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SNAPSHOT

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For Chris

1

On Saturday she watched Robert have sex with four women. She had sex with two men. And now it was Tuesday and she was driving along the highway with her seven-year-old daughter. Sex with strangers on a Saturday evening, driving around with her daughter in the family station wagon on a Tuesday morning: were these the twin poles of her existence? Not any more. Janine McQuarrie had done something about that.

'Are we there yet?' asked Georgia in her piping voice.

Another cliché in a life of them. 'Not yet, sweetie. Bit further.'

She needed to concentrate. The weak, wintry sun was casting confusing shadows but, more than anything, she'd be obliged to make right-hand turns pretty soon. A right turn off the highway, another off the Peninsula Freeway, and another off Penzance Beach Road, which wound in a dizzying climb high above sea level. She slowed for an intersection, the light green. She should make a right turn here,

but that meant giving way to the oncoming traffic, which was streaming indifferently towards her, and what if some maniac failed to stop before she completed the turn? She tried to swallow. Her mouth was very dry. Someone sounded their horn at her. She continued through the intersection without turning.

All those people there last Saturday, as close as bodies can get to one another, yet Janine hadn't expected, sought or found any kind of togetherness. She knew from past experience that the other couples would look out for each other, the wives watching out for their husbands, always with a smile, a kiss, a comforting or loving caress, 'Just checking that you're happy' kind of thing, and the husbands checking on how their wives were doing, 'Are you okay? Love you' kind of thing, even stopping to have sex with them before moving on to another play area. But that wasn't Robert's style. He would never so much as say 'Enjoy yourself' but go after the single women and younger wives, a glint of grasping need in his eyes, and last Saturday hadn't been any different. He'd kept her there until three in the morning, long after most of the others had gone home.

'Mum?'

'What?'

'Can I have a Happy Meal for lunch?'

'We'll see.'

Beside her, Georgia began to sing.

It had taken her husband about three months to wear her down. When he'd first proposed attending one of the parties, late last year, Janine had thought he was joking, but it soon

became clear that he wasn't. She'd felt vaguely discomfited, more from the tawdriness and risk of exposure than realising he probably didn't want her sexually any more. 'Why do you want to have sex with other women besides me?' she'd asked, putting on a bit of a quiver.

'But you can have sex with other men,' he'd said reasonably, 'as many as you want.'

'You're pimping for me, Robert?'

'No, of course not, it will spice things up for us.'

Things had been low-key to non-existent, she had to admit. They still were – with Robert at least.

For three months she'd let him think his wheedling and cajoling were seducing her into it. 'You'll meet lovely people,' he said one day. 'Very open-minded.'

That confirmed it: he'd had experience already. She waited a beat and said in a little voice, 'You mean you've already been to one of these parties?'

Yes, he told her, trying not to sound ashamed or evasive but open, honest and a little defiant and courageous. She'd felt a surge of anger, but kept it bottled. He was so plausible, so *small*. Playing shy and a little threatened she'd asked, 'So they let single men in?'

'Some parties do,' he said. 'It costs more, and you're soon barred if you're a sleazebag.'

Robert wasn't a sleazebag, or not to look at. Nondescript, if anything. His morals were sleazebag, though.

'There's no need to feel threatened or jealous,' he'd said gently, stroking her arm, her neck, her breasts, and she'd actually tingled, her body betraying her. 'It forges a deep

trust between couples,' he went on. 'It's not just physical, it's also spiritual. A mutual trust. It's a fundamental thing.'

On and on, for three months.

'I don't want to have sex with a boilermaker,' she'd told him finally, knowing just what to say.

He shook his head, the picture of top-drawer gentlemanliness. 'Potentially, you have people from all walks of life,' he said, 'but I'll make sure we attend only the better parties.'

Yeah, those that admit right-wing, think-tank sons of police superintendents, she thought now, at the next intersection, her insides clenching. Finally she found the nerve to turn right across oncoming traffic. Soon the car was climbing steeply inland from the coast and heading across the Peninsula along narrow roads lined with pines and gums, sunless, dank and dripping on this early winter morning.

