagers more prone to try drugs, and Ellen had wanted to get her family out of all that.

Jane Gideon's flat was on a narrow street of plain brick veneer houses. Ellen parked and they got out. Old smells lingered in the stairwell: curry, cat piss, dope. 'Number four, top right,' Challis said.

Ellen pictured him two nights ago, the darkness, his exhaustion, the long drive down here just to knock on the door of this sad-looking flat in the hope that Jane Gideon

had not been abducted but given a lift home by a friendly stranger. He turned the key. Ellen followed him inside, knowing there wouldn't be anything worth finding, only a poor mother's phone number.

Before logging on to the computer and doing a printout of sex offenders, Detective Constable Scobie Sutton signed out a Falcon from the car pool and drove to the Waterloo Childcare Centre. He'd scarcely been able to keep his feelings under control during the briefing, and drove hunched over, his knuckles white on the steering wheel.

He pulled on to the grass at the side of the cyclone fence, and watched. Morning tea. The kids were seated in circles on the grass, grouped according to their ages. There she was, in the dress she called her blue ballet, happy as Larry now, her little face absorbed under the shade of a cotton explorer hat, slurping from a plastic cup and sticking her little fist into what looked to be a tupperware container of biscuits. She turned to the kid next to her and Sutton saw her grin, and then both children leaned until their foreheads touched.

He felt the tension drain away. But that didn't change the fact that his daughter had screamed the place down when he'd dropped her off at eight o'clock. 'I don't want to go in! I want to be with you!' Six weeks earlier the shire council, hit by budget constraints, had shut down another of its childcare centres and forced an amalgamation with Waterloo. Twenty new kids, six new staff, nowhere to fit them all. Kids are conservative. They don't like upheavals in their routines. The cheery woman who'd been in charge of

his daughter's room, the two-to-three-year-olds, had taken a redundancy package – no doubt out of anger and frustration. Now a stranger was in charge of the two-to-three room, and Roslyn threw a wobbly whenever Sutton dropped her off each morning. Was this woman slapping her on the sly? Being mean to her?

At least she was happy now. Sutton started the Falcon and wound his way back through the town to the police station.

The desk sergeant caught him at the foot of the stairs. 'Scobe, I got a woman out front. Says she's got some information about Jane Gideon.'

'What's she like?'

'A crank,' the desk sergeant said simply.

Scobie took the woman through to an interview room. She had to be humoured, like all the cranks.

'Name?'

The woman drew herself up. 'Sofia.'

'Sofia. You say you've got information about Jane Gideon's disappearance?'

The woman leaned forward and said, her voice low and rasping, her eyes like glittering stones, 'Not just a disappearance. Murder.'

'Do you have direct knowledge of this?'

'I *felt* it.'

'You felt it.'

'I am a Romany. I am a seer.'

She stared at him. Her eyes: he'd never seen such intensity. She seemed to be able to switch it off and on, too. His gaze faltered. He examined her hair, black and wild, her ears,

ringed with fine gold hoops, her neck, hung with gold chains, and the tops of her brown breasts in a thin, loose, hectically coloured cotton dress. A gypsy, he thought, and wondered whether or not there were gypsies in Australia.

'You mean you kind of sensed it?'

'She died violently.'

He doodled on his pad. 'But you have no direct knowledge.'

'Water,' she said. 'That's where you'll find her.'

'You mean, the sea?'

The woman stared into vast distances. 'I don't think so. An area of still water.'

He pushed back in his chair. 'Fine, we'll certainly look into that. Thank you for coming in.'

She smiled dazzlingly and waited while he got the door. She was stunning, compelling, in a creepy kind of way. The gold, the hair, the vivid dress and the soft leather, they all seemed to fit her naturally.

'You have a little girl,' she said, as she stepped out of the room.

Sutton froze. It was a rule of thumb, never let members of the public know anything about your private life. He looked at her coolly. For all he knew, she might have a kid at the childcare centre, might have seen him dropping Roslyn off in the mornings. She didn't seem to be looking for a lever to use against him, so he said simply, 'Yes.'

'She's confused by the changes in her life, but she'll come through. She's resilient.'

