

# **GIFT HORSE**

**Three Bob Creighton Novellas**

**By**

**J. L. HERRERA**

**‘HACK’**  
**‘HIGH HORSE’**  
**‘NOSE-TWITCH’**

The characters and events in these stories are fictitious.

## HACK

- i -

I was approached by two young men, Damien Botti and Mark Van Deen; I say ‘young’ but mid-thirties which seems young to an old slaggard like me. They run a private investigation agency in Surfers. One room, several computers, some filing cabinets, two dreary plastic potplants, and a chair for occasional clients.

I would’ve said straight out that I wasn’t interested in any proposition they might make me—except that I had heard on the grapevine they were both extremely good at what they did. Curiosity isn’t one of my besetting sins, if people still have besetting sins, and I won’t take the time out to ponder on what my various failings might be … apart from sloth … but I was mildly curious. What was their reputation founded on? Certainly not a good PR department. And not a smart office with a pretty girl at the front desk …

Their proposition was simple. Most of their work was to do with computer fraud and computer security—but occasionally they got asked to take on a case that would involve some legwork. Their usual response was to tell the caller to try another firm. But somewhere along the line they had heard of me, more specifically they had heard of me through the law firm where my daughter Rachel had worked for a while before heading off to Scotland, James & Montefiore, and the possibility of inviting me to do some occasional freelance work came up.

I can’t say I immediately jumped up and yelled Yippee! Just what I need! In fact I think I said I would pass on it, but thanks for thinking of me, etc etc. I wasn’t sure I would fit in with their ideas and way of working, I couldn’t imagine what kind of cases (and how difficult) they might want to pass on to me, just talking about legwork made me feel my age—and it would involve applying to become an agent which would mean, apart from the paperwork and background checks, having to front a magistrate like a naughty little boy and if said magistrate was feeling his oats then being grilled instead of rubber-stamped …

But having got the bit between their teeth they weren’t going to let go. They would do all the paperwork for me. I could have the use of a car as needed. The work would not be full on. And I could turn down any job I didn’t fancy. I said how about giving it a trial. I think I hoped that nothing would come up over the next six months and I would drop off their radar screen. No such luck.

“Can do, Bob.” Sign on the dotted line. “For sure we’ll get something interesting in any tick o’ the clock … ” Something along those lines.

Damien rang me at home only a couple of weeks later. Was I free to go to NSW on a case? I said I was. Then caution kicked in and I quickly backtracked. “Small case?”

“Don’t know, Bob. It’s mainly to do some security, check things over and advise—but there are some curious aspects to the case.”

I didn’t know it then but those words “curious aspects” was how he prefaced every offer of work. Obviously someone had told him to tickle my sense of curiosity any time he wanted to get me out of my balcony lounger. I agreed to come in in half-an-hour.

“Seeing as how you know a lot about horses, Bob,” was how he began his spiel as soon as I walked in, “—we thought you might like to go.”

“To put the record straight, Damien, I know next to nothing about horses. Except that they bite at one end and kick at the other. And I have the horrible suspicion you’re buttering me up so I’ll happily sit outside, night after night, minding someone’s million-dollar-stallion. In which case—why not suggest they get someone local?”

He shook his head. “No, it’s a school, Bob.” He leant forward, his brown eyes shining behind his glasses, and I wondered how long it would take his tiring enthusiasm to wear down to something manageable. “A girls’ school. It’s the kind of school where they’re allowed to bring their horses to school with them. And it seems the horses are getting attacked.”

“Someone doesn’t like little rich girls who can take their neddies to school? I mean, where will it end? Girls wanting to bring pet pythons or tanks of piranhas? Rows and rows of Alfa Romeos and Porsches parked outside the classroom windows?”

He gave his little tenor laugh. “It’s a special kind of school. New ideas and everything. I’ve written down the details. There’s also a voucher pad. Some maybe useful contacts. Your day sheets. And, well—” He cocked his head to one side.

“Where do the police come into it?”

“They don’t. They can lay charges if they find the perp. They’ve promised to drive by occasionally. But they’ve told the school it has to be responsible for its own security.”

“Mmmm.” I glanced down the printed sheet. “Okay. I’ll go and look around. Don’t expect miracles though. And how often would you like me to report in?”

“Whenever it suits you. You’ll be working directly with the client. So just get in touch if we can give you back-up help.”

I would never get rich working for them. But I appreciated the space and respect they appeared to be ready to give me.

And the “curious aspects”? Mustn’t leave them out of the equation.

Southcott House was a school with a difference. I didn't immediately see where the difference came in as I drove into the small car park beside an imposing house with a formal garden in front, just outside a small town in the upper reaches of the Hunter Valley. The sign said it was established in 1978, 'Education in Excellence'. Of course lots of schools put 'education' and 'excellence' into the one phrase. I got out stiffly, locked the car (you never know with kids these days), and went in a small side gate and up a walkway with wisteria keeping it cool and green. All very mellow and pleasant. But given the wide sprinkling of buildings, yards, tennis courts, and all the rest glimpsed behind the house I thought it would be the devil of a place to keep safe and secure.

A small woman, very plain and nondescript in a cardigan and tweed skirt and lace-up shoes, came out to meet me. "Mr Creighton?"

"Yes." I didn't like to make a stab at her. Teacher, domestic staff, head?

"I'm Amelia Southcott. Thank you for coming." She gave a small understated gesture towards a door opening into the front hall. There was no sign of the large boards schools like to hit you with, listing their famous pupils—or if they're thin on the ground—those fallen in various battles. But Southcott House wasn't old enough to have many of either. The hall held only a couple of chairs and a large urn of spiky flowers. We went into a front room with windows overlooking the garden and she motioned me to a comfortable chair.

"Now," she said briskly, "what do you know about our situation?"

"That you've had four attacks on horses, the last one proving fatal. Your security has been inadequate and the police haven't been very helpful."

"Yes."

"You might like to give me chapter and verse. How did you come to have horses here in the first place?"

"I went to a boarding school in Sydney as a child, as did my deputy Kristin. We both felt miserable having to leave our horses, and our riding, behind. I feel certain it undermined our school work. You have probably noticed, Mr Creighton, that the period between about ten and eighteen is the time when girls, and boys too, are most intensely passionate about the animals in their lives, their horses certainly, but also dogs, budgies, anything they feel closely bonded with. Yet this is also the most important period in their schooling when their ambitions and their place in the system is often *set*. If you force young people to choose then some will choose academic excellence and advancement. Some will choose their other interests. The bonds naturally begin to loosen as they get older and get interested in the opposite sex, in cars, in careers, in travel. But one day Kristin and I were discussing ways in which children could have both in this key period, their education and their animals. Neither of us were rich, we were both teachers in the public system, but my parents owned this property. We discussed our idea with them and they said the house would be mine anyway when they both died—but they would be willing to help turn

it into a school and help us run it and then it would become mine completely when they died.

“We had a long struggle with the Education Department to get our proposed curriculum accepted and we wondered if parents would be willing to pay the extra fees to board both daughters and horses. But it was a success from day one. Not least because a lot of parents felt that it was silly to help their daughters get riding and horse skills and then send them off to school and have to exercise and look after those horses. It appealed to their pragmatic side. And it is actually cheaper to keep their horses here for people who normally have to buy in all their feed and pay individual fees to veterinarians and farriers and so on.”

“So this year—how many students and how many horses?”

“We’ve got sixty-nine students and thirty-eight horses. We’ve also got two students with dogs and one with a cockatoo.”

“It starts to sound like Dr Doolittle’s establishment.”

For the first time this little mousy woman sitting opposite me smiled. I had been gradually revising my estimate of her. She might fade into the crowd but I had the impression there was a personality of steel behind that gentle façade. I’m not surprised she prevailed over the department’s bureaucrats.

“It was wonderful, Mr Creighton, it was truly a happy school and a high achieving one.”

“Oh, call me Bob.”

“Thank you. I’m Amelia. Though I do prefer the students to call me Ms Southcott. I leave it to the teachers to decide how they want to be addressed.”

“So are the horses purely an after-school activity?”

“No. We bring horses, animals, the environment, into every subject. Biology, physics, English, French, German, art, history … ethics, religion … ” She rose swiftly and went over to her bookcase and took down a beautiful coffee table tome called *The Horses of St Cyr*. I leafed through it obediently. “One of our students brought that out last year. The combination of horses and fluent French gave her an entrée into a world most Australian teenagers will never know about.”

I suppose I had been unenthusiastic about the whole thing, spoiled kids being allowed to play at horses instead of putting their little noses to the grindstone. I belong to the generation which *suffered* to get the 3Rs. We weren’t going to let the little pikers of today have it easy and pleasant. But I found myself willing to accept that students might manage to have their cake and eat it too … for a price of course.

I nodded. “So the girls bring their animals. I assume they have to do all the work with them, feeding, grooming, exercising.”

“Yes. We employ a groundsman and occasional contractors for specific jobs. When the first horse was slashed we thought it was an accident and we had Jim going over all the stables and yards and paddocks with a fine-tooth-comb. A protruding nail or a loose wire or something. But then the second horse was slashed and we called the police in. They told us to hire someone to do the rounds at night.

There wasn't anyone local but we found a man willing to patrol the place every night. But he only did five nights and then he said it was a waste of time and he was bored stiff and he left. I thought of offering him more money to stay on but I wasn't sure he was doing much of a job anyway. The next night another horse was slashed and we found it in a pool of blood. But when we called the vet to stitch it up and he'd washed the animal down he said most of the blood must've been brought in and splashed around. He thought someone was trying to scare the girls."

"How serious were these slashes?"

"Not very. One horse required twenty stitches. And even the calmest of horses soon gets spooked. We were afraid that both girls and horses would start to panic."

"These horses—were they inside stables or out in the paddocks?"

"They were all outside. The vet arranged to lend us a dog he'd been asked to put down because its owners were moving to Sydney. So we had him tied out near the stables. But that didn't answer either because he would bark at the girls. So we had to tie him right down near the rear fence and someone threw some poisoned meat over and the poor animal died in agony. The police pulled in two young hooligans who had been seen driving up behind the paddocks into the hills there. But they had a good alibi for that night."

I nodded. I had the awkward feeling that it was beginning to look like 'an inside job' though precisely what that might mean in a place like this—

"Then Jim said he would do rounds in the late evening for us so we agreed to that and he would go over and park himself quietly near the hay shed till about midnight. I also had a discussion with our lawyer as to our responsibilities to the animals in our care. He recommended increasing our insurance cover for the horses."

"You weren't afraid for the girls themselves?"

"Not really. We received no threats, no ransom notes, there was no suggestion of anyone hanging round the school. We asked all the girls and all the staff, even the casuals, if they'd heard or seen anything, if they knew of any squabbles or threats or jealousies ... because it is true that some girls have very valuable horses and others have animals which are just farm ponies."

"And your insurance ... might that be an attraction to anyone? To get a payout?"

"I don't think so. We've got the school and everyone in it insured with one company and the horses insured with a smaller company that specialises in all aspects of horse cover. And some of the horses are also insured individually by their owners. After all, accidents can happen anywhere. But we paid the vet bills and notified the families. We also said we would understand if anyone wanted to remove horses—or students for that matter. No one did. But then we had this horrible business ... "

For a moment she seemed too distressed to continue.

“It was carnage. It really was. I’ve never seen anything so ghastly. Like an open air abattoir. I suppose we hadn’t taken the attacks seriously enough. We should have paid the extra to get in a top security firm from Scone or wherever.”

“I’m not sure that would have worked. The perpetrators only had to back off for a month or two. You would decide the danger had passed and relax your security and bingo!”

“Yes, that is about what the police admitted to us.”

“So what happened that day?”

“It was the girl herself who found her horse. It still distresses me to remember that. She always went out early. She kept her mare in the south paddock by the road along with two other mares. The animal was a retired thoroughbred. The plan was for the girl to ride her here for six months then she would go to stud in the spring.”

“So a valuable animal?”

“Very. I have never compared the values of the different horses but certainly one of the most valuable horses on the place. Her owners also had her privately insured. The unfortunate creature had been completely disemboweled. There was blood and intestines everywhere. The police came. They taped off the scene. They found a knife and a saw at the scene. In the meantime I had rung the family and they came immediately. As soon as the police had finished and signed off on it they allowed the family to remove the animal for burial on their property so as not to distress the girls further. And with the police willing to state that there had not been a failure on anyone’s part the family was at least able to get the insurance. But they had lost the mare they had been pinning a lot of hopes on ... and, of course, it has had an adverse impact on the school and all of us. Several of the girls asked for counselling. That family took their daughter away the next day and another girl was removed a few days later. I had anxious parents ringing from everywhere.”