Eventually she'd let Robert see that he'd worn her down, and in February had let him start taking her along with him to his banal little suburban orgies. She went partly out of curiosity and partly to get something on him. On the first three occasions she'd insisted they attend as observers – Robert itching to get into it, of course.

At her fourth party she drank a lot first, to convey the impression that she needed Dutch courage – but then discovering to her irritation that she *did* need it. 'Good on you, sweetheart,' Robert said.

To her surprise, it all turned out to be quite erotic. A house in Mornington, lots of plane trees along the street, tall hedges to screen the house from passersby or nosy neighbours. Robert pointed it out to her, and then parked

in the next street. 'What we're doing isn't illegal,' he said, 'but we don't want to attract unnecessary attention.' They walked to the house, dressed as if for an ordinary party, and were greeted at the door. Ten o'clock, and most people were already there, about twenty couples and a dozen single women. Janine recognised several of them from observing on earlier occasions. They stood around, drinks in their hands, talking about football, the stock market, who was minding the kids tonight – in Janine's and Robert's case, Janine's sister, Meg.

By 10.30 everyone had loosened up. Jackets came off, lights were dimmed, there was kissing, a porn film flickered on a widescreen TV in a corner of the sitting room.

Soon men and women were in the 'change' rooms, hanging up trousers, jeans, dresses, shirts, and emerging, the men in G-strings, the women in sheer black slips, camisoles, knickers. Janine was accustomed to this by now, after those three preparatory visits. You had to 'dress down' in order to watch.

She drank another vodka, then stripped to her knickers and walked topless to one of the bedrooms, a large room where two double beds had been pushed together. Black satin sheets, candles placed where they cast a suggestive light but couldn't be knocked over, a bowl of condoms and a pump dispenser of lubricant on a side table. Two couples were having sex; others watched in the shadows, fondling themselves, sometimes darting forward to peer at all that moist coupling. Cruising nicely now after the vodkas, Janine felt desire hit her, a little hot and nasty in the pit of her

stomach. She perched on the end of a bed and touched a woman's breast, a man's penis, saying, 'Do you mind?'

It was important to ask and not simply barge in. They smiled. No, they didn't mind. Join in, why don't you?

She still wasn't sure. Most of her wanted to, part of her didn't. Perhaps if she just stretched out on the bed...Time passed. People stopped to watch, moved on to another play area, or joined in. 'Like this?' they asked, 'or like that?' 'Here, or there?' 'What would you like me to do?' 'Do you mind if I do that?' 'What turns you on?' By midnight, that first time, Janine had had sex with three men.

It had been her awakening – though not in the way Robert intended – when, a few weeks ago, she'd found love and excitement in the arms of a man who *wasn't* part of that scene.

She shook off the memory and concentrated on her driving, feeling safer now that she was on Penzance Beach Road. She was heading through a region of sealed roads and dirt side roads, amid wineries, berry farms, craft galleries and more cars than she cared to encounter. And a heavy fog had rolled in from the Westernport side of the Peninsula. She tried mentally to map her way, but she'd never driven this route before. Robert was the driver in the family.

Robert and his bullshit about a higher form of sexual freedom. Right from the start Janine had known that Robert and the others were trying to put a spin on things to make themselves feel better about what they were really doing. 'The suspension of jealousy' they called it. 'True sharing' and 'The highest form of sexual freedom'. Janine, checking

out a couple of the websites, had found more of the same: 'All-in-together fun and erotica,' one site said, and featured personal ads aimed at getting like-minded couples together.

The same tone came through in the rules. Of course, they didn't call them rules, but 'etiquette': shower before you arrive; practise safe sex; no anal sex; respect the wishes of others; no means no; ask first and choose the right moment; feel free to watch, but erotic dress in the play areas, please; by all means have a drink to loosen up, but no one wants to partner a drunk.