'Thank you,' Sutton said, and wondered why – just like that, in a flash – he believed her.

*

Challis returned to the abduction site that afternoon and later drove to the bayside suburb where Jane Gideon's parents lived. They had nothing to add to what they'd told him the previous day. Their daughter had moved down to the Peninsula originally because she'd met a cadet at the Navy base there, and had stayed on when he broke up with her. No, he was serving in the Gulf somewhere.

When he got back to Waterloo he found Ellen Destry standing wary guard over Tessa Kane, who was perched on the edge of a steel folding chair and smiling a smile that his sergeant was bound to find insufferable. 'Tess, how are you?' he said.

'Hal.'

'Published any scoops lately?'

'Scoops is a relative term in a *weekly* paper, Hal.'

'Boss, I said you were busy and—'

'That's okay, Ellen,' Challis said.

'She says she's got information.'

'Got it, or want it, Tess?'

Tessa Kane's voice was low and deep and faintly amused. 'Both.'

'When's your next issue?'

'Thursday. Then we miss an issue between Christmas and the New Year, and publish again on 4 January.'

Challis said. 'A lot can happen.'

'Hal, a lot has happened.'

Challis watched her stand and smooth her skirt over her thighs. She was shorter than Ellen Destry, always full of smiles, many of them false and dangerous, others lazy and uncomplicated. He liked her plump cheeks. Women disliked

her. Challis had no opinion on the matter, beyond knowing that he had to watch what he said to her.

'This information you say you've got,' he began.

She cut him off. 'Can we do this in there?'

'The incident room? Tess, please.'

She grinned. 'Just a thought. An office, maybe, instead of here in the corridor?'

Challis turned to Ellen. 'Sergeant, let's take Miss Kane into your office, if that's okay by you?'

He saw Ellen sort out the implications. He was including her, not giving her the shove, so she said, 'Fine with me, sir.'

The office was a plasterboard and frosted-glass cubicle further along the corridor, and once they were inside it Tessa Kane turned and said, 'I was hoping—'

'This is Sergeant Destry's station, her office, her investigation – as my offsider. So, whatever it is you want to tell me, you tell her, too.'

'Suit yourself.'

They watched her take a clear plastic freezer bag from her briefcase and lay it on the desk. 'This came in the post this morning.'

A few lines of crisp type on a sheet of A4 printer paper. Challis leaned over to read through the plastic:

> *This is an open letter to the people of Victoria. I would be loosing faith in the Police if I were you. There running around in circles looking for me. What have they got? One body. But where's the second? Gone to a watery grave? And now there's going to be a third. She's in my sights.*

‘Oh, God,’ Ellen said.

Are you scared yet? You ought to be.

‘Envelope?’ Challis said.

Tessa Kane took out a second freezer bag. He poked at it with a pencil, turning it so that he could read it. He sighed. Block capitals. There would be no useful prints, and no saliva, for the envelope was pre-paid, with a self-sealing flap, and available at any post office. He saw the words, ‘Eastern Mail Centre’, but no other indication of where it had been posted.

‘You got it this morning, and you waited until now to show us?’

‘Hal, I was out all day. It was left on my desk and I didn’t open it until a few minutes ago.’

He looked at her closely. ‘Have there been any others?’

‘No.’ She hooked a wing of hair behind her ear. ‘I think the spelling tells us a little about him.’

Ellen had been itching to say something. ‘Not necessarily. He’s probably trying to muddy the waters. Look at the tone, the way he uses short sentences for effect, the way his constructions are uneven, the words “a watery grave”, the apostrophes. I’d say he’s had a reasonable education and is trying to make us think he hasn’t.’

Sniff. ‘You’re the expert.’

Challis stepped in. ‘We’ll need to examine the letter, Tess.’

‘No problem. I made a copy.’

‘You’re not going to publish, I hope.’

Her voice sharpened. ‘He’s talking about a *third* body, Hal. People have a right to be warned.’

‘We haven’t even found the second body yet,’ Ellen said. ‘Jane Gideon might be alive, for all we know.’