“What did you tell them?”

“The truth. We had not taken the matter seriously enough. Our security had not been adequate. We accepted that they might wish to take their daughters away, given that the police had held out no hopes of finding the person responsible.”

“So, first off, what had Jim done that night? When had he done his last rounds?”

“Just after twelve. He had seen the three mares in the paddock. Horses usually sleep standing up but they do occasionally lie down and he said that particular mare had been lying down over towards the fence. But the animal had turned to face him when he shone his torch around so he is certain it was still alive then. So the attack took place somewhere between twelve and about five when the breakfast staff come down. Some of the girls have formed an informal roster to share stable and grooming work, others prefer to do everything themselves. This girl, Lindi Marryat, always did all her own feeding and grooming and exercise. She was a little bit of a loner. Her only close friend was the girl who left a few days later.”

“Do you think that created any bad feeling? That she wasn’t sociable? That she didn’t join in to help others? That she had a valuable animal?”

“No, I really don’t think so. I know that is only my assessment. But she was a girl rather like me, the sort of person who tends to get overlooked. And I don’t think any of the girls resented her having a valuable mare because they knew it didn’t really belong to her and that she would have to relinquish the animal, come August.”

“Did you have any concerns about the girl for any other reason? Anything at all. That she wasn’t doing very well. That she was worried about things at home. It doesn’t matter how small.”

“Yes, we all had concerns about Lindi. A small school like this works best with a sense of community and working together. Unhappy loners may get overlooked in big schools. In small schools they raise difficult issues about participation and whether they should be encouraged, even pressured to join in more. What did you have in mind?”

“Well, it certainly looks as though the first attacks weren’t serious. Maybe someone was testing your security. Maybe someone wanted it to look like a general attack, some kind of hatred of horses, or vandalism against a private school, even just hooligans having a drunken night out. But it certainly looks as though that particular horse was always going to be their target.”

“I wondered,” she said slowly. “But why? They seem like decent people. I’ve never heard a word against them. The girl was always polite and pleasant to the others. And the insurance wouldn’t cover the real value of the mare. It’s only a small stud. To find and buy in another mare of that quality ...”

“If it was neither an insurance scam nor anyone trying to damage the owners—then it looks like a plan directed at the school. To destroy a farm pony would give you bad publicity. To destroy a valuable mare would give you front page notoriety.”

“Yes. We did have a hard time with the press. Articles implying we were secret occultists, blood sacrifices, a place for millionaires to park problem children ... I finally contacted the Press Council and asked them to respect the fact that these are schoolchildren who have been through a very traumatic experience. Jim was a tower of strength. He got two of his relatives to come and patrol for a few days and the police patrolled regularly. But we knew we had to do something for the long-term. And Jim knew some people who put him on to your firm.”

I didn’t think Damien would like to hear the office called *my* firm. “Then I think I had better start with Jim.”

My mind was buzzing with images of sirens, out-door lighting, trip-wires, snarling Dobermans, you-name-it, but the horses always seemed to get in the way. How do racing stables deal with security? I felt like a babe-in-the-woods in this unfamiliar field. I could suggest that Amelia and Kristin would be better served with a firm with expertise in this area ...

She may have been a mind-reader. She may have been one of those terrifying things: an eternal optimist. But Amelia turned to me as she took me down the hall

and said simply, "We do want security and safety—but what we really want is to find the person who did this terrible thing. I know it is asking you to do the impossible ..." She spread her arms in a slight understated gesture. "But, yes, we are hoping you can find the person."

— iv —

Jim proved to be a Maori bloke of about fifty. I immediately saw why they had put their trust in him. His slow-moving demeanour was backed up by shrewd eyes and muscles that wouldn't go down badly at a weightlifter's convention. If his relatives looked like him they probably helped give everyone a sense that things would soon be back to 'normal'. Jim had a little possie at the back of the laundry where he kept a ride-on lawnmower, various tools, an urn, a mobile phone, even an old computer, an extremely powerful spotlight run off a large battery, and a lot of brochures on installing various kinds of security systems. He was backed up by some casual help but he was the school's only permanent handyman and gardener.

"Take a pew." He indicated an old-leather-covered armchair. I sat down. "Tea? Coffee?" I said it'd been a long drive and a black tea would go down well.

"Yeah. Still, half your luck—living in Surfers."

I have mixed feelings about the place at times but I nodded. "It has its up-side."

He handed a rather stained mug over and took the lid off a tin of mixed creams.

"So—what's your take on everything?"

"People don't like this place. That's for sure."

"Because it's private? Expensive? All girls?"

"Nah. Because it's a success. I go down the pub some nights ... and I've heard the gossip. People round here reckoned the whole thing would fall flat. It took 'em a long time to get their ideas up and the place a going concern. And people waited for them to give up and sell up. Two dames, you see, Bob." I nodded cautiously. It wouldn't be the first time women were assumed to have no business nousse.

"Was there someone else hoping for the property when, or if, it came on the market?"

"Sure to be. Nice bit o' land. Good location."

I nodded again. But I had the feeling he was scratching round for motives. I found his Kiwi accent a bit hard to understand. But it was something else. I couldn't pin it down. He had a different idea but he wasn't sure whether to float it or not.

"Do you think it *has* damaged the school?"

"A bit. But the girl that left was no loss."

"And her friend that left—"

"That was a funny business. She didn't have a horse here. But her parents just turned up, said, 'pack your bags', and they took her away that same afternoon. She wasn't happy about going. I carried her bags down for her, weighed a ton I can tell you, sometimes I wonder what girls put in 'em, and she said to me, 'people don't understand what happened', but it was like she was still trying to puzzle it all out to herself. Then her dad just hussled her into the car before I could ask her anything.

And she said something about 'I'm sure it was the wrong horse' ... I didn't catch it. Then Amelia came out to say good-bye and the family drove off without so much as a wave. It was a bit odd. But I reckon they thought they were saving her from something." He shrugged his large shoulders.

"The wrong horse? What do you think she could've meant by that?"

"Everyone thought it was because that horse was valuable. But you know what I think? I reckon they grabbed it because it was asking for trouble, there it was down there, right by the fence, sitting duck."

"So if it was wrong—what might be right?"

He pondered on this for a long time.

"Well, nobody cared when that girl went. But what say they'd got the horse belonging to a really popular local girl? Someone who'd make the devil of a stink. But that family never made a peep, never complained, always said 'no comment' to the media. You'd think they'd want to get a bit of sympathy ... "

He shrugged again. I wondered if he'd ever played rugby. Those shoulders would carry all before them. Jim seemed a decent sort of bloke but he was making me feel puny.

Still, I was here to improve security first and foremost so I suggested we get stuck into that.

"Yeah. I got my nephews to come up from Newcastle but they went back yesterday. Amelia's paying me extra but there's limits. Still, know what I think, I reckon that'll be the last of it. I don't reckon they'll try again, not for a while."

Cold comfort.

He took me for a walk around all the sheds, stables, yards, garages, and paddocks. I made some notes on where it would be easiest for people to get in. But I have to say that nice post-and-rail fences may look good and keep horses in but they're a doddle for anyone wanting to get onto your property. Somehow I couldn't see Amelia agreeing to eight-foot-high netting topped with electrified razor-wire ...

I was shown automatic lighting, padlocks, fire extinguishers, the alarm system for all the 'human areas' and then he took me out the back and showed me where the butchery had been done. The area was still cordoned off with several metal posts and a heavy chain.

"The horse was either asleep, doped, or shot first." There was no sign of torn-up ground, panic, an attempt to escape.

"Could be. Cops found a knife and a saw out by the road. Covered in blood. But I heard on the grapevine there weren't any fingerprints. S'pose they had gloves. But, know what I reckon? I reckon they were professionals. Me, it'd take me hours to carve up a horse. Those buggers must've been in and out in twenty minutes."

"What makes you think that?"

"Well, I keep my eyes open, Bob. And I've noticed what traffic there is and what time. You'd have to time it to the minute to be sure no one saw you parked. I made a bit of a list. I'll hunt it out later. I reckon the cops probably asked around a

bit but I wouldn't guarantee those lazy sods did much. These days, soon as they hear you've got insurance, they back off."

"Do you know if the insurance company sent an assessor out?"

"Don't reckon so. Chicken-and-egg. Police sign off on it. No sign of a scam. So the companies pay out."

I nodded. I wondered if Jim had ever had a run-in. He sounded sourer than someone with an untouched pocket had any cause to be. But I had to agree. In principle. The more the police depend on the assessors and investigators and valuers the insurance companies employ the more the insurance premiums go up and the more the small thefts and cons and scams fall through the cracks. I thought my next visit had better be to the local cop shop. See whether it was staffed with keen-eyed dedicated incumbents or 'she'll be Jake'-type slobs.

The road out this way curled on up the timbered slope. I could see hoofprints along the verge.

"The girls go riding away from the school?"

"Sure. Every weekend they are allowed out in groups."

"So the girl and her horse went out that Saturday with the others, rode up into the hills behind the town?"

"I'd reckon so."

And some time during that night one, two, maybe even three people slipped through the fence and carved up one horse. I wondered. I'd seen girls in groups before now. There are always stragglers. They've got it down to a fine art. It was just possible something had happened on that afternoon ride. But I still came back to that vague feeling that this was 'an inside job'. I wasn't sure what I meant by that. But someone had known exactly what security arrangements were in place and what was the best time to slip in safely. Professional. Very professional. One person inside. One or more outside. I added the local vet to my list of must-see people. How professional was professional?

— v —

The school was on a side road, a little sort of billabong leaving the highway and returning to it. The town was like most country towns, though sprucer and more attractive than many. I drove through keeping an eye out for a sign saying 'Police' and found myself heading away from town again. Obviously it was tucked back from the main drag. But about half-a-kilometre on the other side I saw a sign saying 'Tindall's Veterinary Hospital'. I slowed and turned in. Just a square brick house with a square brick building behind it, an open area with a sign saying 'Client Parking', a horse float, several yards, one containing a small donkey, and the whole thing set in paddocks with small clumps of trees for shade. It too looked spruce but not exactly bustling. I drove in and could hear some chooks out the back. A door into the rear building said 'Ring and Wait'. I did so. I waited and waited. Finally a girl of about sixteen came panting up the side of the building, saw me, and said a puffed "Oh!" Maybe customers, oops clients!, weren't very common round here?

“Can I help you?” She looked at me, then at my car, I suppose for a clue to my kind of animal problem.

“I wondered if the vet could spare me ten minutes?”

“I wouldn’t think so,” she said candidly. “He’s sewing up a cow. Can I help you? Did you want to bring an animal in?”

“No.” I took out my wallet which now sports one of my old cards which says ‘Detective-Inspector Robert Creighton (Ret’d)’ in one window and ‘Botti & Van Deen Investigation Agency’ in the other window. It had the result of daunting her. She put one hand to her mouth and stared at me. Her nails were cut abnormally short, for a teenage girl, and I wondered if she was a nail-biter. “I was hoping to grab a few minutes to talk to him about the case with the horse over at the Southcott school.”

“Oh!” She kept her hand to her mouth. Then a change seemed to come over her. It wasn’t anything she or her boss had been doing. She was safe. “Maybe I can help you. He talked to me about it.”

“If you’d like to.” I had no idea what kind of maturity or inside knowledge she might have. But if she held the fort when the vet was out then presumably she was reasonably capable.

She took me into a very small and cluttered office with two stackable chairs. She waved me to one and sat down squarely on the other like someone called into court as a witness in an important case. “It was really awful, wasn’t it? And the police didn’t do anything. We put in some booby traps. Brian said he wasn’t going to get caught out like the school was. Who do you think did it?”

“Well, unless the horse was asleep or drugged, then someone very fit and with a knowledge of horses.”

“Oh, the horse was drugged for sure. But the police didn’t take any blood. Brian said why didn’t they and they said they could see from a mile off that the poor thing was dead.”

“Why do you feel so sure?”

“Horses are light sleepers. If you stopped a car right there near the fence and climbed through they’d be sure to hear you.”

“What if the horse knew the people? Would that make a difference?”

She wasn’t good at hiding her feelings. I could picture her bursting into tears if she had to tell a client their animal had died. Now her big blue eyes with lots of black make-up sort of widened and stared. I didn’t know the idea would come to someone as a revelation.

