PRAISE FOR GARRY DISHER

'Garry Disher is one of Australia's most admired novelists. . . A superb chronicler of cop culture'
Sunday Times

'A terrific plot, nuanced characters and solid procedures, served up on refreshing new turf. Done with smooth, assured mastery'
The New York Times

'Disher keeps the various narrative plates spinning with the dexterity of a master storyteller for an engrossing tale of characters who range from morally ambiguous to wholly indefensible'
Guardian

'Only a writer at the top of his game like Garry Disher could control such a colourful cast and complex plot while maintaining an atmosphere of paranoid suspense'
The Times

'Disher's ability to create atmosphere and threat in the wide open spaces of South Australia rivals James Lee Burke's in the bayous of Louisiana, and that is no small feat. . . Here, Disher underlines his exceptional talent'
Daily Mail

'[The] characterisation is every bit as acutely realised as one expects from this award-winning writer'
Financial Times

ALSO BY GARRY DISHER AND AVAILABLE FROM VIPER

The Way It Is Now
Sanctuary

THE PAUL HIRSCH MYSTERIES
Bitter Wash Road
Peace
Consolation
Day's End
Mischance Creek (2026)

THE HAL CHALLIS INVESTIGATIONS
The Dragon Man
Kittyhawk Down
Snapshot
Chain of Evidence
Blood Moon
Whispering Death
Signal Loss

CHAIN OF EVIDENCE

GARRY DISHER

First published in Great Britain in 2025 by Viper,
an imprint of Profile Books Ltd
29 Cloth Fair
London
EC1A 7JQ

www.viperbooks.co.uk

First published in Australia by The Text Publishing Company

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset in Freight Text by MacGuru Ltd
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.

Our product safety representative in the EU is Authorised Rep Compliance Ltd., Ground Floor, 71 Lower Baggot Street, Dublin, D02 P593, Ireland. www.arccompliance.com

ISBN 978 1 80522 448 8
eISBN 978 1 80522 449 5

For Crux

1

Down here in Victoria he was the Rising Stars Agency, but he'd been Catwalk Casting up in New South Wales, and Model Miss Promotions in Queensland before that. Pete Duyker figured that he had another three months on the Peninsula before the cops and the Supreme Court caught up with him again, obliging him to move on.

'Gorgeous,' he said, firing off a few shots with the Nikon that had no film in it but was bulky and professional-looking, and emitted all of the expected clicks and whirs. For his other work he was strictly digital.

The mother simpered. 'Yeth,' she said, reminding Pete of that old Carry On movie, the doctor with his stethoscope saying 'Big breaths' and the tarty teenager in his consulting room saying, 'Yeth, and I'm only thixteen.' He fired off a few more shots of the woman's five-year-old. The brat's lank hair scarcely shifted in the breeze on the top of Arthur's Seat, the waters of the bay and the curve of the Peninsula spreading dramatically behind her, the smog-hazed towers

of Melbourne faintly visible to the north-west. 'Just gorgeous,' he reiterated, snapping away.

She wasn't gorgeous. That didn't matter. Plenty of them *were* gorgeous, and had factored in to his plans over the years. This one had skinny legs, knobbly knees, crooked teeth and a ghastly pink gingham outfit. It hadn't taken Pete very long to figure out that a mother's love is blind, her ambition for her youngster boundless.

'Golden,' Pete said now, fitting a wide-angle lens from one of his camera bags, the bag satisfyingly battered and worn, a working photographer's gear. 'That last shot was golden.'

The mother beamed, a bony anorexic in skin-tight jeans, brilliant white T-shirt, huge, smoky shades and high-heeled sandals, her nod to the springtime balminess here on the Peninsula. Hers was the ugly face of motherhood, the greed naked. She was seeing a portfolio of flattering shots of her kid and the television work that would flow from it, all for a once-only, up-front charge of $395 plus a $75 registration fee. In about a week's time she'd start to get antsy and call his mobile, but Pete had several mobile phones, all of them untraceable clones and throwaways.

He looked at his watch. He'd led her to believe that he had to rush back to Melbourne now, to update a client's portfolio, the kid who played little Bethany in that Channel 10 soap, *A Twist in Time*.

