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KITTYHAWK DOWN

GARRY DISHER



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For Gordon and Pat

1

The National Parks sign said ‘Bushrangers Bay 2.6 km’ and ‘Cape Schank 5.4 km’. Hal Challis edged through the barrier designed to thwart trail-bikes and stepped out along the track, the bushland warm and some of the flora turning red and yellow on this Easter Saturday afternoon in early autumn.

Bushranger.

A name that denoted violent crime and romance. An apt name, given that Challis had come here for a murder and had come here for love.

Autumn. ‘Fall’, as the Yanks call it.

You couldn’t get a better word than ‘fall’ to describe the season and his life now. Leaves everywhere had begun to fall. Since yesterday, Good Friday, his spirits had fallen, love gone wrong. And he thought of the body falling, falling through the water.

Challis strode on, disturbing a small snake. He was tall, thin but hard-boned, and looked slightly out of date in his

jeans, scuffed flying jacket and plain leather shoes. His sunglasses were not an accessory perched above his forehead but shaded his eyes. He'd never worn a T-shirt as an undershirt or tracksuit pants out of doors. He'd never owned a pair of runners. His hair was straight, dark and lifted a little in the wind. It was cut once a month by a young woman who worked beside her father in a Waterloo barbershop. She was skilful and attentive, and for the sum of \$10 returned him to the world with a neatly shaped head. And so Challis was outwardly unremarkable that day, nodding with grave courtesy to the people coming toward him along the track. This late on an Easter Saturday, 5:30 p.m., couples and families were streaming back to the carpark. Only Challis headed the other way, happy to leave them to the roads of the Peninsula, which would be choked with holidaymakers right now. Very few noticed that he was wound tightly, as if insulating a knot of powerful feelings, and the sunglasses hid the habitually weary, unimpressed and disbelieving cast of his face.

There were better things that Challis could have been doing. He could have been halfway through an Easter walk of the Peninsula beaches with Tessa Kane, but yesterday he'd had to pull out, and that had been the start of his falling spirits. He could have been at home reading or mulching leaves, but early in the afternoon he'd found himself listening for the phone to ring with more bad news from the women's prison, where his wife was serving eight years, and so he'd left the house. He could have been spending time with friends, but they all had children and Easter was a time

for family connectedness and strife, and no one wanted a forty-year-old single man hanging around them.

And so he'd started thinking about murder. As the Homicide Squad inspector for the Peninsula, thinking about murder was his job. In fact, there were two murders to think about, both relatively old and both unsolved. The first involved no body, only a strong suspicion. Ten months ago – June last year – a two-year-old toddler named Jasmine Tully had gone missing. She lived with her mother, Lisa, and Lisa's defacto in a rundown fisherman's shack on the outskirts of Waterloo. CIB detectives at Waterloo suspected the defacto, Bradley Pike. When they had failed to shake Pike's story or turn up evidence of any kind, they'd called in Challis. Challis was inclined to suspect Brad Pike too, and had spent hours trying to break his story. Cases involving children were the worst. He hated them. They left him feeling scoured and futile.

But it was the second murder that had brought Challis to Bushrangers Bay.

That, and love. If Tessa Kane was sticking to the timetable they'd mapped out with each other, she'd be walking in from Cape Schank about now. Maybe he'd encounter her. Maybe she'd want to talk.

Maybe not.

As for the second murder, this time there was a body, and Tessa Kane had called it the Flinders Floater on the front page of her newspaper. Unfortunately the name had stuck, and now even Challis was calling it the Flinders Floater.

It had been found by a commercial fisherman from

Flinders about six months ago. He was pulling in his anchor and noticed how heavy it was. He kept hauling, and that's when he saw the second anchor, caught in the tines of his own. But that alone hadn't accounted for the extra weight. Attached to the second anchor – belted on, in fact, so you could be sure it wasn't accidental – was a body.

The fisherman used his mobile phone to call the police, and bobbed in the sea off Bushrangers Bay for an hour until a police launch arrived to take charge.

No one knew who the dead man was. Challis saw the body before the pathologist had started sawing at it. The flesh was soupy, bloated, chewed about, apt to fall away from the bones like a cooked chicken's. Only the finger-pads of the right thumb and forefinger remained intact, the tips badly softened and wrinkled, but by injecting fluid under the skin the lab had distended them sufficiently to make serviceable fingerprints. No matches with the national computer. Then, when it was suggested that the dental work was foreign, Challis had tried Interpol, the Home Office National Computer in the UK, and the FBI.