“Yes.” She sort of let it out on a long breath. “But the horse was drugged as well. They would need to be sure.”

“You’re racing ahead of me. I gather you’re not thinking of some local thugs that get kicks out of attacking animals.”

“I don’t remember another case like it. Not the same. There was someone poisoning dogs about two years ago. And someone shot a prize bull. But this is different, isn’t it?”

I agreed with her assessment.

After she had apparently weighed more comments up in her mind she said carefully, “It was really strange. The way they came so quickly.”

“The police?”

She gave me a look that suggested I was a bit dumb. “Heck no! The people from the stud, I mean. They came straight away with a truck with a winch. It only took them about ten minutes to slip a canvas hoist under the animal and get it on to the truck. They told Brian they’d get their own vet out to check on it. The cops never said anything, never tried to stop them.”

“I understand the police found a knife and a saw.”

“That was just … planted. Brian said you could see they’d used some sort of axe or machete to break the horse’s ribs and something else to drag the guts out.”

“I hope the poor bloody animal really was dead or unconscious before they did this.”

She fell back into a look of sympathy and distress. “Yeah, I hope it was. Brian said it was.”

“So what are you suggesting?”

“You know, I’ve lived around here all my life.” I didn’t know but I nodded. “I get to hear when there’s been something on, you know, some kind of rave up. I’ve got two brothers.” She was obviously implying they were young rips and into all the local mischief.

“So if it wasn’t a local crime … ”

“I’ll bet it was the family themselves. I’ll bet they did it.”

“Why do you think that?”

“People have forgotten now. But I heard all about it. My mum and dad knew what was going on.”

“Heard what?”

She gave me a don’t-you-know-anything look. I felt I should apologise for being ignorant of local gossip.

“The Marryats. She killed her husband. Everyone knows that.”

“You’re talking about Lindi Marryat’s mother?”

“Whatever her name is, yeah.”

“And this is common knowledge around town?”

She shrugged. I could see her mentally backtracking from her confident ‘everyone’. She gave her short blonde hair a slight toss. “Yeah, everyone that’s lived round here long enough.”

“How far from here is the Marryat stud?”

“Dunno. Say fifty kilometres, maybe a bit more.” She looked up at the big clock on the office wall. “I guess I’d better go and do my rounds. Do you want to come back and see Brian later?”

I hesitated. The likelihood of Brian Tindall being equally forthcoming wasn’t high. I said I’d probably come back in a day or two. In the meantime, if Brian wanted to pass on anything or if she thought of anything else, they could get me on my mobile. I don’t like mobile phones. I think they’ve given the crooks an unfair advantage. But I had succumbed to pressure.

As I drove away I wondered what weight to give to the girl’s information. If Mrs Marryat, Lindi’s mother and presumably the horse’s owner, had killed her husband then surely that was a factor worth entering into the equation. Maybe the husband’s family had run a campaign against the murdering wife and this was just one more manifestation?

— vi —

The station was on a street corner, next to the small grey concrete slab that was the Commonwealth Bank (though people probably thanked their stars that this small hot-box had remained in town instead of being flicked into the ether where dead branches go), and facing the primary school. It had a deserted look but I had hardly locked my car when the local incumbents drove in the narrow lane by the station and got out. A very tall man in his forties; a shorter youngster already turning into podge. The tall man raised a finger. “Be with you in a tick.” They got several shopping bags out of the boot and carried them in. Was life here so quiet that they nipped down and got the week’s groceries in mid-afternoon? Or was this evidence in a case? I followed them inside. They dumped the bags behind the counter and said, “What’s your trouble?”

“I’m Bob Creighton.” I showed my cards. “I’ve been asked to advise on extra security at Southcott House.”

“About time too. Greg Blow,” the tall man held out a hand, “and Terry.” The younger man followed suit. At least I hadn’t been faced with the sort of suspicious not-on-my-patch business some of my ex-colleagues give me. “That place was an accident waiting to happen,” he went on rather lugubriously.

“But it wasn’t an accident.”

“Figure of speech.”

“Have you ever had a similar sort of case?”

“Not that I can remember. Occasional bit of nonsense with a few of the local hoons. But we’d never seen anything like it.”

“What was your take on the reason behind it?”

“Oh, it’s an insurance scam. Sticks out a mile. We left it to the company to investigate if they don’t want to pay out. Last I heard they were going to cough up.”

“Did you get enough evidence at the scene to pin it on anyone?”

“Afraid not. They left a knife and a saw but they must’ve used gloves. And there were no tyre prints or footprints from the road in. They must’ve got into the

paddock further up. Don't reckon we'll ever pin it on anyone unless someone blabs."

"But if you think the owners set it up I imagine you've been putting them through the third degree."

"Not on our patch. We passed our info on."

Their easygoing friendliness had duped me. I was up against a brick wall with a happy face aerosoled on it.

"I heard on the grapevine the horse was drugged. Stands to reason of course. Flighty things, racehorses. But I wonder if you got any hint on whether it was a professional hit from the drug used."

"Not our business, mate. The family said they would get their own vet in to do an autopsy."

"Did they pass the results on?"

"Not to us. But they probably gave it to the insurance bods."

I nodded. It was possible that other people were careful, wide-ranging leave-no-stone-unturned conscientious investigators. People accuse insurance companies of doing everything in their power to avoid paying out. Even if the police were slack there might be a keen-eyed sleuth somewhere in the equation.

"I've also heard on the grapevine that the owner of the horse killed her husband. That is unusual surely?"

"You've got the wrong end of the stick there, mate. Very nice lady, Marnie Marryat. Wouldn't hurt a fly. No, her fella died years ago. A burglary. He got in the way by the look of things. The family had a fair bit of cash in the house that night. Someone got in."

"She was never suspected?"

"Don't reckon so. A bit of gossip that she had another bloke tucked away. But it turned out that the other bod that occasionally came by the property was her brother."

"I see. Have you been here long?"

It was more likely to be the truth than a teenager's passed-on gossip. But there *was* something. Just the faintest sense of stepping back. Greg Blow didn't want to get into a long discussion on Marnie Marryat. For all I knew he might fancy her himself.

"Three years. Anyway we'd best be getting on. Tell that Southcott dame to pay for some decent security. She charges enough."

"I'll tell her. So you think there might be more attacks?"

"Could be. Who can say? Get some sicko that gets a kick out of blood and guts—" he shrugged. "You never know."

"Did it strike you as a professional job? A meatworker for instance. Or a vet?"

"Hard to say. There was that much blood and mess it was hard to tell."

The younger cop finally got to have his say. "You've never seen such a mess. Hell, it was worse than some of the things I've seen on the roads."

“It was the school that rang you?”

“Yeah. They must’ve rung the owners too. They turned up soon after we got there. Don’t know who rang Brian Tindall. That’s the local vet.”

Which suggested that the cops had been extremely slow—or the Marryats had been extremely fast.

— vii —

The school had arranged for me to have the bedroom with the best view over the stables. One of the teachers had obviously been urged to give up her small home-from-home. And I had the use of a small room downstairs which also contained a piano, several music stands, a large cupboard and several metal chairs. Amelia introduced me to Kristin, a decisive-looking woman with iron-grey hair and spectacles on a chain. Anyone seeing the two of them together would be inclined to think Amelia was the figurehead and Kristin the power behind the throne. But I had spent long enough with Amelia to feel I was in the company of a very resolute person. She would fight to the death to keep her school’s reputation untarnished. I had no idea what its financial status might be. But I didn’t get the feel of any frills or waste. Damien had tracked down a bit of background on it for me. And its academic record got plenty of independent kudos. My first impression—of a place where young wealthy women played with their ponies and didn’t take their schoolwork very seriously—obviously wasn’t the truth. Or if it was then it was only a part of it.

Amelia said she had told everyone, staff and students, that if they had any information or thoughts to share then they could come and see me after the evening meal.

It was a strange feeling: a man in the middle of dozens of women and girls. I got a few curious glances but no one really showed any interest. Perhaps I was lumped in with other people who had come about security. Just a middle-aged fly-by-night. I wondered if I’d get more attention if I was twenty-five and looked like Brad Pitt. Probably. But there was a feeling here that people really did work. Almost as though they were determined not to be distracted from the real game ...

The real game might be high marks or winning ribbons. Whatever it was it wasn’t me.

I sat in my little cubbyhole for more than an hour waiting for informants who didn’t deign to appear. Was it a reluctance to tell tales? Were people here genuinely at a loss for an explanation? I had asked for a list of the names of the girls whose horses had been attacked and Kristin had promised to get me details of the owners. There just might be a link. But so far the only link anyone had made was that all the horses had been out in the paddocks, not stabled, which raised the curious question: had they too been drugged?

I know nothing about the substances used to make horses run faster or slower, to calm them down or put them to sleep. But I assume there is a range of readily available things on the market. I might ask Brian Tindall. But if there was anything in this idea then there had to be someone who could slip the powder or liquid into

their food or water. It probably wouldn't be hard. The obvious culprit was Lindi Marryat. But would she acquiesce in the horrible death of her own horse? Even if it wasn't strictly hers she had probably developed some affection for it. Had Lindi boasted about the value of her horse and got someone's back up ...

I felt I really needed to meet the girl and get some idea of her personality.

I was just about ready to give up and go to bed as I had planned to get a few hours sleep while Jim did 'rounds' and then I would take over from him in the early hours of the morning. I've never envied sailors with their four hours on four hours off. No wonder they get ratty and drink and fight too much in port. There was a soft knock at the door and two faces peered round it.

I said, "Come in." At least it was better than feeling like some sort of leper or outcast. They both looked about sixteen. "Take a pew. I'm Bob."

"Yes, we know who you are. Ms Southcott said you wanted to know anything, even if it didn't sound relevant."

I nodded. "Yes. Small pieces of information can sometimes link up in surprising ways."

"That's what she said." They seemed to hesitate and I wondered if they were debating whether to introduce themselves or whether it was the information itself that was problematical. I have brought up a teenage daughter but I can't say I handled it very well. I said, "You can introduce yourselves or remain anonymous. It doesn't matter."

"I'm Kia and this is Fiona."

I nodded. "And if you want me to keep it all confidential, just say so."

"Oh, it doesn't matter. Everyone probably knows. We just wondered if it was important."

A bit more and I would have to shake it out of them.

"It's Allina, Lindi's friend. She didn't want to leave but Lindi's family rang her parents and told them to take her away." This came out in a sudden rush.

I nodded. "How did you find out?"

"Oh, Ally told us. She was Lindi's friend in a way but mainly because she felt sorry for her. She went around with us a bit. She was really upset about being taken away from the school."

"I understand she didn't have a horse here."

"That's right. She just used to go out to her neighbour's farm to ride. So she knew she was safe."

"Mmmm. So she told you that Lindi's mother rang her parents. Were they already friends, do you know?"

"I don't think so. But she had told them about meeting Lindi. They live in Quirindi. So I suppose they took it seriously."

"Was Lindi frightened that she might be attacked?"

"It's hard to say. Like—Ally went round with Lindi because she felt sorry for her. But Lindi never said anything and she never joined in with us."

“Why do you think Ally felt sorry for Lindi? Was she very shy?”

The two girls communed a bit. “Well, maybe. And she was a bit weird. Like she’d say something sometimes and then she’d say ‘oh, don’t tell anyone I said that!’ like she was scared—and usually we hadn’t even taken any notice of what she’d said, it was just something ordinary and boring.”

“Did she talk about her horse at all, maybe say she had a really good horse?”

“No.” Again they communed. “Never. We only knew it was a valuable mare because one of the teachers said something about how it had won several important races.”

“And was Lindi here last year—maybe with a different horse?”

“No. This was her first year. Ally too. We all liked Ally. I mean, like it wasn’t Lindi’s fault that she didn’t have any friends, maybe she just didn’t want to be here. But she sort of didn’t know how to make friends or get along with people.”

“Did you ever meet, or even see, any of her family?”

“I don’t think so. I guess they brought her at the start of the year, they must’ve talked to Amelia …”

“So—going back to Ally—you think her parents took her away only because of what the Marryats said to her parents?”

“That’s what she said. She was really upset. I mean, we were all told we could leave if we felt unsafe or we could have counselling or we could send our horses home. No one did. Only Lindi and Ally. She said it made her look like some sort of scaredy-cat … and she really didn’t want to go to the high school in Quirindi …”

“So whatever Mrs Marryat said to her must’ve been pretty strong stuff—”

They both nodded vehemently. “But why would she do that? She didn’t even *know* Ally’s family. I think she did it so it wouldn’t look like it was only Lindi that was too scared to stay.”