'You'll hear from me by next Friday,' he lied.

'Thankth,' said the mother as the kid scratched her calf and Pete Duyker drove off in his white Tarago van, erasing them from his mind.

The time was 2.45, a Thursday afternoon in late September. The primary school in Waterloo got out at 3.15, so he was cutting it fine. There was always Friday, and the weekend, but the latter was risky, and besides, the impulse was on him now, fine and urgent, so it had to be today.

He drove on, heading across to the Westernport side of the Peninsula, winding through townships and farmland, many of the hillsides terraced with vineyards and orchards. Not entirely unspoilt, he thought, spotting an ugly great faux-Tuscan mansion, and here and there whole stands of gum trees looked dead. Pete racked his brains: 'dieback' it was called. Some kind of disease. But the thought didn't dent his equilibrium, not on such a clear, still day, the air perfumed and the Peninsula giddy with springtime growth all around him: orchard blossom, weeds, tall grass going to seed beside the road, the bottlebrush flowering.

He reached the coastal plain and soon he was in Waterloo. Pete was a bit of a sociologist. He liked to get the feel of a place before he went active, and he already knew Waterloo to be a town of extremes: rich and poor, urban and rural, privileged and disadvantaged. You didn't see the wealthy very often. They lived in converted farmhouses or architectural nightmares a few kilometres outside town or on bluffs overlooking the bay. The poor lived in small brick and weatherboard houses behind the town's couple of shopping streets, and in newer but still depressing housing estates on the town's perimeter. You didn't see the poor buying ride-on mowers, reins and bridles, lucerne hay or $30 bottles of the local pinot noir: they ate at McDonald's, bought Christmas

presents in the $2 shops, drove huge old inefficient V8s. They didn't cycle, jog or attend the gym but presented to the local surgeries with long-untreated illnesses brought on by bad diets, alcohol and drug abuse, or injuries from hard physical labour in the nearby refinery or on some rich guy's boutique vineyard. They were the extremes. There were a lot of people who ticked over nicely, thank you, because the state or local governments employed them, or because rich and poor alike depended on them.

Earlier in the week Pete had driven into town via the road that skirted the mangrove flats, but today he drove right through the centre of Waterloo, slowly down High Street, reflecting, spotting changes and tendencies, making connections. He wouldn't mind betting the new gourmet deli might flourish, but wasn't surprised to see For Sale signs in the camping and electronic shops, not with a new K-Mart in the next block. It made him mad, briefly. His instincts were to support the little man.

He drove on, passing a couple of pharmacies, a health food shop, bakery, ANZ bank, travel agency, Salvation Army op-shop, the library and shire offices, and finally High Street opened onto the foreshore reserve: extensively treed parkland, picnic tables, skateboard ramps, a belt of mangroves skirting the bay, and an area given over to the annual Waterloo Show, not busy today but all of the rides and sideshows would be in full swing on the weekend.

Pete passed the Show, making for the far end of the reserve, where he parked beside a toilet block that he'd scouted out earlier in the week: grimy brick, odiferous, no disguising

what it was. He went in, checked that he was alone, and changed into a grey wig, grey paste-on moustache, white lab coat and black horn-rims with clear lenses. Then he drove to Trevally Street and parked where the sunlight through the plane trees cast transfiguring patterns over himself and his van. He wasn't a smoker, but had been known to toss other men's cigarette butts at a scene, to throw off the cops.

Now Pete waited. He waited by the van's open door, a clipboard in his hand. Time passed. Maybe she had detention, or after-school care, or was dawdling on the playground. He walked to the corner and back. Surely she'd be along soon, dreamily pumping the pedals of her bike, helmet crooked on her gleaming curls, backpack bumping against her downy spine.

Of course, she might not come, but twice now he'd watched her take this detour after school. Rather than ride straight home she had made her way along Trevally and down to the waterfront reserve, to the magic of the Waterloo Show, with its dodgem cars, Ferris wheel, the Mad Mouse ride, the ghost train, fairy floss on a stick. The Show was a magnet to all kinds of kids, but Pete had chosen only one kid. He paced up and down, the van door partly open, listening to the bees in some nearby roses.