Despite the claptrap it had been exciting, that first time, and for a while continued to be. Sometimes all of the elements – the smells, the sounds, the images – conspired to make her really horny. But she'd never felt liberated, alive or sweetly wicked, to quote some of the garbage the others spouted from time to time. None of it had translated into a better relationship with Robert – not that she'd wanted that at the time, and certainly not now, with a genuine man, genuine love, in the wings. It all seemed like hard work to Janine, and she felt contempt, everyone so nice, so conscientious about making sure everyone got an opportunity to enter this, touch that, suck this, stroke that, do this, please, do that again, please. By profession she was a psychologist but you didn't need a university degree to see that the whole sex party scene suited the needs of men, not women, and was symptomatic of fundamental anxieties, like desperately clinging to youth, seeking self-esteem, and wanting to be desired.

It was all about needing to be loved, and that was pathetic

and illusory. Robert and his mates needed a good dose of reality, and the means to that had fallen into Janine's lap. Exactly a week ago, the Waterloo *Progress*, a small weekly newspaper, had published a long article on the swingers scene. The editor had apparently attended a party somewhere on the Peninsula and written it up with the blessings of the organisers and the participants. Caused quite a stir amongst the good and the decent who secretly hankered for a bit of spice in their lives. No photographs, no real names used – and that had given Janine her idea. Yesterday Robert and three of his mates would have opened their mail and found photographs of themselves in all of their glory, having sex with women not their wives in front of a bunch of other naked people.

There was no way she could have used an ordinary camera, not even a little spy camera. But a mobile phone with camera and video facility, that was a different story. You needed to have a mobile handy at these parties, wrapped up in your towel, G-string or camisole, in case there was an emergency call from the babysitter.

A few quick snaps, a few seconds of video, family doctors, businessmen, headmistresses, lawyers and accountants bonking strangers in some ghastly suburban bedroom. Even a few snaps of Robert. Janine shivered with glee. What if she showed them to his father, the superintendent of police, the custodian of good order?

Nah, maybe some other time.

She'd posted one photograph to each of the four men whose faces were clear enough for ID purposes. No demands

for money, no note of any kind. She wanted to infect the swinging scene with a bad case of nerves, that's all. She grinned now, like a shark. The fear of finding themselves posted on the internet can't be too far from the surfaces of their tiny little minds, she thought.

Clearly Robert had opened his envelope at work yesterday. She'd had a little fun when he got home, rubbed up against him, felt for his cock, and said, 'Can we go to another party next weekend? I can't stop thinking about it. You were right, it's been liberating.'

He'd squirmed away from her, mouth wrenched in panic and distaste. 'I don't think that would be a good idea,' he'd said in a choked voice, before turning nasty and almost striking her. She'd always suspected that he had a propensity for violence. Robert was the kind of man to kill his wife and plead a provocation defence, and Janine knew there were plenty of other men – judges and defence lawyers – who'd allow him to get away with it. In the end, he'd shut himself in his study all evening. At 6 a.m., he'd flown to Sydney.

Just then her daughter's voice cut in on her reverie. 'Can I put the heater on?'

'Sure.'

It was chilly for early July – meaning a long, dreary winter, Janine supposed. She watched Georgia expertly adjust the Volvo's heater and fan controls, the concentration fierce on her sweet face with its halo of fine blonde curls. How did Robert and I produce her? she wondered. They drove on through the misty landscape, and eventually Georgia was

perched alertly on the edge of her seat, asking, 'Mum, is it far now?'

'Don't think so,' Janine said, sounding more confident than she felt.

They were on a ridge road, with milk-can letterboxes every couple of hundred metres, signs for 'horse poo', and dense trees and bracken concealing driveways that led down to houses and cottage gardens tucked into the hillside. 'I think it's this one,' Janine continued, indicating squat brick pillars and an open wooden gate. She braked cautiously, not wanting to alarm the driver of the car behind her. She signalled, steered off the road, and drove in a gentle curve down a gravelled track to a parking circle beside a weatherboard house.