Still nothing.

The clothing – jeans, T-shirt, underwear and Nike running shoes – had been made in Asian sweatshops for sale in Australian stores. They were a dime a dozen.

All that Challis knew was, the guy was in his thirties and his skull had been smashed in before he'd been thrown into the water. There were also stab wounds to the stomach, but the cause of death was drowning, the pathologist said, noting the presence of a large volume of seawater in the

lungs. The blow to the head? Possibly to stun the victim. The stab wounds? Probably to release gases and so ensure that the body remained under the surface of the water.

The blow to the head was possibly administered by the anchor that had taken him to the bottom, the pathologist reported, after comparing the shape of the indentation in the skull with the shaft of the anchor. The anchor had been intended to hold the body down until the fishes had picked the bones clean. Fortunately the fisherman had happened along about two or three days later. Or unfortunately, because identifying victim and culprit had become a headache for Challis.

At least the anchor told Challis a couple of things: the body had been dumped at sea, not pushed over a cliff, and he'd be saved the tedium of mapping body drift as determined by the tides and the shape of the coastline.

One other thing: the victim had been wearing a Rolex Oyster watch. Silver, with an expanding metal band. It wasn't the costliest Rolex available, but it was a genuine Rolex, not a ten-dollar Singapore or Bangkok fake. If the Rolex spelt a certain level of class or income, nothing else about the murdered man did. The clothes and Nike trainers didn't.

Challis walked on, allowing the Flinders Floater to rest there in his head like a shimmering wraith that would one day clarify, take on a corporeal being and tell him the story of his final days and minutes before he was thrown into the water to die.

He could see kangaroos grazing in the early evening light on the grassy slope above the walking track. He nodded at

a young family, stepping off to let them through, and wondered what he was going to do when he got to the fork on the cliff-top above the little bay. Walk down to the beach and commune with the elements in the hope that he'd solve the case? Continue toward Cape Schank and hope to encounter Tessa?

Dusk was settling. He could see lights on the water and the lights of Phillip Island beyond the water. A cool autumn wind blew in from the sea. He zipped up his windproof jacket. He was hungry, sleepy, cold, depressed – and owed it all to one phone call.

An ordinary everyday sort of man might not have answered the phone at seven o'clock on Good Friday morning. But Challis was a homicide inspector and always answered the phone. And had heard his wife, using her phone card at the prison, announce that she intended to kill herself.

Her spirits always deteriorated at holiday time. Her spirits always *fell*.

He'd hung on to the phone for twenty minutes, letting her talk herself out of her depression. But the damage was done. He'd been making love with Tessa when the call came, and an hour later – the mood for love gone and just as he'd been about to set out for the two-day walk of the Peninsula beaches with her – Challis's parents-in-law had rung to say that their daughter had snapped her phone card in two and tried to saw through her wrists with it, and was in the prison infirmary. She wasn't in any danger, but Challis's presence would help stabilise her mood, and if he wasn't busy would he mind...

Challis had said yes.

Tessa had said, 'It's time you let go of her, Hal,' then had driven off, announcing that she intended to undertake the walk alone.

Challis had almost set out to find her when he returned from seeing his wife in the afternoon.

Perhaps he should have. He was no good at gauging these things, but suspected that it would have been better then than now, a day later, when she'd had time to stew and set her mind and heart against him.

Self-conscious suddenly, he turned around and walked back to his car.

Almost 6 p.m....On the way home he tuned in to the news. Two asylum seekers had escaped from the new detention centre near Waterloo. Challis shook his head, imagining the fallout, the divisions, the extra work for Ellen Destry and her CIB detectives.

2

Ellen Destry would rather have been home tonight, Easter Saturday, but she was a detective sergeant at the Waterloo station and she could sense the hunger in Dwayne Venn.

What Venn liked to do was drive to three or four of the Peninsula's lovers' lanes and park deep in the maw of the roadside trees and attack couples in their cars. In the watery green light of the night-vision fieldglasses he resembled exactly a creeping psycho in a Hollywood slasher film, but on the two occasions that CIB had shadowed him in the past six weeks he'd never done more than watch. Not even taken his old boy out and tugged on it.

Ellen was almost beginning to doubt the veracity of Pam Murphy's information. 'Maybe your informant's given us a peeping tom instead of a rapist,' she'd said to the young uniformed constable last week after another three hours spent in the dark.