But then she appeared. Just as he'd imagined. He stood and waited as she approached.

Finally she was upon him and he stepped into her path, saying, 'Your mum was taken ill. She wants me to take you to her.'

She gave him a doubting frown, and quite rightly, too, but

his lab coat spelt doctor, nurse or ambulance officer, and he was counting on her natural impulse to be at her mother's side. 'It's all right,' he said, glancing both ways along the street, 'hop in.' If necessary, he'd show her the fish-gutting knife.

She dismounted prettily from the bike and her slender fingers played at her arched throat, undoing the buckle of her helmet. Pete was overcome. When she got into a fluster with the helmet, her backpack and a small electronic toy she had hanging from a strap around her neck, he itched to help her get untangled.

'Would you like a drink?' he said, when she was buckled into the seatbelt and bike, bag and helmet were on board. They'd both forgotten the toy, which lay on the grassy verge alongside a crooked brick fence. 'Lemonade,' he explained, shaking an old sports drink bottle. 'Do you like lemonade?'

She took the bottle. He watched the motions of her throat. 'Thirsty girl,' he said approvingly.

He started the engine. He could see that she would start to fret before the Temazepam took effect. She'd want to know where her mother was and where he was taking her.

But, astoundingly, that didn't happen this time. 'Oh, what a cute puppy,' she gushed.

Puppy? What puppy? Pete followed her gaze, and sure enough, some mutt of a dog lay curled on the old sleeping bag he kept in the back, one drowsy eye on the girl. It beat its tail sleepily, gave a shuddering sigh.

Must have jumped in when my back was turned, Pete thought. He assessed things rapidly. If he ejected the dog

now, he'd upset the girl. The dog would ease the girl's mind. Ergo...

'Where are you taking me?'

'To see your mum.'

Frown. 'But she went up to Melbourne,' the kid said, as if she'd only just remembered it. 'To the races. She'll be back late.'

'She had an accident on the freeway,' Pete said.

The girl didn't buy it. 'Let me out,' she mumbled, already feeling the Temazepam.

They were clear of the leafy grove by now and on the access road, with cars, kids wobbling home on their bikes and a knot of people yarning and eating ice creams at the bench seats outside the only corner shop in this part of Waterloo. Pete concentrated. The girl, fading rapidly, turned heavy eyes to her side window and mouthed 'Help me' at Mrs Elliott, the library aide at her school, who had stopped by for a litre of milk. Mrs Elliott gave her a cheery wave and disappeared, and soon Pete had, too.

That was Thursday.

2

Friday was Sergeant Ellen Destry's first morning stretched out in Inspector Hal Challis's bed. Challis wasn't in the bed, but she lay there convinced that some trace or imprint of him lingered.

Six o'clock, according to the bedside clock, and sufficiently light outside for her customary walk, but to hell with that. She closed her eyes, giving herself up to daydreams and fugitive sensations, and the real world retreated. Challis's house was an old-style Californian bungalow on two acres of grass along a dirt back road a few kilometres inland of Waterloo, and he'd asked her to mow the grass while he was away, for the spring growth was particularly rampant this year, but the mowing could wait. The final summations in the Supreme Court trial of Nick Jarrett were expected later, but not until early afternoon. And so Ellen Destry lay there, barely moving.

The next thing she knew it was 8.30 and she was awakening from a dream-filled, stupefying sleep. Her limbs were

heavy, head dense, and surroundings alien. She groaned. When she moved it was sluggishly, and she couldn't figure out how to adjust the shower temperature. She dozed under the stream of water, and then remembered that Challis's house ran on rainwater, not mains water, so she cut the shower short. 'Stop the world, I want to get off,' she said to the misted mirror. Her neck wound looked raw and nasty, even though it had happened months ago, a graze from a hired killer's 9 mm Browning.

Her first breakfast in Challis's house was scarcely any easier. The coffee came too weak from his famous machine and she couldn't make sense of how he'd arranged his cupboards and drawers. Finally, as she spooned up her muesli – organic, from High Street Health, two hundred metres down from the police station in Waterloo – she realised that she missed the sounds of human habitation. She'd had neighbours when she'd lived in Penzance Beach, the next town around from Waterloo. She'd lived with her husband and daughter, for God's sake. They'd created a comforting background murmur of voices, slammed doors and morning radio. But that house was sold now, she was estranged from her family, and reduced to this, housesitting for her boss.