“Do you think Lindi was frightened? It must’ve been terrible for her to find her horse like that.”

“Yeah, I guess it was.” They were both in agreement. But then Kia said carefully, “Lindi was always scared about something. She would get really uptight if she hadn’t finished her homework. And she never liked to ride with the rest of us. When we’d go out she would ride a long way behind the rest of us. Ally said it was because she was scared that one of our horses might kick hers. And she never joined in anything, no jumping, no doing bending races and things like that. I mean it was really stupid to send her with a horse that she couldn’t ride in anything, just giving it gentle exercise. What was the point of paying to bring it here?”

Good question. But if you were going to pull a fast one on an insurance company then it would be more believable to do it well away from your home paddocks …

curiously—I don't know how to describe it—sexual maybe. So was Amelia Southcott right in suggesting that allowing teenage girls to keep their ponies delayed their interest in boys? Who knows? But I had the disconcerting feeling that they would have been readier to come and chat if they knew I could ride a horse. Strictly speaking, of course, I *can* now ride a horse. My daughter saw to that. But I prefer the horse to be old, quiet, solid, fairly lazy and preferring the trot over the gallop.

It had been a long day and I dropped off quickly and slept like a log. Jim came by to tap on my door at about 1 a.m. "You ready to go around, Bob?"

"Sure. Is it cold out there?" Since settling in Surfers I tend to think of places like this as cool by night.

"No, pretty mild."

Even so I pulled a light jacket on and picked up my torch. I had got too used to the weather on the Gold Coast to trust anyone else's assessment.

"I normally do an inside walk and then go out on to the back roads and keep an eye out for anyone parking late."

"Sounds sensible." I had run the idea of Jim as the perpetrator past the accusing judge in my brain. He had the strength. He had the inside knowledge. He might be in with some sort of gang. But I got the impression Jim liked working here and wouldn't needlessly remove his job or remove himself from the staff. Amelia Southcott might seem a quiet nonentity but I would bet my bottom dollar that she had given Jim's references a very thorough check-up.

Stake-outs are dull. So are rounds. People are always calling for more men 'on the beat' as though just the sight of a couple of broad backs trundling to and fro will deter the hoons and help old ladies sleep better. But my feeling is always that if people see this as a magic bullet there's nothing to stop them putting together civilian patrols. But they never do. They know it is one of the most boring routines ever invented. In the few times I went to Taronga Park zoo and saw the bears going round and round I used to say to them, 'Yeah, old fellas, I know the feeling.' The day I got out of uniform and into plainclothes was a release from a particular kind of purgatory. I don't know if other cops feel the same but I'm pretty sure most do.

I did rounds. I wove my way between the various buildings, all neatly labelled with things like 'Science Laboratory' and 'Feed Room' and 'Laundry Room'; no shortcuts for Ms Southcott, and I kept an eye on the darkest places where some one could wait unnoticed. I went past the paddocks and noticed that the horses always turned and looked in my direction even with the torch turned off. All was quiet. I could hear an occasional vehicle on the highway. And three vehicles used the back road past the property and up into the low timbered hills. A dark-coloured utility. A truck. And a small sedan. I noted the time they passed. Were they regulars? Chances were ...

There was a small country abattoir about five kilometres west of the town. They probably started early. The truck might be travelling before sun-up to avoid carrying animals or feed in the heat of the day. There wasn't a local hospital but

there might be some other kind of business where people did shift work. Or visitors leaving late. Or some hanky-panky. I simply made my notes. But if there were regulars then it would be important for the butchery to have taken place between about two and three in the morning. And even so, the butchers were taking a risk. They could say, should someone stop, that they had found the unfortunate animal in that state. They could simply say they had stopped to see what was wrong with the animal. But they would get plenty of warning. Headlights on this quiet side road. It wouldn't be hard to melt away into the scattered trees. And the horse from the road would just look like a dark mound. An animal asleep. A passer-by would not immediately jump to the conclusion that it had been disembowelled.

But I walked that stretch of road very carefully from both directions. The only place where they would be vulnerable to being seen was where the road came down the slope and turned fairly sharply to run along the side of the paddock. At the fork was another side road turning and running along the rear of the property but it had a sign saying 'No Through Road'. A vehicle could be parked further along it but might still be visible. I was inclined to think the safest thing would be to come on foot. But I also felt that if it wasn't simply coincidence then someone had encouraged the horse to lie down in that particular spot. How do you get a horse to do that? Not for the first time I felt my ignorance. The most likely way would be to offer it some food there. Some hay or a tub of grain or a salt lick ... I was only guessing ... Something in its food. The horse getting drowsy. Finally deciding it might have a bit of a kip. Something slow-acting. Some sort of slow-release capsule maybe.

In theory there is nothing to stop your average vandal and hooligan having a good knowledge of horses. And in a country town the odds improved. But the more I went round and round the place the more I felt sure there was a deadly reason behind the attack. It had been planned. But why kill a valuable and promising broodmare? Had they found there was something wrong with her that might reduce her value. Was it possible they had discovered she was infertile (I couldn't guess how) and it made sense to get the insurance—because presumably a mare that doesn't produce foals ends up as a family pet or in the plastic food container of the family pet, and labelled 'All the Goodness your Dog can Chew'.

And if there was so much money in her—might there be a feud and this was a good way to get back at her owners? Owners of horses she had beaten in her career. Punters who had failed to back her at the right times. Stud book scams. Or she might be owned by a syndicate rather than the Marryat family and something had gone sour.

So back to basics. Where next? I could go and see Brian Tindall. I could go and see Allina. I could go and see the Marryat family. I could go and talk to the insurance company. Were they completely satisfied that there was nothing funny at the owners' end? I could look in the back copies of the local paper for anything affecting Southcott House or the Marryat family. I could do all those things.

With the first lightening of dawn several cars drove into the lane that led round past the laundry and drew up near the kitchen door. Then a small van with a logo on it saying 'Kev Grundy Meats' ... A new day. Maybe Kev Grundy had a mania for cutting up animals that wasn't satisfied during his business hours.

But I yawned and went round and got in my car and drove slowly past the school and up the hill. I drew in and got out and looked over the peaceful scene below me. The countryside roundabout was dry. But the school looked like an oasis of green and calm. Maybe people really did envy Amelia Southcott. It was the most attractive place I had seen so far. Maybe people envied the girls. It beat hollow the sort of high school I went to with its anonymous mass of kids and hot concrete and the feeling that just about anything had to be better than school.

I drove on, stopping every so often to get out and look around. I had wondered if there might be signs of a little hamlet back in the hills. But these were all obviously cattle properties. I went for about five kilometres. Then turned. As I was coming back equally slowly but with the sunlight now spilling across the hills I noticed something curious. It wasn't particularly obvious. But a vehicle had pulled into the verge. I walked back to the spot and walked up and down several times. I'm not much good at tracking. But it was just possible that the vehicle, possibly a four-wheel-drive, had been pulling something. And in the soft dust in close to the dry grass of the verge were a couple of clear marks from a horse's hooves.

There was a farmhouse back in the last fold in the hills. I wondered if they would've heard or seen anything from there. It hadn't rained for some time so the marks could've been there for weeks. I felt I shouldn't read too much into it. The girls came riding up here. The hoofprints and the vehicle could be two separate events.

As I drove back down towards the school I remembered I hadn't filled in the day sheets Damien had given me. It was hard to remember that someone else had a vested interest in my hours and my expenses.

I didn't feel much like driving anywhere but I finally decided to go to Quirindi. What sort of girl was Allina Gray? Was she bright? Truthful? A good witness to Lindi's behaviour before and after the finding of her horse? And would her parents be willing to tell me what they had been told and why they took the information so seriously. Lindi's leaving was natural. If anything, it would've looked odd if she hadn't left. But Allina's was more problematical. Maybe her parents were just squeamish. As soon as the word 'blood' was mentioned they threw their hands up in horror. Or worriers.

Even so, I lingered over breakfast—hoping, maybe, that someone would come bumbling in like Miss Marple, saying 'I see it all', and save me a long dreary drive.

The endless paddocks of dry grass flitted away on either side of me and I tried to decide how to handle the questions. In a way it made life easier to work for someone else. All those times I had tried to decide whether to go into a situation as

myself or as a stranger ... all the machinations and false pretences. Now I could just introduce myself and plunge in.

— ix —

Plunging in was easier said than done. I found the Gray home via the address Kristin had given me and some driving round the small town. A weatherboard house on a side street. A pleasant verandah and a garden ablaze with yellow and red dahlias. At a guess Mr Gray was probably a supermarket manager or worked in the local bank. He might be a dentist. Whatever he was, I never got past Mrs Gray. As soon as I had explained my reason for coming her pleasant face seemed to contort. “Don’t talk to me about that place! The worst thing we ever did! Call themselves a school! The place is one big con! To think of all the money we wasted and the time and trouble—” I couldn’t get a word in. And after telling me not to come bothering her again she went inside and shut the door with a very definite thud.

And there was me thinking I was quite good with women ‘of a certain age’.

I went back down the path. I could understand her annoyance. All the trouble of moving schools in mid-term. A new uniform. And had Amelia Southcott refunded their fees? And yet there was something a little bit odd, sort of artificial, about that tirade. Almost as though Mrs Gray was afraid she would break down if she didn’t get her piece said and the conversation ended.

She had told me not to bother her again but what about her husband? And what about Allina herself? I don’t like sneaking round behind anyone’s back but it had been a fair drive. I was tired and hungry. I didn’t want it to be a wasted drive.

Schools understandably don’t like strange men hanging round outside the school yard. I could go in and ask to see Allina in a formal interview but it would involve a lot of explaining and the school might be very protective of their students. Then again they mightn’t care.

It was already well through the afternoon so I got myself a bit of a snack, sat in the car to eat it, then parked outside the high school and waited for kids to come out. The first group came charging out, girls swinging bags, boys behaving like horses just let out of their stable. I managed to stop a boy in glasses who came mooching across the yard. Did he know Allina Gray. He looked round vaguely then pointed.

“The redhead or the blonde?”

“Red.” He didn’t show any interest in me and wandered on, scuffing his shoes, and avoiding a group of about six boys. I waited till Allina and the other girl came out and then accosted her.

“Excuse me, but are you Allina Gray?”

She nodded. The other girl, if anything, looked more curious.

I took out my wallet and showed it to Allina. “It’s about the death of Lindi Marryat’s horse. I wonder if there is somewhere we can sit for a minute and if you could maybe answer a question or two for me.”

She seemed to turn my request over and over again. “Can Cathy stay with me? Or is it very private?”

“Fine by me. But does she know what happened? I don’t want to distress her.” Not that Cathy looked the sort to distress easily. She already had a brown stringy look about her. Probably with a farm somewhere in her background.

“You know all about it, don’t you, Cath? All that business with the horse.”

Cathy nodded. “Yeah, this is exciting. I never met a detective before.”

It didn’t seem much good trying to take the girls to a café, a park, even invite them into my car. The simplest thing was just to stand there and ask questions. Which I did.

“So the day before the horse died—was Lindi just as normal, do you remember?”

“No, she was really strange. We all went riding, well, not all of us, but about ten. Kia lent me her horse to exercise because she was playing tennis. Lindi and I rode along behind the others. She didn’t look well. The others decided to turn round and go back. But she said to me she was going to have to go into the bushes near the road there because her stomach was really playing up. I asked if she would like me to hold Magda, that was her horse, but she said no, that I should just go on and join the others and she would soon catch us up. So that was what I did. I joined the others and we all rode down to the school. It was getting fairly late by then. I was a bit worried about her missing dinner. But then I thought maybe she thought it didn’t matter if she wasn’t feeling well. The others had all gone in when I saw her coming down the road. So I rode in and unsaddled Kia’s horse and put him in his stall and gave him the tin of chaff and everything she had left ready. Lindi came up the lane and I called out to her to hurry up. But she said, you go on in, I really don’t feel much like eating. So I walked on up the path to the back hall.”

Cathy had begun to lose interest in this long recital. She waved to someone as though to say ‘with you in a tick’. Then she turned back and Allina said, “You go on Cathy, I’ll be okay. I’ve just got to tell him about the way Lindi was that night.”

As Cathy had never met Lindi and maybe felt that she wasn’t getting much attention she agreed and said, “Tell me about it tomorrow.”