Challis backed her up. ‘Your letter writer might be a crank, Tess. An opportunist. Someone with a grudge against the police.’

He regarded her carefully, and saw that she understood the implications.

‘You’re not holding out on me?’

‘I swear it.’

‘But can I say the police *think* there may be a link between the first two?’

He sighed. ‘There may not be, but there probably is.’

She muttered, ‘Not that quoting you does me much good if you arrest him before Thursday’s issue.’

‘I can’t help that.’

She looked up at him. ‘People are scared, Hal. This morning I had a call from a real estate agent saying he’s had a couple of holiday cancellations. I checked with the caravan park and the camping ground. Same story. A lot of the locals depend on summer tourists.’

‘Tess, we’re doing everything we can. We’re following leads, checking our databases. As soon as there are any developments, I’ll give you a call ahead of anyone else.’

She touched the tips of her fingers to his chest and very lightly pressed him. ‘Would you? That’d be great, even if you do sound like a police spokesperson.’ She stepped away from him. ‘Well, Christmas soon. Season’s greetings and all that.’

'You too.'

She turned to Ellen. 'Someone's been distributing leaflets about Constable Tankard. Anything you can tell me about that?'

'No.'

'Okay. Bye now.'

When Tessa Kane was gone, Ellen said, 'I hate people who say "Bye now".'

'Ah, she's okay. You just have to know how to handle her.'

'Hal, don't get in too deep.'

He frowned. 'Are you my nursemaid now?'

'I mean the police–media thing, not your private life.'

Challis was embarrassed. 'Sorry.'

'I'll get this letter off to the lab.'

'It won't tell us anything.'

'I know.'

Canteen gossip soon spread the word about John Tankard's attempt to book Challis, so he was foul company that afternoon – as if he wasn't touchy enough already, owing to that leaflet campaign against him. Pam Murphy trod delicately around him during the ground-search of the Jane Gideon abduction site. Being diverted to attend a domestic dispute with him, on their way back to the station, was the last thing she wanted. Tankard's method of policing domestics was the bellow and the clip around the earhole.

She drove through the late-afternoon heat. A week before Christmas, and four months of hot weather lay ahead of them, the heat giving a particular spin to local crime. Your

burglaries increased, as people went on holiday or left windows open to catch a breeze. Cowboy water-haulage contractors stole water from the mains. Brawling increased – in the home, the pub, the street; outside pinball parlours; on the foreshore on New Year's Eve. Surfies reported thefts from their vans. Weekend farmers drove down from Toorak and Brighton in their BMWs and Range Rovers on Friday evenings and discovered that someone had emptied their sheds of ride-on mowers and whipper-snippers, or their paddocks of cattle, sheep, horses, angora goats. And now another highway murder.

'Next right,' Tankard said. He sounded keen, as if he could sense an arrest.

Pam turned the corner. The arrest rate was part of the problem. The sergeant was always urging a higher arrest rate, saying it was too low for the region. It's not as if we're in the inner suburbs, Pam thought, tackling knife gangs. Down here a quiet warning should be enough.

Still, she thought, I'm the rookie here, what do I know?

She braked the van gently about halfway along the street. There was no need to peer at house numbers: the focus of the drama was obvious, a gaggle of neighbours on the footpath. She pulled in hard against the kerb, pocketed the keys, and got to the front door of the house before Tankard could.

It was ajar. She knocked. 'Police.'

The man who came along the corridor toward them wore a bathmat of body hair on a white, sagging trunk. His feet were bare, his knees like bedknobs under threadbare shorts.

Someone had scratched his plump shoulders. He'd also have a black eye by the evening. 'Look, sorry you were called out, but we've got it sorted.'

Pam said, 'I'm Constable Murphy, this is Constable Tankard. Who else is in the house, sir?'

'Just the wife, also the—'

John Tankard shouldered through. 'We need to see her, pal.'

The man retreated in alarm. 'She's—'

Pam saw worry under the weariness, the poverty and the beer. She touched Tankard's forearm warningly and said, 'Constable Tankard and I just need a quick word with your wife, sir, if you don't mind.'