Standing in for him at work, too. Challis, head of Peninsula East's Crime Investigation Unit, was away for a month, maybe longer. Family business. He seemed to think that she was perfectly capable of coping until he got back, but, in her worst moments, Ellen found herself biting her bottom lip. She felt an ever-present, low-level anxiety. Her everyday work as a CIU detective often involved up to a dozen cases

at a time: some small, some middling, none very large, but the point was that she managed. But as temporary *head* of CIU, the job seemed enormous. She just knew that her male colleagues expected her to fail. Maybe I'm depressed, she thought. She should speak to the naturopath who gave free consultations in High Street Health, go on a course of St John's wort.

She glanced at Challis's wall calendar, hanging next to a cork pin board, hoping that its rows of unmarked days might give her a sense of security. False security. She moved her gaze to the photos pinned to the board. They showed Challis with the old aeroplane he was restoring. A weird hobby. Still, it was a hobby. What interests did she have, outside of work?

Sometimes it's the little things that set the world right again. She moved her breakfast things out onto the deck, where the morning sun drenched her. Presently the wood ducks wandered into view, a male, a female and seven ducklings – down from ten ducklings, owing to a fox, according to Hal. They paid her no mind but foraged through the flowering grasses that passed for a lawn out here, far from town.

Another reason not to do the mowing yet. She stretched, wondering if Challis liked to breakfast in the sun. She tried to picture it. She saw toast, coffee and a newspaper. Curiously, she didn't see a woman. There had been women, but he sat alone, and she was thinking about that when the phone rang. It was Scobie Sutton, one of the detective constables under her command. 'Ellen? We've got a missing child.'

Ellen wanted to say, 'So?' Kids went missing every day. It

was a job for uniform, not CIU. Instead she said, 'How bad is it?'

'Katie Blasko, ten years old, missing since yesterday.'

'*Yesterday?* When were we notified?'

'Uniform were notified an hour ago.'

Ellen closed her eyes. She would never fathom how careless, vicious or stupid some parents could be. 'Be there as soon as I can.'

Katie Blasko lived in a house on Trevally Street in Waterloo, a few blocks from the mangrove flats and the yacht basin. The house was small, a yellowish brick-veneer structure with a tiled roof and rotting eaves. Ellen met Scobie at the front gate. The detective was wearing one of the funereal suits that exaggerated his earnestness and awkward, stick-figure shape. Two uniformed constables, Pam Murphy and John Tankard, were doorknocking in the distance.

'What can you tell me?' Ellen said.

Scobie flipped open his notebook and began a long, sonorous account of his findings. Katie Blasko had attended her primary school the previous day, but hadn't been seen after that. 'There was some mix-up. She was supposed to stay at a friend's house last night.'

Ellen copied the relevant names, addresses and phone numbers. She glanced at her watch. 'Head over to the school, check with her teachers and classmates. I'll catch up with you as soon as I've finished here.'

'Sure.'

Ellen stepped through a little gate and up to the front

door. The woman who answered was thin, nervy, dressed in jeans and a T-shirt. She looked wrung out and pleaded, 'Have you found her?'

Ellen shook her head. 'Not yet, but you mustn't worry, it's only a matter of time. Why don't we go inside and you can fill me in.'

'I already told the police everything. A guy called Scobie.'

Her voice was peevish and distraught, not that Ellen was blaming her, exactly. 'If you could just go over it again, Mrs Blasko,' she said gently.

Like, why did you wait so long before reporting your daughter missing?

Donna Blasko's sitting room was a pokey space dominated by a puffed-up sofa and a wide-screen TV. A six-year-old girl sprawled on the floor, stretching tiny, rubbery dresses and pants over the unresponsive plastic limbs of Polly Pocket dolls, alternately humming and talking to them. A cat twitched its tail on the carpet under a chunky coffee table. And, as Scobie had said, there was also a man, Donna Blasko's de facto, Justin Pedder. Ellen wasn't the least bit surprised to see that he was stocky, dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, with a shaven head to complete the picture. If you're a blue-collar male aged between twenty and forty in Australia, that's how you cloned yourself. You had no imagination at all. Nor did your parents, who named you Justin, Darren or Brad.