But Dwayne Venn was a nasty piece of work and there had been two rapes late that summer, both involving a knife

and a hint of unhinged violence. Now Tessa Kane, Challis's editor girlfriend, was asking questions in her newspaper, and so Ellen would continue to watch Venn for as long as the budget could stand it. Senior Sergeant Kellock had taken a brief hard look at the figures that afternoon and told her, 'Two constables, Murphy and Tankard, that's all I can spare, what with those fanatics escaping from the detention centre.'

Fanatics? Next he'd be calling them 'ragheads' or 'sand niggers', like some redneck in a film. According to the detention centre management, the escapees were Iraqis, one an engineer and the other a taxi driver. They weren't her concern – or not yet anyway. Her concern was catching Venn.

And so now she was in the bushes where she could not be seen but where she could see the station's unmarked blue Falcon as a dense shape against the general blackness. In bushes on the other side was John Tankard, one of the uniformed constables. The other, Pam Murphy, was in the Falcon itself, huddled on the back seat with Detective Constable Scobie Sutton. They were playing lovers. Neither wore shirts. Pam's bra was black, which seemed to indicate passion and willingness for some reason, if you listened to the ads. All four officers were armed, and in radio contact via earpieces and small microphones. To the casual eye, the microphones worn by Sutton and Murphy could have been matching necklaces.

Ellen said softly, 'Destry in position.'

Scobie murmured in her ear, 'Sutton in position.'

‘Murphy in position.’

‘Tankard ditto.’

Trust John Tankard to be different.

And they settled back to wait. They were a hundred metres away from the tourist road that gave access to the lookout. There was little local traffic – everyone was down on the coastal flatlands, heading herdlike to or from parties, pubs, restaurants and the cinema on this Easter Saturday evening.

Just then a Kombi van drove in. It stopped for thirty minutes, there was soft music, and then it clattered away again, leaving behind a trace of marijuana smoke. There were lights upon Port Phillip Bay, and the distant horizon glow of the Melbourne suburbs beyond the black water. Cloud wisps obscured the stars and the moon.

Ellen’s mind drifted. Back at home in Penzance Beach her daughter was having a party. Ellen fretted a little. It was Larrayne’s seventeenth birthday and Ellen wanted to celebrate the fact that her daughter was better now. Just over a year ago Larrayne had been abducted by a man who’d already abducted and murdered three other women. She’d been full of adolescent moody rattiness before the abduction, but since then had become quieter, more studious, inclined to stay at home. The party was also meant to mark her jettisoning of the ratbags she’d once hung around with at school and cementing new friendships. They were decent kids, these new friends, but – along with all the other shit that happened at night on the Peninsula lately – there had been instances of gatecrashing that had ended in violence.

‘We could register the party with the police,’ Ellen had suggested.

‘Sweetheart,’ her husband said, ‘we *are* the police.’

Alan Destry was a uniformed senior constable in Traffic. He was sour about his prospects. He’d failed the sergeants’ exam and was married to a detective sergeant on the fast track. Beating her at something, however trivial, made him feel a little better about himself.

And he was earning brownie points tonight, staying home, watching over a bunch of partying teenagers. Ellen imagined his scowling presence at the door as they arrived, his visual scrutiny, his quick search of jacket pockets, handbags and daypacks for booze and dope.

There was *some* booze allowed. Not enough to cause Larayne’s friends to waste themselves and turn nasty, though.

Drugs were another matter. There was evidence that a major network had taken over on the Peninsula: increased arrests for possession and pushing, more overdoses, reports of ecstasy and amphetamines being sold at rave parties. The rave party scene scared Ellen. Admission was cheap, about \$15 to cover the hire of a DJ and portaloos, and the parties were often held in out-of-the way factories that lacked basic safety measures like fire sprinklers. Kids heard about them by word of mouth and liked the sense of community encouraged by the music, the drugs, the secrecy, the air of being outside the mainstream. The drugs were also cheap and readily available, with ecstasy selling for \$50 a pop and the effect lasting for hours. The kids believed that ecstasy was harmless and loved the boost it gave them, the ability to

dance all night and feel invincible. They had a touching faith in the purity of the ecstasy, unaware that it had probably been made by a bikie gang in some backyard garage and contained heroin, speed and the horse-drug ketamine, bound together with glucose or caffeine. They risked poisoning themselves or fusing their brains in the long term, and at the parties they forgot to drink lots of water, got dehydrated, risked death.