The man twisted his features at her. 'Look, girlie, I—'

It had been a long day. Pam pushed her face into his and breathed shallowly. She got 'girlie' twenty times an hour at the station; she didn't need it from some civilian as well. 'Are you obstructing us in our duty, sir? Because if you are—'

A priest appeared from a back room. 'It's all right, it's all right. I'm talking to them. We're sorting it out. There's no need for police intervention.'

'See? Told ya.'

Pam hooked her finger. 'Father, could I have a minute?'

She took the priest out on to the lawn at the front of the house. Tankard scowled after her. She ignored him. 'Father, I'm as anxious as you are to avoid trouble.'

The priest nodded. 'Everything's calm now. The fellow's wife has a history, a personality condition. Sometimes, when it's been hot for a few days, things get on top of her and she

snaps. That's what all the ruckus was about. She hit him, not the other way round.'

'How is she now?'

'Quiet. Ashamed. She hadn't been taking her pills.'

Pam walked with the priest back to the front door. 'Sir, we won't be taking any further action.'

Tankard was furious with her in the van. 'We should have talked to the wife.'

Pam explained. Tankard said nothing. He said nothing the whole way back to the station, not until he saw Inspector Challis outside the station, getting into his car to drive home.

'Arsehole.'

There had been a time when Challis wanted to write a book about the things he'd seen and known and done, a lot of it bad. Fiction, because who'd believe it if he tried to pass it off as fact? He'd studied with a novelist at the TAFE College in Frankston, Novel Writing, every Wednesday evening from six until ten – when he wasn't on call somewhere, staking out a house, feeling for a pulse, arresting someone who didn't want to be arrested – but soon realised that although he had plenty to say, he didn't know how to say it. It was locked inside him, in the stiff language of an official report. He couldn't find the key that would let the words sing on the page. He'd confessed all of this to the novelist, who congratulated him, saying, 'My other students either have nothing to say or never realise that they haven't got a voice, so count yourself lucky.'

Challis had smiled tiredly. 'You mean, *you* count yourself lucky you're not stuck with one more bad writer.'

The novelist laughed and invited him to the pub to say goodbye.

But one thing stuck in Challis's mind – a quote from a writers' handbook. Georges Simenon, author of the Maigret novels, had said: 'I would like to carve my novels in a piece of wood.' Challis felt like that now. As he drove away from the Waterloo police station at six o'clock that evening, he thought that he'd like to be able to stand back from this case, his life, and gauge where the shape was pleasing and where it was all wrong.

He turned right at the sign for the aerodrome and splashed the Triumph into a parking bay at the rear of the main hangar. He went in. One end had been partitioned off, and here Challis pulled on a pair of overalls, tuned in to Radio National, and went to work.

When he'd first moved to the Peninsula, he'd joined the Aero Club and learned of a Dragon Rapide lying in pieces in a barn north of Toowoomba. He'd paid ten thousand dollars to buy the wreck and a further fifteen hundred to have it trucked down to Victoria. There was a serial number, A33-8, as well as an old VH registration, but Challis knew nothing else of the particular history of his aeroplane. He knew that in 1934 de Havilland had flown the prototype at Stag Lane, in the UK, as a faster and more comfortable version of the DH84 Dragon, with Gipsy Queen 6 motors instead of the Gipsy Major 4s, but who had imported *his* Rapide, and what had she been used for?

He turned on a lathe. Several pieces of the airframe had been damaged, sections of the plywood fuselage casing were lifting away, the six passenger seats had rotted through, and both motors would need to be rebuilt. He was also attempting to find new tyres, and had asked a machinist to manufacture a number of metal parts to replace those too rusty to be restored. It could all take years. Challis was in no hurry.

A woman came in, smiling a greeting. 'The dragon man.'

'Kitty.'

Challis knew that Kitty wasn't her real name, but derived from Kittyhawk. They exchanged pleasantries, then Kitty fetched overalls from a hook on the wall and went to the other end of the partitioned space, where the fuselage of a 1943 Kittyhawk fighter sat on the concrete floor, next to an engine block. The only other restoration project in the room was a 1930 Desoutter, which was close to completion.