God I'm in a sour mood today, Ellen thought.

Donna sat beside Pedder, saying gracelessly, 'This is Justin.'

Ellen nodded. She'd be running his name through the

databases as soon as she got back to the station. As if he saw that in her eyes and wanted to deflect her, he scowled. 'You should be out there looking for Katie instead of questioning us again.'

He might have been expected to say that. It was in the script. Ellen stared at a yellow lava lamp on an empty shelf and said, 'I have constables doorknocking the area at this very moment. Now, according to Constable Sutton, you were both up in the city yesterday afternoon, correct?'

'Spring carnival,' said Pedder.

Horse racing. 'Back any winners?'

Pedder gave her a humourless smile. 'You want to see our betting slips, right? To prove we were there?'

Ellen went on. 'Katie has her own key?'

'We work, except for Thursdays,' Pedder said. 'Katie always lets herself in.'

'She makes herself a snack,' said Donna, 'does her homework and watches TV until we get home. The TV goes off then. She's not allowed to watch it after dinner. She's a good girl.'

And we're good parents, thought Ellen. 'And last night?'

'Me and Donna like to do stuff together on Thursdays,' said Pedder. 'Shopping up at Southland. A movie. The races. If we're going to be late, we arrange for Katie to stay at a friend's house. It's like her second home.'

Gets more love there than here, thought Ellen. She referred to her notes. 'The friend's name is Sarah Benton?'

'Yes.'

'And that's what you'd arranged for last night?'

'Yeah.'

'What time did you get home from the races?'

'About seven.'

'Seven in the evening. And you didn't call to see that she was all right?'

They shrugged as if to say: Why would we?

'But you did call this morning?'

'Yes,' said Donna, suddenly wailing, her face damp and ravaged. 'Sarah's mum said Katie wasn't there and hadn't been there and she didn't know anything about it.'

'But I thought you'd arranged it?'

Donna squirmed. 'Katie was supposed to ask Sarah if she could stay. She must've forgot to.'

Ellen liked to change tack swiftly. 'Do you live here, Mr Pedder?'

'Me?'

Ellen gazed about the room for other Mr Pedders. 'Yes.'

'Sure.'

'But this is Donna's house?'

He gazed at her bleakly. 'I get where you're coming from. Yeah, I've got a place of my own that no one knows about and I took Katie there and did her in.'

'Justin!' wailed Donna.

'Aw, sorry, love, but it's so fucking typical. Blame the bloke.'

'We wouldn't be doing our job if we didn't examine every avenue, Mr Pedder.'

'I know, I know, sorry I said what I said. Look, I was renting a flat until I met Donna.'

'You always spend your nights here?'

'You interested in my sex life now?'

'Answer the question, Mr Pedder.'

'He *lives* here,' asserted Donna. 'He's here every night.'

Ellen turned her gaze to Donna. 'Did that bother Katie?'

'No. Why should it? Justin's good to Katie, aren't you, Jus? Never hits her or anything. No funny business, if that's what you're on about.'

They were both staring at her hotly now. 'We have to ask these questions,' Ellen said.

According to Scobie Sutton's brief preliminary investigation, the neighbours considered Donna to be a reasonably good mother, but there had been a few boyfriends over the years. The police had been called to noisy parties a couple of times. Sarah Benton's mother claimed there was no point in trying to phone the Blasko household after about seven in the evening, for Donna and Justin were probably getting quietly stoned and never answered the phone. You'd leave messages but they'd never be returned. It was a common picture, in Ellen's experience. No real cruelty, just ignorance and benign neglect – and mothers putting their partners first, ahead of their children, afraid of being single again.

'Maybe Katie's little sister knows something?'

'Shelly?' said Donna, amazed. 'Shelly was next door, weren't you, love?'

The child continued to play. Ellen said, 'Next door?'

'Mrs Lucas. She likes to baby-sit Shell, but Katie can't stand her.'