'Look, sweetie,' she said, pointing ahead, the fog parting briefly to offer gorgeous views across a dramatic valley, the sea and Phillip Island beyond. But Georgia wasn't buying it. 'It's creepy,' she said, meaning the grimy old weatherboard house. 'Do I have to wait in the car?'

'I'm sure you'll be allowed to watch TV or something,' Janine said.

She was double-checking their location with the street directory, completely rattled, and welcomed the sound of the car that came in behind them with a growl of its tyres.

2

There were two of them, wheelman and hard man, and they rolled down the driveway in a Holden Commodore, a model dating from 1983 but still plentiful on the roads, though maybe not in dirty white with one light yellow door.

A woman, that's all Gent knew. He didn't know what she'd done, only that Vyner had to sort her out, a warning, maybe a slap around the chops. That was Vyner's expertise, not his. He was the wheelman, along to provide the car and knowledge of the twisting roads in and out of this part of the Peninsula, an area of small towns, orchards and vineyards. And a sea mist had rolled in, choking the roads and waterways, providing good cover for the job.

The driveway was a steep plunge from the main road above, the Commodore's brakes dicey. 'Shitheap car,' said Vyner in the passenger seat.

Gent shifted uncomfortably behind the wheel. Vyner had told him to steal a decent car, plenty of power but nothing

fancy. 'Best I could do,' Gent muttered, guiltily pumping the brakes of his cousin's Commodore.

The guy's a whinger, thought Vyner in the passenger seat, drawing out a pistol with one gloved hand and screwing on the silencer with the other. He waited with barely concealed patience for Gent to stop the car, then got out and advanced on the woman's car, a silver Volvo station wagon. The woman got out; big, apologetic smile. Vyner despised that. Where he came from, you acted first and asked questions later. Children's Court at thirteen, ward of the state at fourteen, sentenced to a youth training facility at fifteen. Then the Navy, where for a few years he channelled all of that energy into useful skills like long-range, technologically enhanced killing techniques. He was discharged in 2003, an incident in the Persian Gulf, the shrink who assessed him concluding: *Leading Seaman Vyner possesses a keen intelligence but is manipulative, lies compulsively and has demonstrated a capacity for cruelty.*

Well, as Vyner had noted in his journal this morning, *No comet has showered sparks of joy and light over me*. Life snapped at his heels even as he sought higher rungs of knowledge.

Like now, what it meant to gun a woman down in front of her kid – for there was a kid in the passenger seat, should have been at school, given that it was a Tuesday. The kid not scared yet, merely curious, but the woman was, the woman had seen the gun.

She held both hands out, pleading, 'No, please, it was just a joke, I wasn't going to show them to anyone, I wasn't going

to ask for money.' Then she slammed the door on her kid and began to back away from Vyner. Said a few other things, too, like 'You've got the wrong person' and 'What did I ever do to you?' and 'Don't hurt my daughter', but Vyner was here to do a job.

He strode on, and when the woman turned and scuttled around to the front of the Volvo, Vyner didn't alter pace, merely raised the pistol and closed in on her. She rounded the front of the car, ducked back along the other side, towards the tailgate, so Vyner turned patiently, retracing his steps to meet her. It was cat and mouse, the woman whimpering, Vyner registering the measured rate of his own heart and lungs. Lines for his journal: *Today I was served by angels*.

Nathan Gent, behind the wheel of the Commodore, came to a shocking realisation. Sitting there with his mouth open, the Commodore shaking arrhythmically on about four out of the six cylinders, he finally twigged that this was a killing he'd been hired for. He closed his mouth with a click of rotting teeth and goosed the accelerator a little, hearing the motor idle more evenly. 'A bit of business,' Vyner had said. 'Won't take long.' Vyner – as hard, thin and snapping as a whip – had always been tough, but Gent had never known him to kill anyone except maybe a few Iraqi ragheads. Gent felt himself go loose inside. He watched, squeezing the old sphincter, and saw Vyner and the woman reach the rear bumper of the Volvo simultaneously, from opposite sides of the car. The woman jerked, ran back the way she'd come, half bent over. Vyner, all the time in the world, went after her.