Challis returned to his lathe work. Behind him, Kitty began to remove the sludge from the engine block. It was companionable working with her. Challis felt some of the blackness lift away. He didn't have to account for himself here. He didn't have to apologise for, or hide, his obsession with the Dragon. Here it was as if he didn't carry his whiff of people who had died terribly or committed terrible deeds. He was simply Hal Challis, who liked to fly aeroplanes and was restoring a 1930s Rapide.

The moon was out when he finally drove home. The eyes of small animals gleamed in his headlights. The telephone was ringing in his hallway.

‘Yes.’ He never said his name.

‘Hal?’

His sense of calm left him. Some of the day’s badness came leaking in to take its place. He dropped on to the little stool beside the phone. ‘Hello, Ange.’

She didn’t speak for a while. ‘An early Merry Christmas, Hal.’

‘You, too.’

‘I thought, I might not get an opportunity to ring you next week. Everyone here will be hogging the phones on Christmas Day, so I thought, why not call you tonight, get in early.’

‘Good thinking,’ Challis said. He wished he had a drink. ‘Look, Ange, I’ll take this in the kitchen, okay?’

‘If this is a bad time I’ll—’

‘No, now’s fine, just wait a moment while I go to the kitchen.’

He poured Scotch into a glass, stood the glass on the bench top, stared a moment at the wall phone next to the fridge, then let out his breath.

‘I’m back, Ange.’

‘I’m trying to picture your house.’

‘It’s just a house.’

A catch in her voice. ‘Not that I’ll ever see the inside of it.’

‘Ange, I—’

‘I imagine somewhere peaceful and quiet. I miss that.’

‘Yes.’

‘I’m not a bad person, Hal. Not deep down inside.’

‘I know you’re not.’

‘Temporary madness.’

‘Yes.’

‘I can’t really believe it all happened like that. Like a bad dream.’

‘Yes.’

‘You do forgive me, don’t you?’

‘I forgive you.’

The answers came automatically. He’d been giving them for years.

She said, in a wondering voice: ‘You’re an unusual man, Hal. Other husbands wouldn’t forgive their wives, not for something like that.’

Challis swallowed his drink. ‘So, Ange, will your mum and dad come on Christmas Day?’

‘Change the subject, why don’t you? Mum will, Dad won’t. He doesn’t want to know me.’ She broke down. ‘God, seven years, and he hasn’t been once to see me.’

Challis let her cry herself out.

‘You still there, Hal?’

‘I’m here.’

The night was still and dark. The house was like an echoing shell around him.

‘You don’t say much.’

‘Ange—’

‘It’s okay, Hal, I have to go anyway. My phonecard’s almost used up.’

‘Take it easy, Ange.’

‘I shouldn’t be here, Hal. I don’t belong, not really.’

Challis said gently, ‘I know.’

‘It’s not as if I did anything. Conspiracy to murder, God, how did I know he’d try it?’

‘Ange—’

She sighed. ‘Spilt milk, eh?’

‘Spilt milk.’

‘Get on with my life.’

‘That’s the spirit.’

‘I can’t believe I wanted him instead of you.’

Challis drained his glass. He said, ‘Ange, I have to go now. Take it easy, okay? Keep your spirits up.’

‘You’re my lifeline,’ his wife said.

3

That same night, a woman on Quarterhorse Lane jerked back her curtain and saw that her mailbox was burning. Now the pine tree was alight, streaming sparks into the night. God, was this it, some twisted way of telling her that she'd been tracked down?

She'd been briefed carefully, eighteen months ago. Never draw attention to yourself. Keep your head down. Don't break the law – not even drink driving or speeding, and especially nothing that will mean you're ever fingerprinted. Don't contact family, friends, anyone from the old days. Change all of your old habits and interests. Dress differently. Learn to *think* differently. You liked collecting china figurines in the old days, right? Went to auctions? Subscribed to magazines? Forget all of that, now. Switch to sewing, cooking, whatever. It's good to give people a box to put you in – stereotype you, in other words, so that their minds fill in the gaps in your new identity. Above all, don't go back, not even if you get word that your mum's dying. Check with us, first. It could