Ellen was watching Pedder. Apparently struck by the

cuteness of the child playing on the floor, he reached out a flash running shoe and poked her tiny waist. The child battered his foot away absently. No fear or submission, Ellen noted. The child hadn't been introduced to her. Ellen had always introduced her own daughter, even when she was a toddler. It was good manners. Had she been taught good manners by her own parents? She couldn't recall. Then again, good manners were a matter of commonsense, surely.

I am sour today. She said pointedly, 'When you realised that Katie hadn't slept at Sarah's last night, what did you do?'

'Made a couple of calls.'

'Who did you call?'

'My mum,' said Donna. 'She lives up in Frankston.'

'You thought Katie was there? Why?'

Pedder exchanged a glance with Donna. 'Look,' he said, 'she sometimes runs away, all right?'

'Ah.'

'She always comes back.'

'She runs away from *you*?' Ellen demanded.

'No,' said Pedder stiffly.

'We usually track her down to me mum's or another of her friend's, but this time no one's seen her,' said Donna, tearing up swiftly and dabbing her eyes with a damp, crumpled tissue. There was a box of them beside her, a cheap, yellow, no-name brand from the supermarket.

'And so you called the police?'

'Yeah,' Pedder said.

'How many times has Katie run away before?'

'Not many. A few.'

'Do you fight with her? Argue? Smack her when she's naughty?'

'We've never smacked her.'

'Fights? Arguments?'

'No more than any other family.'

'How about Wednesday night, Thursday morning?'

'Nothing happened.'

'Does she ever spend time on the Internet?'

'When she's got a school project and that,' said Donna.

Pedder was quicker. 'Are you asking did she spend time in chat rooms? You think she met a paedo, a paedo's got her?'

'Is that what you think?'

'I'm asking you.'

'We'll need to look at any computers you have,' Ellen said. 'We'll give you a receipt.'

'Oh, God,' said Donna.

'We'll also need a list of all Katie's friends and acquaintances.'

Donna was sobbing now. 'You think she met some pervert on the Internet, don't you?'

'Very unlikely,' said Ellen soothingly. 'Has she ever wandered off before?'

'We already told you she does.'

'I don't mean running away; I mean is she a dreamer? Maybe she likes to explore creeks, the beach, farmland, deserted houses.'

'Not really.'

'Not the beach? I know I did when I was a kid.'

She hadn't done anything of the kind. She'd grown up in the hills. She meant that her own daughter had liked to explore the beach, back when she was little, back when Ellen and her husband and Larrayne had been a happy family.

'Maybe with her friends of a weekend, but she has to ask permission first,' said Donna, the responsible mother.

'You think she drowned?' said Pedder.

Donna moaned. Ellen gave Pedder a look that made him go pale. 'What about the area between here and the highway?'

'Katie's scared of snakes,' said Donna.

Larrayne had been, too.

They'd all run out of things to say. Ellen gathered her notes together and got to her feet.

'What do you think happened to my baby?' whispered Donna.

That was in the script, too: the words and the whispered voice. 'Kids go missing every day,' said Ellen warmly. 'They always turn up again.'

She glanced at Justin Pedder as she said it, warning him not to say the obvious.

3

It was now 11 a.m. Ellen was due at the Supreme Court by early afternoon. Saying goodbye to Donna Blasko and Justin Pedder, she called Scobie Sutton's mobile, and met him outside Katie Blasko's primary school. 'I'll have to leave it in your hands for a few hours,' she told him. 'It's possible that Katie simply ran away, but why would she stay away for this long? To be on the safe side, continue the doorknock, check with hospitals, contact family and friends. I'm going to see Kellock. We need more uniforms.'

'Thanks.' He shivered. 'Missing kid. I hate it, Ellen.'

Scobie Sutton was nuts about his own child, Roslyn, who was also aged ten. He could be a bore about it. 'Stay in touch during the day,' Ellen told him. 'Call or text me if you find anything.'

The police station was by the roundabout at the head of High Street. She parked at the rear and entered, heading first for her pigeonhole, where she collected a sheaf of letters and memos. She found Kellock, the uniformed senior sergeant in charge of the station, in his office. He was a barrel

of a man, his head a whiskery slab on a neckless torso. There were cuts on the hunks of flesh that were his hands. He tugged down his shirtsleeves self-consciously and scowled, 'Been pruning roses.'