Then she broke cover. She knew the end had come and intended to draw Vyner away from the kid trapped there in the back seat – or so Gent hoped, an old bitterness rising in him as he flashed back to his own mother, who'd never sacrificed a thing for him. He watched the woman dart away from the carport towards a little garden shed, a tangle of rakes, shovels, fence pickets, whipper-snipper and mower – looked like a Victa to Nathan Gent, he could come back with a mate's ute, load up, flog the mower for fifty bucks in the side bar of the Fiddlers Creek pub.

Maybe not. Crime-scene, police tape around it, the cops wanting to know what business he had on the property.

But a murder. Jesus, accomplice to a murder. For comfort, Gent rubbed the stump where his right ring finger had been, the finger torn off by a ship's chain somewhere in the Persian Gulf.

Again he remembered what Vyner had said about stealing a car, and silently thanked God for the concealing fog. And for the location: the house was below road level, the road winding along the top of a ridge, the ground sloping steeply away on either side. Passing drivers would have to get out of their cars and stand at the head of the driveway and look down on the turning circle and carport in order to witness anything. No neighbours to speak of. But Jesus, why hadn't he *stolen* a car like Vyner said?

While Gent watched, Vyner aimed at the woman, now cowering beside the garden shed, and shot her twice, a couple of pops, softened by dense fog and silencer. Then Vyner returned to the woman's car, hurrying a little now.

The kid knew. A little girl, maybe six or seven, she came bounding out of the Volvo in her red parka, running, curls bouncing, Vyner tracking her with his pistol. Gent saw him fire, miss. Now she was heading towards the Commodore, Gent thinking, no, piss off, I can't help you. He put his hand out of the window, waved her away. She gaped at him for a long moment, then darted towards a belt of poplars at the edge of the garden. Gent saw Vyner take aim, pull the trigger. Nothing. Vyner looked at the gun in disgust, then strode back to the garden shed, searching for ejected shells. A moment later he was piling into the Commodore, shouting, 'Let's go.'

Keep the prick moving, Vyner thought. Gent had been sitting too long – though it was what, less than two minutes, tops? He hoped the guy wouldn't turn out to be a liability. Gent was only in his early twenties but going to seed rapidly through beer and dope; a pouchy, slope-shouldered guy who claimed to know every back road – and probably every backyard and back door, Vyner thought – of the Peninsula.

Well, Gent was getting $5000 for his part in the hit, and knew what would happen if he didn't keep his mouth shut.

They neared the top of the driveway, Vyner removing the clip from his Browning and cursing it. You'd think the Navy would stock reliable handguns, border protection and all that. Not that he'd ever intended to hang on to this gun, keep incriminating evidence around. He'd do what he'd done before, seal it in a block of concrete, and toss it into a rubbish skip on some building site. There were two more

Navy Browning pistols in the wall safe of his Melbourne pad, and he'd better examine and clean them tonight. Didn't want them jamming on him, especially when firing in self-defence. Shit gun. Unfortunately it was too late to get back his $500 per weapon because the Navy armourer who'd sold them to him was dead. Shot himself in the head.

He unscrewed the silencer – at least *that* worked – and slid it into the inside pocket of his jacket, then shoved the Browning into another pocket, the hammer catching, tearing the fabric. Useless fucking thing. Vyner had wanted something more cutting edge from the armoury, a Glock automatic or a Steyr short-barrelled carbine and a high-end night-aiming device, but all the Navy guy would sell him was three old Brownings from the stock used for cadet training and which were gradually being phased out. 'I can lose these in the paperwork, no dramas,' his mate had said, 'but the new stuff, no way.'