As she walked away I said quietly, “Allina, if you want to keep everything confidential ...”

“Yeah, I think I do, really. Because it doesn’t make sense.”

She watched Cathy walk away then she said quickly, “It wasn’t the same horse, you know, but no one will believe me ... It sounds mad, doesn’t it?”

Allina was a nuggety little redhead with untidy curls and a round chin. Not pretty exactly and yet I felt there was character there. Whatever Allina decided to be she would get there. But this didn’t tell me if she was honest and reliable.

“Did you say this to anyone?”

“Yeah ... well, not exactly. I tried to say something to Lindi but she was upset and crying and she kept saying ‘How could they?’ and then she would cry some more. It was all pretty hard to cope with. Like, I’m not really good with all that stuff. And it wasn’t like I knew Lindi all that well, just those couple of months.” She stood

there biting her lip and looking upset. One of the teachers heading out the gate saw us and changed direction. It probably *did* look like I was bothering a student. This woman came over and said firmly, “What’s going on here?”

“It’s okay, Ms Tolland. I’m just talking about the horse that got killed. I still get upset.”

Ms Tolland turned her gimlet gaze on me. I thought of whipping out my identification but I had the awkward feeling that this protector of young woman might say I should’ve set up a proper interview with Allina’s parents present. Maybe I should’ve but I probably would only have got the surface explanations she had given them.

“I’m Bob Creighton. If you’d like to stay, Ms Tolland, you are more than welcome. But I want to let Allina get home as soon as possible.”

Ms Tolland stood undecided. “I really am okay,” Allina said firmly. “I just need to talk about the horse, get it out of my system. Sort of grieve for him.”

I had to admire the way she brought this out. The teacher finally nodded and left.

“You said ‘him’ just now. Was that a slip of the tongue or had Magda the mare been turned into … ”

“That’s the thing I don’t understand. Do you know much about horses, Mr Creighton?”

“Not a lot. But I’m learning. Did the horse that Lindi rode in in the evening look different?”

“No, not really. I mean it was still a chestnut with a white star. I didn’t really look closely. But it was the sound it made as Lindi came trotting up the lane.”

I was on shaky ground here. Was it possible to tell a female horse from a male horse by its *sound*? I found the idea hard to swallow. Or did she mean it had a different neigh or something?

“I do believe you. All the same you’ll need to explain what you mean.”

She sort of squirmed.

“Geldings sometimes make a noise. It’s because they’ve got … ” She didn’t know how to describe what geldings have to a stranger. But now that I came to think on it I had a vague memory of my time riding an old gelding called Danny Boy. I had assumed it was the sound made by the effort he was making to cart my dead weight around.

“Yes, they’ve got their apparatus underneath.”

She nodded. “And as they trot they take air into it, sort of. I don’t know how it works. But they make a noise mares don’t make.”

“Did you wait for Lindi to unsaddle and walk over with you?”

“No, she said she would be a while feeding Magda and everything—and then she might go straight up to bed. I didn’t say anything. She was looking very pale and worried. I didn’t know if I should say anything to anyone so I just went inside. I

thought I could talk to her later. But then when I went upstairs after the film we'd watched she was already asleep."

"Did she always get up early to go and see to her horse?"

"Oh yeah. Always. She was always the first one out. She said it was because Magda was valuable and didn't really belong to her. She said she worried a lot about her."

I was beginning to have serious doubts about Lindi's family. Even if I was completely wrong and a bunch of local yobs really had attacked the horse I still felt it was quite unfair to send a daughter to a new school and make her responsible for a very valuable horse. Why hadn't she been allowed to settle in comfortably—*then* decide about what kind of horse would fit in?

"Do you think Lindi was unhappy, upset, worried, before then?"

She nodded slowly. "I always sort of felt sorry for her. I mean I was new too but I didn't find it hard to fit in and I really liked all the teachers. But Lindi was like someone who is never going to fit in. It's sort of hard to explain. It's like ... she wasn't really there. She was always listening to voices we couldn't hear. Like someone always telling her she'd got everything wrong. And she was always hoping no one would notice."

"You don't think she might have been mentally ill?"

"No-o-o, I don't think so. At first I just thought she was very shy. But she never relaxed or fitted in with anyone. Mr Creighton, I've heard somewhere that if a family is really, you know, gives you a hard time—"

"Abusive?"

"Something like that. Then people sort of split into pieces. I don't mean their body ... but their ... their personality."

"Multiple Personality Syndrome? Yes, it's possible. But did Lindi ever say anything that worried you?"

"She did tell me that someone had murdered her father when she was very young but she didn't have any memories of him. I don't think her mother would do anything to her, do you? I mean she was an only child."

"If she saw or heard anything as a small child she may have sort of buried the trauma at the back of her mind. Maybe she tended to get very tense and anxious but didn't really understand what the matter was."

Allina seemed to find this idea comforting. I felt she *had* worried over Lindi, worried about her, and this seemed to offer her something concrete to grasp instead of chasing after shadows.

"That might be it. But her mum did ring my mum to tell her I was in danger. She told her every detail about the horse and she said she had taken her daughter away and she felt mum and dad should take me away. I didn't want to go but they turned up and talked to Ms Southcott and she told them the school was going through a very difficult time and she had to be honest and say she couldn't be certain

I would be safe. I don't think they really believed Lindi's mum. But when the principal said *that*—”

Yes. It may have been unvarnished honesty but it wasn't exactly comforting to anxious parents. But I did sympathise with Amelia Southcott. If she reassured anxious parents and then a child was attacked ... I could see her dilemma. She risked seeing all she had worked so hard for crumble into dust.

“Mmmm.” I nodded. My problem now was that, true or not, I couldn't see how to find evidence to prove that a far less valuable chestnut gelding had been substituted for a champion chestnut mare. But it might explain the nature of the attack. They hadn't set out to terrify anyone. But they had set out to remove enough of the horse to make it no longer easily recognisable as male. Strewing intestines and blood around had been enough to shock the police and keep everyone in the school at bay. They may not even have realised what sort of mess they were going to create. It isn't the kind of operation likely to be done regularly.

They?

How had they arrived so quickly and so well prepared on that very early Sunday morning?

The answer was probably that they hadn't gone home after doing the switch with Lindi the afternoon before. I had thought of a four-wheel-drive up there in the dry back country. But it could've been a smallish truck pulling a float. Somewhere there they had unloaded, left the float either at someone's farm or on a quiet back road. Or there might have been two vehicles. One to pull the float and one to come and winch up the remains of the horse.

— X —

After I had thanked Allina, given her one of my cards (whether for support if she got asked questions or to contact me with more revelations—though I felt she had told me the most important things), and promised to let her know if I found out more about the case, I drove out of Quirindi.

But something was nagging at me. If the insurance company had already paid out for the lost mare—then they probably wouldn't want to re-open the case. But if they hadn't ...

Equine Life had an office in Newcastle and a small branch office in Scone. Presumably the branch office had passed on such a big pay-out. I managed to get on to the Newcastle office. They were not in the business of giving out that sort of confidential information to strangers. But that wasn't why I was ringing. Were they clear on the case I was talking about? They said they were aware of it, yes.

“And are you aware that the supposedly champion mare that got killed was in fact an ordinary and probably not very expensive gelding of no value to any stud's breeding program—unless they have found a way to clone champion geldings.”

“Believe me, we have gone into this case very thoroughly and we have the police report—”

“And you have had an independent vet check the animal's sex and DNA?”

“I am not at liberty to pass on details.”

“Look, I’m trying to save you a lot of money. You don’t have to believe me. But if you haven’t made that sort of check then I think you would be wise to do so. My impression is that it was a very carefully set up insurance scam designed to net a very large pay-out very quickly.”

They weren’t impressed. There didn’t seem to be anything else I could do to convince them. And in a sense if they wanted to pay out, regardless, that was their business. I wasn’t going to worry about their bottom line.

But as I got back on the road I found myself wondering how the next stage of it would work. What do you do with a very valuable mare—if she is officially dead? You might substitute her for another valuable mare which has died. You might find an unscrupulous buyer overseas. But I wondered if I was missing something obvious. I’ve read one or two Dick Francis novels but maybe I should make him my regular diet. Skullduggery in the racing world wasn’t my field.

So where to next?

I felt what I really would like would be a drink, a decent steak with chips, a chance to put my feet up ... I hadn’t asked myself how I would feel working for two young souped-up executive types who would think my grumbles not worth taking notice of. Twelve hour day? That’s nothing, Bob, we often put in longer. They probably did. But it wasn’t my cup-of-tea. Maybe I would simply tell them when I got home in a day or two that they had better look out for someone else.

The thought of dragging round saying to myself ‘where next?’ and trying to think up the questions to ask people and trying to put the various little bits together ... No, it didn’t appeal. At least when I worked in my usual haphazard way to help people I just bumbled along at my own pace. And if it took two days or ten ... or if I didn’t get anywhere ... I just said so. But now I had reports to write and expenses to note and the feeling that I had to convince them I was earning my keep ...

It was evening when I saw Southcott House down the road. I drew into the small car park and sat for several minutes. Jim noticed me drive in and left the hose he was coiling to come over and say, “Good day, Bob?”

“Don’t know, really. But a few ideas. Jim, when they had removed the horse—and after the police had finished—did you hose down that area?”

“Yeah. I did it the next morning. Amelia told me to clean up as best I could. Why?”

“Was there anything left there when you’d finished? Horsehair maybe?”

“Could be. I don’t guarantee I got every last hair and scrap. But the police took those saws covered in blood if they wanted to do any testing like that.”

Somehow, just a hunch, I thought the police here would not take kindly to any suggestions that they might run tests on that blood. And if it was a truly professional job then they might have nicked the mare and smeared *her* blood on the saw ...

“I know. But I might just go and have a bit of a look round tomorrow.”

“I’ll give you a hand. You reckon drugs would still show in blood after all this time?”

“I’m not sure. It would depend what they used.”

Jim seemed satisfied with that. I said I’d get some tea and hit the sack if he wouldn’t mind waking me in the early hours. I had the feeling not even my small alarm would wake me up. I needed a night’s sleep. Not a quick nap.

— xi —

The early hours of the morning passed wearily. I tried to decide what should be my next tack. The Marryat family, obviously, but I felt a deep reluctance to go and see them. Still, I could probably burble on about security and did they have any suggestions for the strengthening of same … I couldn’t define my own deep sense of reluctance.

But maybe Allina’s take on Lindi was better than anyone else’s and something was deeply wrong in Lindi’s home life, in her psyche, in the way she had been made part of something evil … I couldn’t pin down my unease. I think it was the vague sense that by going in cold I might inadvertently make things worse for her.

The night passed. I had breakfast. I had a brief discussion with Amelia and Kristin. I could see they longed to ask me questions like: do you think the danger has passed—or will there be another attack. If my ideas were in any way right then the school was probably safe. If I had got it all horribly wrong then … but I couldn’t guess at the motivation of the unknown people behind the attacks …

“I don’t like to intrude on the Marryats if they have had a terrible shock but I think I should go. Is there anything you can advise me about … I mean what approach to Mrs Marryat might be most sympathetic.”

“I know improving our security won’t be their priority but they may have suggestions. But you suspect the Marryats, don’t you?”

“Yes, I’m afraid I do. Was there ever anything about Lindi’s demeanour that suggested to you she might be an abused child?”

They both looked first startled, then thoughtful. “That isn’t easy to say, Bob. For a young person even going to board at a school can be traumatic if they’ve never lived away from home. We both felt Lindi was an unhappy girl but that could be homesickness, shyness, a lack of social skills, pressure on her to achieve, worries over things at home … and we both felt it was unfortunate she was made responsible for a very valuable horse … and more so when she never gave the impression of someone who was very ‘horse-minded’.”

“Did the family ever threaten to sue you?”

“No. And I think they would not have succeeded anyway. Our paddocks are virtually identical to the sorts of paddocks most studs keep their broodmares in.”

I didn’t remind them that there had already been three attacks. But the Marryats had not insisted the mare be stabled or even yarded closer to the school. Nor had they responded to the school’s offer to send horses home …

“But do convey to them our apologies and regrets,” Kristin said. “Perhaps we were remiss in not taking the warning signs more seriously.”

“And Lindi herself. We hope she is settling into another school, poor child.”

Neither Amelia nor Kristin were women who precisely inspired affection but I had come to respect them both. Despite the horrors of the past two months the atmosphere remained very positive and caring. If Lindi had not fitted in then I was inclined to think it was her own decision to hold herself apart. Or, if not her decision, then her family’s decision.