She was about to say that she should have been mowing Hal Challis's grass, but stopped herself. She didn't want to broadcast the fact that she was staying in Challis's house. Just then, Kellock's desk phone rang. 'Be with you in a minute,' he said.

She sifted through her mail while he took the call. Most of it she'd bin; the rest was bound for her in-tray. One item enraged her. It was a memo from Superintendent McQuarrie: 'Owing to budgetary constraints, all of Peninsula Command's forensic testing will henceforth be carried out by ForenZics, an independent specialist laboratory based in Chadstone. Not only are ForenZics' fees significantly lower, their laboratory is closer and their promised turn-around time quicker than the state government's lab.' Ellen shook her head. She'd never heard of ForenZics. She and Challis had always worked with Freya Berg and her colleagues in the state lab.

Kellock snarled, 'They're all scum.'

Ellen glanced at him enquiringly. He put a massive hand over the receiver and said, 'It's Sergeant van Alphen. He's in the courtroom, says Nick Jarrett's family's been heckling and jeering.'

'Doesn't surprise me,' Ellen said.

Kellock ignored her, barking into his phone: 'I want a car stationed outside their house all night, okay?'

He listened to the reply, grunted, replaced the receiver

and said to Ellen, 'If the jury acquits, the Jarretts will come home and celebrate. If they convict, the Jarretts will hold a wake. Either way, it's not going to be much fun for us. Now, how can I help you?'

'Katie Blasko, aged ten, been missing since yesterday.'

She wasn't sure that Kellock had heard her. His face was like bleak wastes of granite, revealing no emotions, but under it he probably continued to be furious and vengeful about the Jarretts. Then there was a subtle shift. He twisted his mouth. She supposed it was a smile. With Kellock you couldn't be entirely sure, not until he spoke. 'You want some uniforms to help search?'

'If you can spare them.'

'You already have Murphy and Tankard. I can spare a couple more, maybe a probationer or two.'

Ellen grimaced. The perennial shortage of available police on the Peninsula affected them both. 'Thanks. If we don't find her soon, we'll need more bodies, more overtime.'

He nodded. 'I'll square it with the boss.'

He meant Superintendent McQuarrie. It was said that he was McQuarrie's spy, but that could be a good thing if he was also able to drum up support when it was needed. 'Thanks, Kel.'

'We'll find her, Ells, don't worry.'

Kellock was bulky and confident. Ellen felt a little better about everything.

Finally she headed up to the city, striking heavy traffic. It took her ninety minutes to reach Melbourne and then find a

car park near the Supreme Court. It was two o'clock by the time she entered the courtroom, and she was dismayed to see McQuarrie there.

'You're late, Sergeant.'

'Sorry, sir,' Ellen murmured, sliding onto the bench seat, her movements stirring the air, arousing faintly the odours of floor wax and furniture polish.

McQuarrie sniffed: a good sniffer, Ellen thought. He was a neat, precise, humourless man who professed a glum kind of Christianity, like many ministers in the federal government. She darted a glance past his costly dress uniform at Sergeant Kees van Alphen, who with Ellen had arrested Nick Jarrett all those months ago, and helped put the case together for the Office of Public Prosecutions. He winked; she grinned.

Finally she gathered herself, willed her racing pulse to settle. It soon became clear that she hadn't missed much of the prosecutor's final summation to the jury. He droned on, a man with almost no presence, when the trial of Nick Jarrett surely required prosecutorial outrage. Eventually, with a weak flourish, he finished.

Nick Jarrett's lawyer leapt to his feet, placed his hand on his client's shoulder, and said, 'Reasonable doubt, ladies and gentlemen.'

Ellen snorted. McQuarrie glanced at her sourly. So did the judge. She ignored them. Reasonable doubt? Nick Jarrett was twenty-four, a wiry, fleshless speed addict, his skin jumping today in a suit that might have come from the Salvation Army op-shop in Waterloo. Barely literate, but cunning, driven by amphetamines and base instincts, not

intellect. Young men like Nick Jarrett passed through the courts every day of the week. Owing to the drugs and the alcohol, they were vicious and unpredictable. They hurt people, and got hurt. They made stupid mistakes and got arrested. But not all of them ran over cyclists for sport.