Larryayne had been to one rave party. It had been well managed and publicly advertised, but the pushers were there, she said.

Ellen looked at her watch. Ten forty-five. Where was Venn? Assuming their rapist *was* Venn, he liked to take a knife from his boot and burst in upon a pair of lovers, demanding money. Then he'd threaten to start slicing pieces of flesh from the woman unless she undressed fully and handcuffed her boyfriend's hands behind his back and performed oral sex on him. Finally he'd insert the handle of the knife inside the woman's vagina and leave after cutting clumps of pubic hair from her and pocketing any cash the couple had on them.

Ellen badly wanted to catch him.

Then she saw him. 'He's here,' she murmured.

She had heard the engine and at first thought it was a passing motorist, but then a lowered black Longreach ute with a roll bar appeared in her glasses, slowing for the entrance, then U-turning to make another pass, and giving her a clear view of both its numberplates. She saw the ute enter finally, then coast past the police Falcon and stop

some distance away, pointed toward the exit. The Longreach looked fast and hard, like the driver.

They were going to make an arrest no matter what. If Venn simply spied on Sutton and Murphy, then they'd have him on a public nuisance charge and would work on him to confess to the rapes. But what Ellen wanted was to arrest him as far along the stages of assault, unlawful imprisonment and rape as possible, so that she could make a firm arrest yet not imperil her officers.

Venn opened his door. Ellen took the fieldglasses from her eyes and saw nothing; he'd removed the interior light bulb. She put the glasses to her eyes again and saw that he wore dark jeans, a dark T-shirt and lightweight army surplus boots. The balaclava sat like a pelt of short black hair on his scalp. He was big, but light on his feet. The fear he inspired, one person going up against couples, made sense to her finally.

She murmured into her mike, 'Approaching you now, Scobie, coming in on your rear passenger side.'

'Roger.'

The reply was a whisper. She watched Venn reach the Falcon and apparently meld with it as he put his face to the glass and looked in at Sutton and Murphy in their partial nakedness. Then she saw him break away from the car and bend swiftly to his right boot before straightening with a knife and unzipping and tugging out his penis.

'Get ready.'

Venn didn't shout. Witnesses to his previous assaults said he always kept his voice low and even, but crackling

with menace. Ellen Destry watched him open Pam Murphy's door and heard him say, 'Surprise! See the blade, lover boy? It slices open your girlfriend's windpipe, you give me any aggro. And feast your eyes on this, sweetheart. I'm gunna slip it up your cunt and your arse and in your mouth and your boyfriend's gunna fucking watch.'

'Don't hurt her,' Sutton said, sounding scared.

Venn's got the knife to Pam's throat, Ellen thought. And he's exhibiting himself to them. She could see the back of him in the open door. Then she saw the hand that must have been holding his penis suddenly slide around to the rear pocket of his jeans.

Handcuffs.

'See these, sweetheart? Cuff lover boy's hands behind his back. Come on! Move it or I'll stick you with this.'

'Don't hurt her.'

'Shut up. Okay, sweetheart, let's see what you got to offer.'

And as he backed away from the door, slicing open Pam Murphy's skirt as he went, Ellen said, '*Go, go, go.*'

John Tankard got there first. He slammed his baton on Venn's arm. The knife fell into the dirt. Venn groaned, hugged his arm to his chest and whimpered.

That's when Pam Murphy's foot caught him between the legs.

Not a happy boy.

3

After Dwayne Venn had been booked and remanded, Pam Murphy stretched out on the bench inside the locker room, poleaxed with tiredness. She was alone and liked it like that but knew it wouldn't last. There was always someone going on or off a shift or fetching or stowing something. There were separate showers and change rooms but a unisex locker room at Waterloo. It was a meeting ground, a staging ground, a breeding ground for oversexed young men and women and normally she avoided it like the plague, but right now she was too tired to care.

The door hissed on its pneumatic arm and John Tankard came in. His tongue had been hanging out earlier. It was the black bra. Her bareness from the waist up as she'd climbed into the rear of the Falcon to trap Dwayne Venn two hours ago.

'Good result tonight,' he remarked.

She watched him through eyes heavy-lidded with exhaustion. He was unbelting his uniform jacket, releasing the

revolver, cuffs and other junk that weighed you down and ruined your lower back.

‘Yes,’ she muttered.