Vyner removed his gloves and folded down the sun visor to check himself out in the vanity mirror. Nothing caught in his teeth. His old familiar face looking back at him. He pocketed his cap, smoothed back his hair.

'Shit!' shouted Gent, braking hard as the Commodore levelled out at the top of the driveway. It rocked to a halt just as a taxi came out of the fog and disappeared into the fog, gone in an eyeblink.

3

Normally Hal Challis started the day with a walk near his home, but he wanted to catch Raymond Lowry unprepared, to ask about the stolen guns, so at 6.30 that morning he shrugged into his coat, collected his wallet and laptop, and got behind the wheel of his Triumph. Five minutes later, he was still trying to start it. When finally the engine caught it fired sluggishly, with a great deal of smoke, and he made a mental note to book it in for a service and tune.

He set out for Waterloo, heading east through farmland, a sea fret licking at him, shrouding the gums and pines along the side of the road, reducing the universe. 'Sea fret' – as if Westernport Bay, vanished now but normally a smudge of silvery water in the distance, was chafing. Challis supposed that it was chafing, in fact: there'd been a sudden and bitter chill in the air last night, which had come into contact with sea water still warm from a mild autumn, and the result was this dense, transfiguring fog. He knew from experience that it would sit over the Peninsula for hours, a hazard to

shipping, school buses, taxis and commuters. And a hazard to the police. Challis's job was homicide but he pitied the traffic cops today. Maniacs passed him at over 100 kmh, before being swallowed up by the fog; irritated with him, the sedate driver in his old Triumph. Old, lacking in compression and the heater didn't work.

Soon he reached a stretch of open land beside a mangrove belt, and finally the tyre distributors, petrol stations and used-car yards that marked the outskirts of Waterloo. New, cheap houses, packed tightly together, crouched miserably in the fog. There was high unemployment on the new estates; empty shops in High Street; problems for the social workers. Yet on a low hill overlooking the town was a gated estate of million-dollar houses with views over Westernport Bay.

Waterloo was the largest town on this side of the Peninsula, hemmed in between farmland along one flank and mangrove swamps and the Bay on the other. Three supermarkets, four banks, a secondary college and a couple of state and Catholic primary schools, some light industry, a fuel refinery across from the yacht club, a library, a public swimming pool, a handful of pubs, four $2 shops, several empty shopfronts. A struggling town to be sure, but growing, and less than an hour and a quarter from Melbourne.

Challis slowed for a roundabout, and then headed down High Street to the shore, where he passed the swimming centre and the yacht club on his way to the boardwalk, which wound through the mangrove flats. Here he parked, got out and walked for an hour, his footsteps muted and

hollow on the treated pine boards. Beneath him the tidal waters ran, and once or twice there was a rush of air and a hurried warning bell as a cyclist flashed past him, too fast for such a narrow pathway in such struggling grey light.

Seven-thirty. He stopped to watch a black swan and thought about his dead wife. She'd never understood his need to wake early and walk, or his need to walk alone. Maybe the rot had set in because of that essential difference between them. His solitary walks focused him: he solved problems then, plotted strategies, drafted reports, did his best loving and hating. Other people – like his wife – wanted to chat or drink in their surroundings when they walked, but Challis walked to think, get his blood moving and look inwards for answers.

Strange the way he kept referring to her in his mind. Strange the way she continued to be the person to whom he presented arguments and information, as if she still mattered more than anyone else, as if he still hoped to shine in her eyes, as if she hadn't tried to kill him and her own death hadn't interrupted everything.

Seven forty-five. He swung away from the swan, returned to his car and drove back to High Street. Here the early birds in the bakery, the café and the newsagency were opening their doors, sweeping the footpath, seeding their cash registers. He entered Café Laconic, bought takeaway coffee and a croissant, and consumed them in his car, watching and waiting.