One day in May, Nick Jarrett and his mate, Brad O'Connor, had been engaged in their latest enterprise, carjacking. They'd done it six times since March, and had developed a taste for it. What you did was, you hung around a car park, like the dusty overflow area of a hospital, somewhere there are no security cameras, and some woman comes along, blinded by tears because her husband's dying in intensive care, or joy because she's newly a grandmother, and you shove a blood-filled syringe in her face before she can buckle her seatbelt. Sometimes, for a laugh, you take her for a little ride to the middle of nowhere, and shove her out of the door.

The cars from the first five carjackings had never been found. Ellen suspected they'd been stolen to order by Nick and Brad, taken to a chop-shop or straight onto a shipping container, but that wasn't the issue before the court today. The issue here was vehicular manslaughter, and the police had impounded the sixth car, which had yielded some – admittedly not very compelling – forensic evidence.

What young Nick Jarrett liked to do, while driving his carjacked vehicle to who-knew-where, was play chicken with cyclists and pedestrians. He'd got pretty good at it, pretty deft with the brakes and the steering wheel. To give his victims an extra thrill, he liked to open his door at the last minute, watch those schoolkids and old ladies duck and

weave, throw themselves down on the bitumen. He'd always liked mucking around with cars. Never meant no harm by it.

But on 13 May he'd crossed a median strip and misjudged things a little. A lot, really. Tony Balfour, aged fifteen, on his way home from school. Everything to live for, said the newspapers. A young life cruelly snatched, etcetera. Not only that, he was the son of a popular civilian clerk employed at the Waterloo police station.

Ellen and van Alphen had gone for murder, but the OPP had reduced that to criminal negligence. After all, Nick had been driving under the influence of amphetamines and alcohol, to which he was addicted.

Now his defence lawyer had the nerve to argue reasonable doubt, and was doing a pretty good job of it, too, Ellen realised. She stiffened to see thoughtful nods on the faces of the jury. It had barely registered during the trial, but now the testimony of Nick's mate, Brad O'Connor, was looking pretty shaky. Yes, Brad had testified against his friend, but had he really done that to assuage his guilty feelings and see justice done? 'I don't think so,' Nick's lawyer thundered. 'Mr O'Connor was driven by malice and greed: malice because his de facto wife had developed a relationship with my client, and greed because he wanted the fifty thousand dollars reward offered by the victim's family. Put that together with the fact that no forensic evidence places my client in the car that struck the particular blow, and you have no alternative, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, but to find that a reasonable doubt exists, and find him not guilty.'

'I thought the forensic evidence proved it,' snarled

McQuarrie from the corner of his mouth. 'I thought this was sewn up, Sergeant Destry.'

'It links the vehicle with the victim but not to Jarrett, sir, but even so...'

McQuarrie gestured for her to shut up. A chill went through her. She risked a glance over her shoulder. The dead boy's mother and sister were weeping on one side of the courtroom; the Jarrett clan was taking up three rows of seats on the other. Rowdy and ever-present during the trial, they were now flashing grins at the prosecution team. They clearly thought a reasonable doubt had been shown to exist. The only exception was the clan's patriarch, Laurie Jarrett. Aged fifty, a hard, motionless presence, he was staring at Ellen as though he'd never had a thought or a feeling in his life.

4

The jury retired to consider its verdict, and now it was a waiting game. Hours. Days. Ellen left the court building and glanced at her watch. Mid-afternoon, but it was Friday, so the traffic would be hell wherever she went now. She bit her lip indecisively: return to Waterloo and the search for Katie Blasko, or catch up with her daughter?

She pulled out her phone. 'It's me, Scobie. Any news?'

'Not yet. What about you?'

'The jury's out. Look, I'd like to see Larrayne, since I'm in the city.'

He was silent; she could imagine his sombre face. 'I guess that's okay.'

She wanted to say that she didn't need his permission, then wondered if he were judging her for not racing back to help find Katie Blasko. 'I'll be back before five o'clock. I want to have another go at the parents.'

'All right.'

The man irritated her. She made another call. 'Hi,