And it *was* a good result. No doubt some smart-arse lawyer would get bail for Venn, but Venn would go down for rape, attempted rape, false imprisonment and assault with a deadly weapon and whatever else the DPP could throw at him. Plus he’d go on a sex-offenders’ register and earn himself a lifetime of official harassment whenever there was even the hint of a sex crime on the Peninsula.

She took a moment to profile Venn in her mind: twenty-two years old, fit despite a diet of beer, hamburgers and amphetamines, poor, poorly educated, face like a child’s drawing. He would die before the median age for men – of alcoholism, bad health, work accident, car smash. There were thousands like him living in shabby estates. His parents hadn’t known any better, just as he didn’t, his children wouldn’t. Young men and women like Dwayne Venn spent their lives in and out of courtrooms, lockups, rental houses, welfare offices. They never moved away from the area. Their friends had been their friends at school – friendships based on proximity, familiarity and disadvantages in common. They became parents at sixteen or seventeen. They were mute and vicious and a police officer’s nightmare.

It was the interconnections that had surprised Pam when she first came to the Peninsula. Although Waterloo was the main town for the eastern region of the Peninsula it was like a big village compared to her old stamping grounds, the restless inner suburbs of Melbourne. For example, Venn lived

with Donna Tully. Donna was the sister of Lisa Tully. Lisa had lived with Bradley Pike before Pike killed her toddler daughter and hid the body – *if* that's what had happened, and Brad Pike was the only person in creation saying that he hadn't done it. Now Lisa was living with Donna and Venn. She didn't want to have anything more to do with Brad Pike, she'd said, and had even taken out an intervention order on him, but recently Pam had seen Brad Pike in the company of Venn and the Tully sisters.

At the pub, in fact. Go figure. They'd all gone to school together. Maybe that was enough to bind them. *She* would never understand it.

Yet it was Pike who'd informed on Venn. He'd stopped her in the street one day with a weird story about being stalked and what was she going to do about it, then suddenly told her that Venn was the lovers' lane rapist. No, he didn't want to go onto the official informants' register. Wanted her to keep his name secret from her bosses too. She'd honoured that, but really, he was weird, they were all weird.

Uh-oh. Now John Tankard was seating himself on the end of the bench beside her stretched-out feet. An unmistakable tremor ran through the wooden legs and padded vinyl seat as the bench surrendered to Tankard's bulk. She'd removed her shoes earlier and now the soles of her feet were touched briefly by his massive thighs, by polyester heated from within by meaty flesh. She drew up her legs hastily.

God. She was too tired for this.

'Want me to massage your feet?'

'No thank you, Tank.'

‘Or I could sit on the other end and feed you peeled grapes.’

‘What do you want, Tank?’

‘Just making conversation.’

‘Well don’t.’

After a while he said, ‘It was good tonight. On any other Saturday night we’d’ve been cleaning puke out of the divvie van.’

‘Yes.’

He fell silent. His body made minute adjustments that were transmitted through the bench to her like shifts deep in the earth. She was almost asleep when she heard an oiled click and a faint, lubricated, whirring sound.

He’d taken out his service revolver.

‘Put it away, Tank,’ she said, then regretted it. He was the king of the double entendre, after all.

But he didn’t ask what was out that should be put away or where he should put it. Instead, he said, Pow, pow,’ and the revolver dry clicked on an empty chamber.

Shocked, she sat bolt upright. He was pointing the revolver directly at her midsection with the dazed, swollen look of a man aroused by naked flesh.

‘Don’t point that thing at me!’ she shouted, scrambling away from him.

Click.

‘Never point a gun at someone in fun, you know that.’

Click.

‘Stop it,’ she said.

Click.

Badly rattled now, she leapt from the bench and shouted, 'Loser!'

He seemed to wake from whatever possessed him – sexual arousal? Power? The gun itself? Or a combination. Whatever it was, he snapped out of it and said irritably, 'Settle down, it's not even loaded.'

'One day it will be,' she said and couldn't keep the shakes out of her voice.

John Tankard lived in a rear unit of a block of four similar units on Salmon Street. He overlooked someone's back yard, a dull reddish Nubrik wall and mouldy PVC downpipes. The front units overlooked weedy grass, a bicycle path and dry-docked yachts behind a steelmesh lockup yard, but the rent was higher. Besides, his rear unit was a blind corner in the world, like a burrow away from all of the shit.