I went round to catch Jim before leaving and asked him to go over the ground with a fine-tooth-comb and try to find a bit of something, hair, hide, hoof, which still might be testable.

He said he would—once classes started.

Then I called in on Mr Tindall. This time there were several elderly-looking ponies grazing in the front paddock and he was standing by the office door talking to his young assistant. She smiled and waved at me and said “Here he is!” as though she had specially detained her boss for my pleasure.

I introduced myself and asked him whether he had ever thought about the horses being drugged and what someone might use. He nodded and pursed his lips. He was a good-looking man of about thirty, curly brown hair, hazel eyes, an energetic athletic stance.

“Well, I did. But afterwards. The first time I wondered if it was an accident. Horses do catch themselves on bits of wire, or a protruding nail or something. But by the time I got to see them it might not have shown up anyway. And the horse that was killed—I didn’t get a proper chance to examine her. I can understand the police wanting the animal moved before it upset the girls—but still it was a crime scene and should’ve been treated less casually.”

“Would the police let you test the weapons they picked up if you asked?”

“I doubt it. Anyway they said they’d been sent to the forensics lab.”

“Does it strike you that their whole handling of the situation was pretty sloppy?”

He treated this as a loaded question. But his young assistant had no such qualms. “Of course it was! But that’s because it was the Marryats’ horse—and everyone knows about the Marryats.”

“They do?” he said cautiously. “I don’t know much about them, Lou, just their ads for their new sire. I’ve never seen their place.”

“No, silly, the way she killed her husband.”

“But you don’t know that she did.”

“My dad said it was the cleverest thing he’d ever heard of.” I had bumped young Lou’s age up a couple of years. Though she looked a bit like a young pixie she had a lot of confidence. “Y’see,” she turned to me, “there was another crime just like it, years before, and everyone knew the wife had bumped her husband off but they didn’t like to grab her because she was very well known and well-off and

everything, like, she was one of the oldest and most famous families round the Hunter ... and so when Mrs Marryat killed her guy she did it in exactly the same way. So they couldn't charge her because then people would say, so why didn't they charge that other woman? You see what I mean."

"Who was that?" Brian said, obviously curious.

"I don't remember. It was before I was born. My dad would know. At one of the famous studs."

"So you are saying that she was given the benefit of the doubt so as not to risk new questions being asked about that other murder?"

She nodded. I was catching on. "And you think this hands-off approach flowed through to the death of the horse?"

"Why not?"

Oh to be young and without a doubt or a qualm or a fear of defamation!

"The police told me it was a burglary gone wrong."

"My dad said that was a lot of hooey. Who pays a service fee in *cash*?"

"They might—if they were laundering money." Brian gave us an apologetic grin.

Young Lou shrugged but I could see nothing was going to turn her from her take on the case.

And was she likely to be right? I asked her where her dad lived. Down in Muswellbrook now, it seemed. This was the edge of thoroughbred stud country. From here on out it was mainly cattle. But her dad, she said, had spent a lifetime round horses. Lou herself lived in town here with a cousin and cycled out to work each morning. I thought of going to visit her father but finally rejected the idea. I needed to go and see Mrs Marryat and it was no good getting diverted from the main game—however unpleasant the interview might prove to be.

And would this view of the case explain why the police had been at such pains to get the case tidied up, closed, passed on, off their patch? If all else failed I would go and browse through some old papers later and see what the take on the crime had been at the time.

Just before I left I asked them if they thought the Marryats had good horses.

"I'd say so. It's only a small operation, one stallion, maybe twenty mares of their own, but they've won some good races. I am really surprised they let the girl take one of their mares to the school—but some people believe mares are easier to get in foal if they've been having gentle exercise rather than just let down and turned out."

"I see."

It was after eleven when I saw a sign saying 'Marryat House Stud' and turned off the main road. The sign at their gate said they were standing a sire called High Banner (I wonder if studs ever sit sires?) by Better Banner from a mare called Aroma (imp). This suggested to my non-horsy mind a lot of little goblins dancing

around but I assume it meant imported. At the bottom of the sign it said ‘Inspection Invited’. With luck they were so in need of possible customers they would not order me off the place in case I had a suitable mare or two tucked away at home somewhere.

At first glance the place looked a picture. White fences, irrigated green grass, neat sheds and barns, a nicely-graded track through the front paddocks, a pleasant farmhouse with poplars behind it. But as I drove in and parked and stretched briefly I began to see the signs of neglect or poor maintenance. Peeling paint. A gate tied up with wire. Weeds invading the parking area. Maybe prices were going down. Maybe High Banner wasn’t very popular. Maybe they just weren’t very good managers. Or maybe they thought those things were only cosmetic and the quality of their animals was the only thing that mattered.

For several minutes the place continued to drowse in the sun and I debated whether to go over to the house or go and look round the stables and yards. Then a large man came out a shed door with a headstall or bridle or something over his arm.

“Help you?” he called across the yard.

“Yes, I’ve come to see Mrs Marryat. Would she be over at the house?”

“Probably. I’ll get her. What do you want her for?”

“I’m afraid it’s confidential. Tell her I won’t need more than a couple of minutes of her time.”

He scowled. “I thought we were finished with the insurance business.”

“Just about.”

He turned and walked away. Was he implying that the insurance bogs had been back with more questions? I wandered to and fro in the few minutes he was gone and I noticed a small area that looked like a horse graveyard. There were several wooden markers with names on them. I didn’t think people would get called Katydid or Miss Banner. I could see unsettled soil. Was this the last resting place of the unfortunate Magda or her doppelganger?

I wondered why supposed insurance agents were not invited in to the house. Were they *meant* to stand observing the grave of their recently deceased ‘client’?

Marnie Marryat came over to me and said, “Yes?”

She was a slim faded woman, her hair dyed blonde, her face showing the signs of worry or too much dieting. Yet she had probably been a stunning woman twenty years ago. Her large dark-blue eyes would have turned heads. And her profile, as she turned back to her assistant, was perfect still, just the faint signs of age in her throat.

“It’s all right, Ron, I can handle it.”

Ron nodded but he remained standing with a hand on a gatepost within earshot. I could see her debating whether to say something more or accept his presence. “It doesn’t matter. It’s about your horse.” As I spoke I turned and strolled slowly towards my car as though I might need to take out a briefcase. Ron could follow but it would be pretty obvious. “And your daughter,” I added quietly. “Ms Southcott

asked me to convey her deepest sympathy. Everyone there feels terrible about what happened and they asked me to say how much the girls miss Lindi.”

She didn’t respond.

As I reached the car I took out my wallet and showed her my identity. Then I reached into the back seat and took out my old briefcase, which had nothing in it but a few notes on the school and an exercise book, and sat it on the bonnet.

“I’m afraid I also have to tell you that the insurance company is going to go ahead with a DNA test on the blood and so on. Someone has come forward to raise doubts about your horse’s identity. I’m sorry to give you more distress.”

It came so quickly, the way her face blanched; then she turned away as though to beckon Ron over. He was still standing by the gate watching her. There was something in his stance that suggested a bodyguard rather than a stud manager or groom ...

“What are people saying?”

I felt that it cost her a lot to keep her voice calm and faintly disinterested. People, it seemed to imply, they always gossip. You don’t want to take any notice.

“That you substituted a chestnut gelding for your mare on the afternoon before the attack. That you involved your daughter in your planning of an extremely brutal crime. I am sorry—but I think you need to be prepared if the gossip gets going. It might get very unpleasant before it dies down again. I was hired by the school to improve their security. But if I as a stranger have heard it ... well, it may be circulating quite widely already.”

“So long as Lindi is away it doesn’t matter about me.”

“Your daughter has gone to a new school?”

“Yes, my brother Adam has taken her to Sydney. She’s going to stay with a family there and go to a high school. We thought she needed to get right away from horses for a while.”

“I’m sure that’s a very sensible response. But I can see you are very worried about her. I was told she was the one who found her horse. It must’ve been terribly traumatic for her.”

“It was. Yes, I’m sure she will never forget ... but she’ll get other interests in Sydney.”

I felt she was giving out a whole confused range of signals. She wanted me to go away. She wanted me to stay. She wanted to talk about everything. She knew talk was dangerous. She wanted Ron to come over and give her some support. She wished he would go away and leave her in peace. She was a naturally anxious worried person. She was a normal person who couldn’t cope with the shocks of the last few weeks. I couldn’t disentangle the sense of someone who was desperately in need of some sort of help but couldn’t admit to anything.

“Mrs Marryat, I don’t want to make things worse for you—but it isn’t just your horse or even your daughter—you are afraid for your own safety, aren’t you?”

She turned back to me and her eyes widened. Then she said, "I can't talk about things."

I moved slightly so that she now had her back to Ron.

She ran her tongue over her dry lips. "Nothing helps. Not now. Not ever."

"Would it help if I arrested you now for the murder of your husband?"

— xiii —

I thought she was going to faint. But she put out a hand and rested it on my car. At last she said, "I can't leave Lindi. She is all I have."

"You know where Lindi is? The address?"

"Not really. I mean I know the school. But she is still with my brother. I don't know where they're staying."

"But she would be in school now?"

"Yes."

"She is safe there?"

"I—I think so."

"Okay, get in the car and we'll go and collect Lindi and then you can decide what to do next."

"What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I said. We'll be in Sydney in a couple of hours."

The silence lengthened. Then she walked round the car and climbed into the front passenger seat. Ron started forward but cops get in and out so many times they get good at fast getaways. Even so I wanted this to look normal, not like flight. We drove away down the lane. I had turned out on to the highway when I noticed there was a utility coming up fast behind us. My little hatchback wasn't built for speed. I had bought it for something nippy and easy to park round the Gold Coast. But once we got in to the stream of traffic ... and the utility looked like a well-used farm vehicle.

It didn't stop him trying. He managed to come up right on my tail and give me a hard nudge, he had to fall back as we got into the next town on our way south-east, he caught up and passed on the other side, then slowed right down. I pulled out my mobile and dialed 000 and asked for police.

I finally got on to their centre, gave my position and told them, "There's a maniac on the road here, blue Holden utility", I read out the number plate, "male driver, cutting in and out dangerously, tailgating, slowing right down then exceeding the speed limit to get ahead." I gave them my name and asked them to check him out as soon as possible as he was an accident waiting to happen. They said they would.

Marnie Marryat was sitting rigid and staring. I didn't blame her. She had been getting shocks upon shocks. And I couldn't guess what she had previously known or not known. But it was obviously no use expecting her to give me any help if we did get hit. And I found driving with a catatonic passenger pretty unnerving.

She had got into my car without so much as a handbag. It suggested either someone who didn't care about anything or someone so desperate ...

Ron slowed right down. I did likewise. But he was obviously regretting getting in front of me. One truckie gave him a blast as he went past. It didn't surprise me when Ron pulled off, waited for us to pass, then pulled in behind us again.

"Do you have the number of your daughter's school?"

"No. It's in Pennant Hills."

I thought of getting directory assistance and calling the school. If we were going to play cat-and-mouse all the way to Sydney it might be getting late by the time we got there. I ran various courses-of-action through my mind. Ron was up close again. Too close. I felt him hit us. He fell back. But my little hatchback wouldn't take much in the bumping line. It seemed to occur to him that a straight hit wouldn't do the trick. He had to angle in and try and force us off the road.

"What's the next town in front of us?" I said to Marnie.

She turned and looked blankly at me. Then she seemed to pull herself together. "Singleton, I think."

"Good." I had come up this way years ago in the hope of finding a witness to a robbery. I knew exactly where the station was. No indicator. A quick pull up. With luck Ron would go shooting right past. And if he pulled round and caught us—would he be willing to follow us into the station? He might. Ron suggested a man who wasn't used to giving up and going home meekly. And yet—why?

And would we make Singleton?

— xiv —

I'll remember that last stretch to my dying day—unless Alzheimer's intervenes. It wasn't only Ron behind me but Marnie in the car was losing the plot. She was starting to hyperventilate. Her gasping and hiccupping interspersed with small screams was pretty hard to take. But traffic was getting a little thicker. If Ron did get us off and turned turtle then there was a good chance someone would witness it. Even so it was an exhausting half hour. I don't think I've ever been so glad to see a country town on the horizon ...

Ron managed to hit us again.

The wheel shuddered under my sweaty hands. Marnie screamed louder.