At five minutes to eight, Lowry appeared, walking from the carpark behind the strip of shops. The man wore jeans, a

parka and a woollen cap, a tall, thick-bodied guy who liked to show a lot of teeth when he talked. Challis watched him fish for keys and open the door to his shop. Both the windows and the door were plastered with advertisements for mobile phones and phone plans. Waterloo Mobile World the shop was called.

Challis gave Lowry a couple of minutes and then entered, setting off a buzzer. 'We don't open until...' Lowry began, then something stopped him, some stillness and focus in Challis. 'What do you want?'

'Another talk, Mr Lowry,' Challis said.

Raymond Lowry showed indignation and bafflement with his mouth and shoulders. 'What about?'

'The inquest's on Thursday,' Challis said. 'I'm finalising my report to the coroner.'

'Let me get the door,' Lowry said resignedly. He locked it, then gestured for Challis to follow him into a cramped back room, where he immediately sat at a desk and began to make notes in a ledger. It was airless in the little room. A fan heater blew scorching air at Challis's ankles. Eventually Lowry looked up. 'Sorry about that. There's a lot of paperwork in this job.'

Challis glanced around at the grey steel shelves loaded with boxes of mobile phones and phone accessories. 'Business doing all right?'

'Can't complain.'

'Better than life in the Navy?'

Lowry shrugged.

The Navy base was a few kilometres away. Lowry had

served there for a while, met a local girl and eventually quit. 'You can't raise kids in that kind of environment,' he said, 'getting posted all over the place. And I make a decent living at this.'

Lowry, the solid businessman and decent family man. Challis didn't reply but waited, an old trick. 'Look,' said Lowry with a disarming grin, baring his large, glorious teeth, 'what more can I tell you? I barely knew the guy.'

On a Saturday night in May, an armourer from the Navy base, high on a cocktail of alcohol and drugs, had been ejected from the Fiddlers Creek pub. Two hours later he'd returned unnoticed with a pistol from the armoury and shot dead a bouncer, then returned to the base. Later still, he'd killed himself with the same pistol. The fallout was far-reaching: eighteen cadets had been dismissed after testing positive to drugs, and the operation of the armoury was under investigation. According to a preliminary check, some of the pistols were missing, older stock that was being phased out. Challis badly wanted to know where those guns were.

'Barely knew him? That's not what I heard,' he lied. 'I heard you were pretty pally with him. Were you his contact on the outside? He falsified the paperwork to cover the theft of several guns, and you fenced them for him?'

'No way. Not guns.'

Meaning that yeah, he'd been caught handling stolen property last year, but no way would he handle stolen handguns. 'Then who did handle the guns for him?'

Lowry opened his arms wide. 'How the hell would I know?'

'How's the wife?' said Challis.

Lowry faltered at the direction change. He had close-cropped hair and now he floated a hand above the spikes as if to gather his thoughts. 'We're separated.'

Challis knew that from Lowry's file. Mrs Lowry had taken out an intervention order on her husband last year, and later left him and been given custody of their children. Lowry had joined an outfit called Fathers First and made a nuisance of himself. 'Sorry to hear that.'

Lowry flushed. 'Look, am I under arrest? Are you going to charge me or what?'

Challis smiled without much humour. 'We'll see,' he said, and returned to his car, hoping it would start and not let him down with Lowry watching from his shop window.

The police station was on two levels; offices, cells, canteen and interview rooms on the ground floor, and conference rooms, the Crime Investigation Unit and a small gym on the first floor. Challis entered by the back door and headed for his pigeonhole in the corridor behind the front desk. He reached in, took out a sheaf of memos and leafed through them.

Most he shoved into the overflowing bin nearby, but paused in futile wrath over one from Superintendent McQuarrie, addressed to all senior officers: *The Assistant Commissioner will be asking some tough questions this year, and you will be expected to deliver balanced budgets. The budget situation is taking over as the main management challenge for the region, and so every order, every item of expenditure, will be reviewed with a critical eye.*

Challis had lived through budget constraints before. The usual result was that paper expenditure skyrocketed, to deliver the ever-increasing flood of memos, while the money for torch batteries, interpreters, pens, cleaning materials or calls on mobile phones dried up. More seriously, any squad could be charged for using the services of another squad, access to telephone records of victims and suspects had been reduced, and there was only minimal funding for phone taps. Crime fighting by committee, that was Challis's view.