He flicked on the TV and sank into the sofa, his usual spot, against the right arm, next to a little op-shop cupboard on which his phone sat in a scattering of beer-can rings. The sofa was op-shop too, a job lot he bought when he first moved into the flat. He'd repaired the vinyl with duct tape that more or less matched, but the tape was lifting here and there, showing the cracks.

Cracks are a metaphor of my life.

Now where the fuck had that come from? He wasn't even drunk yet, hadn't had a beer since lunchtime.

But a crack had shown back there in the locker room, right? When he'd aimed and dry-fired his gun at Pam Murphy.

Wished he'd seen her other crack, nudge nudge, wink

wink. He'd stopped thinking she was a lesbian some time ago. Stuck in the divisional van with her day after day, he'd begun to appreciate her close proximity. When she wasn't looking, he'd take in her shape under the shapeless uniform. Her bare arms through the summer and into early autumn. Once or twice out of the corner of his eye he'd seen her wet her lips. Now that was either unconscious and unrelated to him or unconscious but stimulated by his proximity to her, their thighs less than a metre apart there in the divvie van. Or a deliberate turn-on.

Tankard flicked through a week's unopened mail. A couple of bills and credit card statements and the latest *Sidearm News* from the States. He'd found it advertised on-line when surfing the Web for information about the Glock 17 pistol, subscribed to it, half wondering if it was a rip-off and he'd find his card account stripped bare, but it was legit and now the magazine came regularly and was an antidote to the shit he had to face in his job.

Through its pages he'd bought stuff by mail-order. Deer-hide holster. Night-vision goggles. Ankle-strap scabbard. Tins of mace. Pistol replicas: an Uzi, a Sig Sauer, a Heckler and Koch.

Plus a Confederate flag – and fuck me if he hadn't seen six Confederate flags in the past six months, usually in some dopehead's scungy flat. Tonight, in fact, he'd gone with Pam to the rundown weatherboard house that Dwayne Venn shared with the Tully sisters and there, in the sitting room, was a Confederate flag on one wall, photos of Sitting Bull and Cochise on the other walls, and sundry Native American

beads and blankets and other crap scattered around the place.

The world was full of fuckups whose lives were so shithouse they escaped into dreams of a time and a life where you'd find courage and absolutes and something clean and noble.

Me? I get that from a gun in the hand, Tankard thought. Like earlier tonight.

There was a hot dark corner of his mind – and it made his groin tremble – where he imagined shooting Pam Murphy. Imagined the spurt of it, like an ejaculation. Not destructive, necessarily – though that was part of it. Sort of a pumped-up feeling. Tankard was no longer a porcine, sweaty, unappetising tired copper with a crook back, but as tall and hard and sinewy and unreadable as the Indian chief who wiped out General Custer at Little Bighorn.

But I've never fired a shot on active duty, he thought, and most cops haven't and most cops never do.

God, his back hurt. He stretched out on the floor and visualised his spine as a sequence of knots along a rope and tried to unpick them one by one.

He fell asleep and woke up cold at three o'clock in the morning.

4

It was 11 p.m. and Challis was slumped in front of the television set, thinking about bed, when Tessa Kane knocked on his door, still dressed in her outdoor gear: hiking boots, jeans, padded jacket. She didn't look angry, exactly, but didn't smile either, her face a little sad under the vivid intelligence that was always there, as if the disappointments she'd been bottling up since yesterday morning had worked their way to the surface.

He fetched her a scotch, walking on eggshells, trying to read her. But she said nothing about his letting her down, running to his mad wife instead of taking a camping walk with her.

He'd lit the fire, for the wind had turned sleety by the time he'd returned from Bushranger Bay, and now the house was warm and safe against the squally night. He didn't know what to say to her. Now and then she sipped at her scotch, very still and silent, but finally a grin chased away the blues and she fished around in her daypack. 'I called in at work

on the way here,' she said. 'Lots of letters and messages to catch up on.'

This was better. This was something she did from time to time when she visited him. She liked to read stuff to him. Soon her lap was full of envelopes, e-mail printouts and slips of paper. She flipped through them abstractedly as he watched.

He said lightly, 'Any mail from the Meddler?'