A big semi blared past us. I hoped the driver had not only seen Ron's antics but had noted his number and warned other truckies to watch out for the maniac in the blue utility. And if all this wasn't enough I could see the fuel gauge dropping.

Whether we liked it or not we had to put our faith in Singleton. But if we managed to give Ron the slip—would he head straight on for Sydney? Marnie might be willing to speak out if she was certain her daughter was safe. But if she didn't get this guarantee ...

I could only guess. But if all else failed I still might be able to get them interested in the fate of the chestnut horse. And if even that failed—was I putting Southcott House and its occupants at risk by playing, or trying to play, the swashbuckling hero?

We crossed the causeway into town. Ron was right on our tail. It's times like these I am glad of the driving courses I got sent on, years ago, because driving skills and a cool head are worth having when you've got a character like Ron practically in your back seat.

He had to drop back a little in town. Too many cars and people. This was my chance. I was nipped into a park along Hunter Street, which although a natural name for a street here was curiously appropriate, before he knew what had happened. He had no choice to go on. Maybe our luck had turned. Marnie Marryat let out a long sort of gasp.

“Come on now, we've got to get inside before he comes back.”

For a minute I thought she was going to give up and simply sit there. Then she reached out slowly for the door-handle. I was tempted to grab her arm and hussle her in. But I didn't want this to look unnatural or that she was being pressured. God knows, she looked ghastly enough without me making things worse.

In films the hero only has to blurt out his trouble and the squad cars are pulling out, sirens blaring. In real life you get looked at as though they haven't heard you properly and then someone says slowly, “What the bloody hell is going on?”

I flapped my wallet. “I'm sorry but this is an emergency. Can you get on to the school and make sure they keep Mrs Marryat's daughter safe. I'm afraid we may end up with a hostage drama to make things worse.”

Sergeant Hinckley went on staring at me. “Is this one of those child custody battles?”

“No, I'm afraid it involves murder. The child needs to be protected.” I turned to Marnie Marryat. “Can you give them the details of the school?”

She had begun to tremble violently. I don't know if it was this or something about the name Marryat but the sergeant softened. “Take your time and I'll ring through for you.”

He was on the phone for quite a while, not saying anything, while someone at the other end did ... whatever. He turned back to us. “They say she isn't in school today? Where else might she be?”

Mrs Marryat went pale. “Oh my God! I knew he would!”

“Would what?” The sergeant was obviously torn between calling a doctor or trying to calm her down himself.

“She might be at the Pennant Motor Inn. My brother knows someone there.”

He spoke to someone, the school secretary maybe, and I hoped it was a school of two or three hundred not a monstrosity of a thousand or more, to ask if they had an address for Lindi. He wrote down a mobile number, repeating it as he did so.

“But that's Adam's number,” Lindi's mother said. I grabbed a chair and she sank into it.

He hung up. “Do you want me to try the Motor Inn?”

“No. Can you call the local station there and ask for someone to go and check. It may be too late but it’s worth a try. Ask them to bring Lindi and—what’s your brother’s name, Mrs Marryat?”

“Adam Lynch.”

“To bring them both in to assist with enquiries. Tell them it’s to do with a dead racehorse.”

I felt sorry for the sergeant. He was putting his neck out for two people who must’ve seemed a bit manic. A bit? I was beginning to feel pretty poppy-eyed myself and Marnie was almost a basket case. But he hunted up a number and rang through and finally turned back to us. “You’d better be on the level, mate, because it’s my head on the block.”

“I appreciate your help. You may remember that a horse was killed at a school called Southcott House a few weeks ago.”

He considered, then nodded slowly. “Rings a bell.”

“I think, though I don’t yet have the DNA results, that another horse was substituted. I assume it was an insurance scam … but Mrs Marryat obviously knows a lot more about it than I do.”

“And?”

I don’t think he wanted to include her in the conversation, not while she was in such an obviously desperate near-hysterical state.

“I was only called in by the school to look at ways to improve their security. But while I was looking into the way the horse died, and the events leading up to it, I became suspicious. I also was given some rather disconcerting hints about the horse’s owner, the Lindi Marryat who was then taken out of the school and sent off to Sydney. It’s only hearsay at the moment but there was a possibility that Lindi Marryat was also an abused child. In what way I couldn’t guess. My guess would be sexual abuse. Probably by her uncle—Mrs Marryat’s brother—but I don’t yet know enough about it all to do more than make a guess.”

The sergeant turned and looked at Lindi’s mother. “This is strong stuff, Mrs Marryat. Do you want to comment?”

I really did think she was going to faint then. Her face had gone dead-white and beads of sweat stood out. She pressed her trembling hands together. Then she said so low we strained to hear it: “Help me.”

— xv —

The sergeant rang for a doctor after urging Marnie Marryat to put her head between her knees. I wondered if we should also send out for a tot of brandy. But I was still nervous about Ron’s whereabouts. Was he waiting outside for the inevitable moment when we would reappear? Was he hot-footing it to Sydney? Was he ringing through to Adam to give him a run-down on the day’s events? Were there other people he could call on? As well as Marnie, Adam, and Ron there might be other people employed at the stud. Ron looked the sort of bloke who would know some other toughs.

Eventually Marnie managed to sit up again. "Will I be safe if I tell you the truth?"

This is a loaded question. Did she mean physically safe, safe from prosecution, safe in prison ... but Sergeant Hinckley said, "Of course you're safe. But don't try to talk now. The doctor said he would be round in about twenty minutes. Would you like a cup of tea?"

"No. Just to be safe here."

"It's pretty safe here. But I can take you through to another room if you'd like."

She nodded. "I would feel better. Ron might still try to get me back."

We were ushered through. But the phone rang and Sergeant Hinckley answered it. He made a few exclamations then he turned to Mrs Marryat and said, "How old is your daughter?"

"Sixteen." The sergeant relayed that and listened for a couple more minutes. Then he hung up. There was a long silence. He seemed to be trying to decide what to pass on.

"You've found Lindi?" Marnie looked up.

"Yes. She's—quite safe."

"Then that is all that matters. I would like to confess to the murder of my husband Brett Marryat fourteen years ago. I have lived with that burden all these years. Let me go to prison and be safe."

But the doctor came then and I let him talk to Mrs Marryat in peace. I was about buggered myself. I had been up since 1 a.m. And whatever else Lindi's mum might be she wasn't restful.

The doctor gave her something to calm her down. As he went out I asked him if he had seen any sign of a tough outside or a blue utility. He shook his head. "Didn't notice."

Marnie was given the option of a lawyer before she incriminated herself but she turned the offer down flat. Then she was given pen and paper. She wrote slowly and for a long time. Several times she got up and walked around and I could see the tears running down her face.

— xvi —

The gist of her story was that she had married Brett Marryat who owned the stud but she had found out that he could be violent and sadistic. She told her brother, not because she liked her brother but because he was the only close relative she had, and he had come up with the plan for her to kill her husband using the same method which had been used in a previous high-profile Hunter Valley murder. When she queried this, Adam had said either they wouldn't be game to prosecute or they would assume the same perpetrator was still at large. She had said the courts might not see it like that—so her brother had grabbed her and beaten her up, leaving her bruised and bleeding. Then he had said 'in that case you will plead prolonged domestic violence. They'll believe when they see those bruises.' But the police had backed off and no charges were ever laid against her. She inherited the stud safely

and Adam and his two toughs, Ron and a man called Stan Bigelow had moved in. She soon discovered that she had gone from the frying pan into the fire. They weren't violent but she was expected to have sex with all three of them when they wanted it, and she was virtually a prisoner on the stud. Adam did all the business. And when Lindi got old enough she was included in their want list.

She managed to convince Adam to let her put Lindi's name down for the school by persuading him that it was better for her to leave the local school because people there were wondering why she never invited other girls home.

She said it was true that another horse had been substituted the day before.

At last she put her pen down and looked up with a long sigh. "It's all yours."

Sergeant Hinckley and a colleague who had come in while Marnie was writing read her pages through. "Well, I guess we'd better charge you and caution you, Mrs Marryat. Then it will be out of our hands."

"But you will keep me here, won't you? I don't want bail."

They communed. "I guess we can send you on this evening."

"And my daughter?"

"She is at the station in Hornsby. We'll contact them and arrange for her to see a doctor and then she can come to see you." He gave her a long assessing look.

"A doctor?" she said faintly.

"She was found in bed with your brother."

She closed her eyes briefly, then she nodded.

— xvii —

In a way my job was ended. But I had one more question. The police didn't really want to give me any more access to their prisoner. But it was only a small question.

Why had they decided on the insurance scam in the first place—and where was the mare now?

"My brother set it up. Ron and Stan did it. We lost one of our best mares just after Christmas. When Adam went to claim on the insurance he found he'd left her off his list. All our best stock are valued and insured individually. By substituting a old hack we kept for work around the place for Magda he could get more back from the insurance company. And Magda became Sun Sweet. It wasn't hard."

"And your daughter was the person who found the unfortunate horse they had disembowelled."

"It couldn't be helped."

I am an easygoing old sod usually. But there are limits. I watched this woman led out and I don't know what I felt. But it wasn't sympathy.

— xviii —

I left the station. No sign of Ron. I wondered if he was now nearly to Sydney. I filled up with petrol then set out on the long drive back to Southcott House. I stopped in Muswellbrook and had several coffees and a salad roll.

I could've gone on to Sydney. So near. My mother lives in Leura. My good friend Petra Day lives in Annandale. Petra would be comforting. Except that the card she had sent me a while ago had been rather odd. Something in her scrawl about my 'new responsibility' ... or did she mean my new lack of responsibility now that my daughter had flown the coop for law school in Glasgow? I couldn't decide. Just something a bit odd in the tone of it all. But I didn't feel up to being sociable. And I was on time sheets and expenses. I needed to report back to Amelia Southcott, then to Damien and Mark.

The school was having dinner when I finally got there. I ached all over. But at least Jim and I could cease patrolling the school by night. I went up to my room, had a bit of a wash and brush-up, then I went downstairs and found Jim watching TV in his little private room off the store room.

"Bob!" He sat up and turned the volume down. "Any luck?"

"Some. The police have charged Marnie Marryat and pulled in her brother. There's two other men to be found and charged."

"So it was a scam like you thought?"

I nodded. "And Mrs Marryat admitted to murdering her husband fourteen years ago."

"Phew!!" He whistled. "That's a bummer, isn't it?"

"Yep. Hard to believe."

"And what about Lindi—where is she?"

"At the moment she is in a police station. What's going to happen to her I don't know."

"Send her back here," Jim said pragmatically. "At least here people know what she's been through."

"As a matter of fact, Jim, that's a damned good idea. Did you have any luck with finding bits of the horse?"

"A few hairs. I've put them in some plastic bags."

"Good. They might still be needed as back-up evidence."

"Do you want me to patrol again—or is that something we can give up on?"

"I think it's safe but there are still two very tough and dangerous characters on the loose. They carved up the horse. I won't be absolutely relaxed till they're in custody too."

"Ring the cops here. About time those lazy bastards did something for us. They're always quick to point the finger at us—" I assume he meant 'us' as in Maoris not 'us' as in the Southcott community, "but I don't notice them doing their jobs properly. It took you to find out what was going on."

"I might get Amelia to contact them. It might look less like rubbing their faces in some very rotten eggs."

Jim grinned. "Good one."

Amelia and Kristin listened carefully to my long recital. Several times they shook their heads in apparent disbelief. At the end Amelia said, “So it was really nothing to do with us? If we hadn’t been able to take Lindi at fairly short notice they would’ve set up their scam in a different way?”

“Probably. But I would still increase your security a bit, if only for your own sense of confidence and safety.”

They both nodded.

Then Amelia said, “Bob, we are just grateful the situation has been resolved. But can we ask you about your *modus operandi* as it were. What clues put you on to the substitution?”

“Every one of you helped. Several of your students. Jim, of course. Your local vet and his assistant. And your ex-student Allina Gray. Also the actual physical circumstances of the crime. Where, when, how, and why.”

“Allina?” Kristin said in surprise.

“Yes, I had a brief chat with her. I don’t know whether it would be worth writing to her parents to explain what happened and asking them if they would like to let Allina return. I think she is missing this place.”

“We were sorry when she left. A very nice conscientious girl.”

“And Lindi?” Kristin added. “What will happen to her?”

“I think she may be charged with conspiracy to defraud. But if you can give her some support it may be the best thing you can ever do. Because, you know, she is the true victim of everything that has happened.”