He turned and made for the stairs that led to the first floor. 'Hal,' said a voice before he reached them.

He swung around. Senior Sergeant Kellock – a bull of a man, befitting his surname, and the uniformed officer in charge of the station – was beckoning him. Challis nodded a greeting and entered Kellock's office. 'This came for you,' Kellock said.

It was a parcel the size of a wine carton wrapped in heavy brown paper. Complicated feelings ran through Challis when he saw the senders' names: his dead wife's parents. He was fond of them, and they of him, but he'd been trying to draw away from them. 'Thanks,' he muttered.

'Mate, we're not a postal service,' said Kellock.

Challis knew that the parcel would have been delivered to the front desk. There was no reason, other than nosiness, for Kellock to take charge of it. Profoundly irritated, Challis carried the box upstairs to the first floor.

The Crime Investigation Unit was a vast room of desks, filing cabinets, phones, wall maps and computers. Ellen

Destry, the CIU sergeant, was having a half-day off work; Scobie Sutton, one of the DCs, was spending the morning in court. A third DC was taking a week-long intensive course in the city, and the fourth was on holiday. It was going to be quiet in CIU today.

Challis's own office was a partitioned cubicle in one corner, offering a dismal view of the parking lot behind the building. Here he dumped the box on the floor, switched on his office computer and checked his e-mail. There was only one message, from Superintendent McQuarrie, who wanted him to write a paper on regional policing. Challis printed it out and tried to make sense of the guidelines, a low-level fury burning in his head. Was there a clear distinction between a 'mission statement', an 'aim' and an 'objective'? Words, meaningless words, that's what policing had become.

Fed up, he brewed coffee and reached behind him to the dusty radio on his shelf of law books, police regulations and tattered Manilla folders. With the 9 a.m. news murmuring in the background, Challis fired up his laptop, got out his notes, and brooded over his report for the coroner on the Navy shooting.

But really, he was putting off the inevitable. Retrieving the parcel from the floor, he tore open the paper and found a sealed cardboard box with a note taped to the lid.

> *Dearest Hal,*
> *These things of Angie's arrived here a few days ago. Apparently they'd been in storage at the jail and overlooked. We*

thought you should have them to do with as you wish. Take care, dear Hal. We often think of you.

Love,
Bob and Marg

Challis opened the lid and looked at the sad remnants of his wife's life: paperback novels, a brush and comb, makeup, a pocket-size album of photographs, a wristwatch, the clothes she'd been wearing when arrested. He swallowed and wanted to cry. And then, as the habits and imperatives of his days asserted themselves, he dumped the box and all of its contents in the bin.

Too soon to know if it was a gesture that meant anything.

He returned to his report. The phone rang. It was Superintendent McQuarrie, but a broken McQuarrie, not the dapper golfer and Chamber of Commerce toady.

4

According to the DC who greeted Challis at the murder scene, the 000 switchboard had given the job to Rosebud police. Suspecting a prank, a kid playing around with her mother's mobile phone, they had eventually sent two uniforms in a divisional van. The uniforms had taken one look at the scene, secured it and called in Rosebud detectives. Then the child, remarkably calm but smeared in her mother's blood, had revealed that her grandfather was a policeman, an important policeman, Superintendent McQuarrie.

'I mean,' the Rosebud DC said, 'we had to contact him.'

Challis nodded. He gave his name to the uniformed constable who was keeping the attendance log at the head of the driveway, and paused for a moment to take in the wider scene. Sealed road, with various police vehicles, including his own, parked on the grassy verges. There was also a hearse from the firm of undertakers on contract to the government to deliver suspicious-death cases to the lab. Gum trees, suffering from dieback, pittosporums, pine trees and