She'd often told him about the man who bombarded her with anonymous letters and phone calls. The Meddler was an appropriate name: he had an obsessive and insane regard for good manners, law and order, and commonsense. He liked to report bad drivers, rubbish dumpers, lazy shire workers, mulish bureaucrats, vandals, property owners who failed to slash their grass in late spring. Unfortunately, you had to agree with him most of the time. Last summer, for example, he wanted to know what bright spark – 'pun intended' – had ordered a controlled burn of the nature reserve on Penzance Beach Road when hot northerlies had been forecast for the next day. The resulting bushfire had burnt out half of the reserve, grassland and fences, and come within a few hundred metres of a weatherboard house.

'Roadside rubbish this time,' Tessa said, not glancing at Challis.

'Uh-huh,' he said.

She waved a letter in her fist. 'Garbage bags dumped on Five Furlong Road, to be precise. He actually hunted around in the garbage bags and found a letter, which he's kindly enclosed.' She wrinkled her nose. 'Smells of rotting fish. It's

from the Department of Social Security and addressed to a Donna Tully, inquiring as to the status of her cohabitation with one Dwayne Andrew Venn. The Meddler wants me to denounce Venn and Ms Tully in the pages of the *Progress* as dumpers of rubbish. Says he's also sent a copy to the shire, hoping they'll prosecute.'

Challis nodded. At least she was talking to him now. He wondered if she'd noticed the significance of the Tully name. Surely she had. She'd reported extensively on the disappearance of Lisa Tully's child, and left no doubt in her readers' minds that she thought Bradley Pike was behind it.

As for Dwayne Venn, he wondered if he should tell her about Ellen Destry's stakeout.

No.

'The Meddler's offended by everything,' Tessa said. 'The genius who approved give-way rather than stop signs at the corner of Coolart and Myers roads. The woman at Peninsula FM who says "yee-uh" instead of "year", "haitch" instead of "aitch". The residents of Upper Penzance for not wanting paved roads or mains water and thinking themselves better than anyone else. He seems to live in a state of permanent apoplexy.'

Not that she minded. The Meddler's weekly letter had become an institution in the *Progress*, attracting other letters. Tessa's view was, if you're on a good thing, stick to it.

He watched as she continued to sort through the papers in her lap, and as he watched from the other side of the fire, her dark, clever, mobile face relaxed into a shy, pleased smile. 'What?' he demanded.

She might stay the night. She might not.

She waved a flimsy piece of paper at him. 'This is the proof-sheet of next Tuesday's column.'

He crossed in front of the fire, let his fingers brush against hers as he took the proof-sheet, retreated to his armchair again. She wrote a weekly column for the *Progress*. This time she'd tackled wankers.

Appreciating the wanker and his art, and distinguishing the wanker proper from the wanker accidental, is best undertaken with a close, like-minded friend. Just the other day one such friend and I were shopping in Rosebud and encountered a man walking a ferret on a lead. Our reaction was immediate and simultaneous. We turned to each other and murmured, 'Wanker.'

But wanking is a fluid notion, so to speak. Once upon a time a man with a big bunch of keys hanging from his belt was a wanker. Now only certain tradesmen and misguided old queers clip keys to their belts.

Challis grinned. He'd been the 'like-minded friend' that day. 'Nice one,' he said, attempting to be like-minded again.

Tessa scowled at once, her face sharpening. She straightened her back, folded her arms and looked fully at him. 'How was the little wife?'

'Don't be like that,' Challis said, immediately feeling sulky and small.

'Like what?'

He turned his face to the flames in the grate.

Tessa continued: 'Big emergency, was it? Is she in intensive care by any faint chance?'

Challis flushed angrily. 'If you must know, she had cut herself.'

'Yes, but to what extent, and with what?'

He hesitated fatally.

She pressed her advantage. 'Barely a scratch?'

He shrugged.

'Not a full-blooded attempt, so to speak. Not a proper deep slice down the length of the wrist.'

He sighed. 'No.'

'A cry for help, maybe?'

Challis snarled, 'Something like that.'

Tessa's voice softened. 'It's time you gave her up, Hal.'

Challis crossed the room to the, whisky bottle. 'It's not as easy as that.'

'Of course it is. Your wife pulls the strings and you jerk into action. She says "jump" and you say "how high?".'

'*She* didn't call me the second time, her parents did. So why don't you just shut the fuck up?'

The 'fuck' didn't sound quite right. It struck a false note, sounded forced rather than genuine. But he saw the hurt it caused, and then Tessa was turning away from him, staring at the dark shadows in the corners of the room, solitary and chafing. Her voice when it came was low and hollow 'I was so looking forward to our walk. Mostly perfect weather, perfect company. Well, we all know about that, don't we?'

Challis said nothing. He sipped his scotch miserably and stared down the years to a time and a place that wouldn't

let him go. He'd been one of four CIB detectives in a town in the old goldfields country north of Melbourne. His wife, restless and easily bored, had taken up with one of his colleagues. The colleague had become infatuated with her and lured Challis to a deserted place and tried to kill him. Now the colleague was shuffling around a prison yard with a bullet-shattered femur and Challis's wife was serving eight years for being an accessory to attempted murder.

She would phone him from time to time and say she was sorry, then say she *wasn't* sorry and would gladly do it again. She needed him, she hated him. He was too good for her, he was a shit. Most of the time she was full of longing for him and what he'd represented and the times they'd had before it all went wrong. Challis didn't want her back and no longer loved her, but he did feel responsible, as though he should have been a better man or at least the kind of man she wouldn't want her lover to kill. As Tessa Kane kept saying, it was time he shook her off. Time he *divorced* her, in fact.

'I suppose her parents were there?'

'Yes.'

In fact, Challis liked his wife's parents. They were bewildered, apologetic, as tortured with notions of responsibility as he was, and sorry to think that their daughter could do such a thing to so nice a man.

Tessa snorted. Challis read it not as contempt but obscure pain and envy, as though she felt she had no claim on him at all. He put down his scotch. 'Tess—'

'Something unusual happened on my hike. Do you want

to hear about it?’ She looked at him, brightly blinking her moist eyes.

Relief flooded through him. ‘Of course.’

‘I was walking along an empty stretch of beach near Flinders this afternoon. There was a lot of seaweed and kelp on the beach, strong winds, waves, you know how windy it was today.’

Challis nodded. Had she seen him? No.

‘Anyway, I’m trudging along when a four-wheel-drive appears, roaring straight at me across the sand.’

Challis’s nerve endings tingled. ‘Go on.’

‘White Toyota traytop ute, to be exact. Two men inside. The driver starts shouting at me. What am I doing there? Who else is with me? Have I found some boxes on the beach? Maybe I’ve hidden them? He was quite aggressive. Then he just sped off further down the beach. I was too surprised to take down the number.’

‘Shipment of drugs,’ Challis said flatly.

‘I’d say so.’

Challis worked homicide, not drugs, but the trade in drugs often leads to homicide, so naturally he was interested. ‘There was a gale last night,’ he said.

She nodded. ‘Either the stuff was tied to a buoy and got dislodged, or it was thrown or washed overboard from some ship or yacht.’

‘Or the shipment was ripped off.’

‘That too. Or it’s entirely innocent. But it didn’t *feel* right, you know?’

Things not feeling right is a common instinct in the

police and the press, Challis thought. ‘What did they look like?’

Tessa shrugged. ‘I only saw the driver clearly. Generic Peninsula male, late thirties, beanie, shades, footie jumper, needed a shave. I can’t be more specific than that.’

‘Even so, it’s worth reporting. Our collators can feed it into the system.’

She saluted. ‘Yes, sir.’

A silence opened between them. It was clear to Challis now that they were not going to make love and he’d been deluded to think that a reunion after what he’d done to her – as she saw it – could have been passionate. If he reached out and touched her now she’d flinch and say, it’s not as easy as that, Hal.

She seemed to read his confusion and unhappiness and got to her feet. ‘I’d better go.’

She almost walked out on him coldly but at the last moment stopped and briefly touched his cheek.

She’d left her scotch unfinished.

5

At 1 a.m., with Dwayne Venn questioned and remanded and most of the paperwork done, Ellen packed up and drove home to Penzance Beach, still dressed in her baggy stake-out cargo pants and cotton windcheater. The Destry family home was a fibro holiday house on stilts in a hollow between the beachfront and hilly farmland. Penzance Beach was a fifteen-minute drive but a world away from Waterloo, with its depressed estates and idle light industry. In summer, Penzance Beach crawled with the four-wheel-drives and German saloon cars of the well-heeled Melbourne families whose fairytale cottages and architect-designed bunkers would one day replace the fibro shacks of families like the Destrys.

Melbourne was just over an hour's drive away so Penzance Beach crawled with outsiders at Easter too. She slowed the car and looked for somewhere to park. The street was full of cars of the holidaying families and the kids attending Larrayne's party. She drove down two adjacent streets before finding a gap large enough to fit her Magna, and walked