“Yes.” Amelia sighed. “Poor girl.” She rose and went over to a cupboard. “You are worth every penny of your fee—but Kristin and I have a little personal something for you as well.” She took a paper container with a string handle down and gave it to me. Inside were two bottles of Glenmorangie’s Ten Year Old and a box of chocolate truffles. I was touched. But I couldn’t resist asking how they had known my private foibles.

“It was Damien,” Amelia said. “He told us he was sending us the best man he knew. And that you had a liking for a good single malt.” She smiled quite charmingly.

It would’ve been churlish to tell them any reasonably conscientious country cop could’ve done the same.

- end -

## HIGH HORSE

- i -

I was tired when I drove in to my carport and went upstairs to my unit. I would go in and see Damien and Mark tomorrow. I poured myself a cold drink and went out on to the balcony. The sun was shining. People were down on the beach. It is always an odd feeling coming home to all this after being immersed, if only briefly, in the misery of other people's lives and troubles.

There wasn't much in my frig but I thought a can of soup would do and I would shop tomorrow. After all, how much food does one old dodderer really need?

I ran my phone messages through without expecting anything exciting. Last cab off the rank was a voice which introduced itself as Deborah Marrow. She would be glad if I could find the time to ring her. It wasn't a matter of time. It was more that we had been ships that pass in the night and I had the feeling we should simply go sailing on, to whatever different ports our navigation systems were set for. It wasn't that I had anything against Deb. I remember her as very beautiful. An exciting lover. Probably a good mother. But we had absolutely nothing in common, that I knew of, and her life was full of large problems including her husband who, at best, was an unpleasant and abusive man and, at worst, was a major crook. Deb undoubtedly needed some help and support but I didn't think I was the right person to provide it.

I could pretend the message had accidentally got wiped before I jotted down her phone number. If she really desperately needed me she could ring back. But in the end I thought 'better get it over' and rang the number. She answered straight away. "Bob! It's very good of you."

"No trouble." Only a minor lie. "Are you down in Surfers?"

"Yes, just for a few days. I know we never planned on seeing each other again. But Petra told me to ring you."

"Petra! What's Petra got to do with anything?"

Now if there is one thing Petra is strong on it is female solidarity so I had the sinking feeling that this would all prove to have something to do with women in need ...

"She thought you should know. I didn't want to tell you."

"Know what?"

"Bob—could I come and see you? Or you could come and see me? It would be easier to explain. I'm at the Sea-n-Sand units. No 5."

I said I knew the place. It is only about five minutes south of here. But I would be lying if I said it was no trouble to go and see her. I knew it wasn't a good idea to

put my shoes and socks back on. To pick up my wallet and car keys. To comb my hair and give my teeth a quick rinse. I felt it was about time Deborah realised this wasn't a white knight she'd rung but an old superannuated slob ...

— ii —

I found Unit 5. I rang. She opened the door to me. She was carrying a very small baby against her shoulder.

“Oh, hello, Deb. Are you looking after someone’s baby?”

But I knew then. I knew where Petra came into it. I knew why Deborah had come back into my life. Deborah hadn't just wanted a very brief fling. Deborah had wanted ...

“No, Bob. He’s mine. Mine and yours. That’s why I wasn’t going to tell you. It wasn’t fair to you. But Petra says men spend their lives walking away from responsibility ... something like that.”

“Oh, she does, does she?” Did she also take into account men who get set up, seduced, drawn into something where they don’t know what the stakes are?

Deborah was still attractive but she looked pale and weary and a bit out of shape. I had remembered her as someone who kept all her emotions locked away deep inside somewhere. But the baby seemed to have unfrozen something. She put on a small smile.

“I didn’t think you would be happy about the news—and it was all my fault. I did just throw myself at you.”

“True. But I suppose like all the girls told to say no I could’ve walked out the door.”

“Well, not really. It was your motel room.”

I didn’t know if I wanted to laugh or groan. The implications of it all seemed to overwhelm me. I didn’t want to be a father again. I didn’t want family ties. I liked my life because I could pick and choose the people I shared it with. I wasn’t even sure I could *afford* fatherhood. Instead of taking on an occasional job with Damien and Mark I would now have to put my poor nose to the grindstone. And where was I going to fit Deb into my life here? I really didn’t want mother and child in my unit ... Whichever angle I looked at it from it looked pretty grim.

“Bob, don’t look so gloomy. We really won’t interfere in your life. I promise. But just for you to know ... ”

“Deb, I hate to say it but Petra is right. It does take two to tango. So tell me about the bub and what your situation is at the moment.”

“I’ve called him Aidan Robert. I’m still living with Mum and my girls out at Tungin. I just came down for a short break and to see you.”

“And your mother knows—” I couldn’t bring myself to say ‘about us’ because I still didn’t think of Deb and myself as an ‘us’.

“Not really. I just told her I wanted to start a new life.”

Even so. Betty Marrow might be fairly taken up with her own life, she might be too kind-hearted to ask tough questions. But she would need to be blind, deaf, and dumb not to put a few ideas together.

“People out there just think it was my husband’s baby. They don’t know that I ran away from him. Mum knows that isn’t true. But she never pries. She has a very high opinion of you. I’m sure she wouldn’t mind about him being yours.”

I know there are cases of babies foisted on to men who have vaguely guilty feelings about being irresponsible. But now I wondered how they asked the key questions without sounding like absolute shits. The trouble with babies is—unless they come out with some completely disqualifying feature like a black skin or Chinese eyes—they all look pretty much the same. You can’t go by the hair which usually falls out or changes colour. You can’t go by their eyes which start out nondescript and only gradually get to be their final colour. You can’t go by their teeth because they don’t have any. And you can’t go by their size because they usually come early or late. I suppose you can demand a blood test but there again the etiquette of it all looks pretty tricky. And even if Deb wasn’t someone I wanted to share my life with she was a nice person who had already suffered a lot. I didn’t want to hurt her. I could probably go with the flow and see how the baby turned out.

“So you are planning to go back and stay with her?”

“Oh yes. My girls are there. They’re happy. I don’t want to spoil things for them by making them change school. And Mum is a great help.”

“Are you still afraid of your husband?”

“Yes. Petra is trying to find a way—either to get charges laid against him or make sure he never bothers us again. Bob, I know what you’re thinking.” If she did she was cleverer than me. I felt like someone who’s fallen off the tour boat into a whirlpool. “I did think I might be safer if I had a baby with someone else. That way he would never try to get me back. He wouldn’t want trouble with another man. And I wanted to feel I was normal. That babies were just things you could have and love. Not ... not hostages.”

She had begun to sound emotional. Naturally I backed off. I wasn’t up to any big scenes.

“Yes, I can understand that. Look, Deb, this is all pretty hard for me to come to terms with. I wish you’d given me a bit of warning along the way. And I’ve just come back from a pretty traumatic case down in New South Wales. I’ve got to do up my report for them. And I’d like to help you, money-wise I mean. So if you could take—” I opened my wallet and scrabbled round and came up with thirty-five dollars. It wouldn’t pay for many nights in Surfers.

“Oh no, I can’t take your money.”

“Yes, you can. I’m sure you’ve got a lot of expenses. How did you come down from Tungin?”

“By bus.”

I wouldn't fancy carrying a baby on a bus. But then Deb undoubtedly knew more about babies than I did. "Bus fares and nappies and staying here and food and all the rest of it."

"It's very kind of you."

I hadn't planned on asking to hold the baby but I thought I'd better bite on the bullet. She hesitated then handed over the bundle. The baby slept peacefully on. For that I was profoundly grateful.

"I just hope he takes after you," I said drily. "I'm no oil painting."

"I think you're a very good-looking man still." I suppose she couldn't say something more honest. And after all *she* had leapt into my unsuspecting arms ...

As I drove home I found myself wondering how I was going to pass on the news to my daughter that she now had a half-brother. And I couldn't help trying to second guess her response. But the exercise defeated me.

— iii —

I went in to the offices of Botti & Van Deen next morning. "With you in a tick," Mark said from in front of his computer. A man in a business suit and with a briefcase shared the tiny waiting area with me. I filled my time by debating on what might bring him here. Damien came through from whatever rooms they had out the back and said, "Mr Carroll, sorry to keep you. Come on through. Hi, Bob."

I went on sitting. Then Mark came over and said, "How did it go, Bob?"

"It's all in there. But the whole nasty business was an insurance scam. I've left information with the police down there. And with luck it won't mean having to go back for a court case. I also made some suggestions on improving their security. But I don't think it's ever possible to make what is effectively a farm as well as a school completely secure. The costs would be prohibitive for one thing. And it is supposed to be a school—not a jail."

He nodded and asked a few questions. Then he went over my expenses with me and wrote me a cheque on the spot. I signed the payment voucher and the business was concluded—unless anything in my report needed later discussion.

"We couldn't be more pleased, Bob. And we've got another job for you if you're interested. It's a bit outside our usual type of work. So if you don't want it we'll suggest he goes elsewhere."

Normally, I would be happy to say no. But I felt a few days away to do some more mulling over my private life mightn't be a bad thing.

"Where? Who? What?"

"Guy up the Lockyer. Not far from Laidley. His wife left him, taking their young son. No note. Took nothing. He's very worried. He'd like to know she's safe—if she is. He says if she doesn't want to come back to him he won't try to pressure her. But he's scared that she may not have gone of her own free will." He was his usual brisk waste-no-time self.

I didn't particularly like the sound of it. But then I doubt if I would've liked the sound of any domestic upset right then. And was he trying to get her back because

he genuinely cared and was worried—or because he was some sort of ‘control freak’?

“Okay, I’ll take it. But if it looks like she had good reason to leave him I’d like to be able to walk away from it.”

Mark nodded. “Sure. We take money up front to look into the case. The remainder on the completion of the case. So you’ll get your share of the upfront money. If you think the case stinks—that’s it. We forego the rest.”

“Fair enough.” I hadn’t previously asked how they managed the money side of things. It had seemed so remarkable to actually be paid for pulling dusty old rabbits out of tatty hats. Mark hunted out the name and phone details and I sat down there and then and rang Lee Palmer.

He sounded perfectly normal. But then Ian Brady and the rest of the bunch probably sounded pretty normal on the phone. I agreed to come up and see him tomorrow. He sounded a bit antsy. Was I sure I couldn’t come sooner? I asked him if he had any reason to believe his wife might be held captive, kidnapped, imprisoned, or just caught somewhere by accident. He said he had no idea what had happened. But I relented. I would come today if I could.

Then I went to see Deborah. I was off. Could I give her a lift, say up to Gatton? I was even willing to stretch a point and drive up to Toowoomba if that would be more helpful.

“No, it’s okay, Bob. I’ll go home at the end of the week. It’s nice here. The sea. People enjoying themselves. Just being anonymous.”

“Would you like to have the use of my flat while I’m away?”

She hesitated then said she’d like that. If I wouldn’t mind the mess. Right on cue the baby started to cry. She managed to hush him again and I said, “Right. Get packed up. And I’ll take you up there and show you around. I’ve got neighbours but the place is pretty well sound-proof.”

As luck would have it I met one of the downstairs people (I am in a building of four units), Alice, as we came in. I introduced her to Deborah and said I was going away for a few days and Deb was going to stay in my flat.

“How nice!” Alice immediately said as though she couldn’t wait to be a surrogate grandmother. Alice has two children but apart from always trying to pressure her to move into a Home I can’t see that they do much for her either as help or as company.

I showed Deborah around and told her Alice or any of the others would be willing to help her. I wondered about food. I’d decided not to bother with bread and milk seeing I was going away. But I didn’t suppose a new mother would want to live out of tins for a week.

“What say I ask Alice to babysit for a few minutes while we go down and get a few groceries for you?” Deborah agreed. Alice said she would love to so we left her with the baby and Deborah chose out a couple of bags of groceries.

Then I packed a few things into a bag, gave her my mobile number and the number of the man I was going to see, asked her to give my pots of cacti a tiny drop of water, and left her to tee up with her previous place and settle in. The place would probably be buzzing with gossip and speculation by the time I got back but I would face that when the time came.

— iv —

I've only ever driven through the Lockyer Valley on the way to somewhere else. Now I went up through Beaudesert and followed my map and was booked into a place called Lazy Day Cabins on the road into the little hamlet. As Lee Palmer had told me it didn't have a pub and as I am not wild about actually staying with clients this was the only other option, unless I stayed in Laidley and commuted the twelve kilometres every day.

The Cabins looked like a paddock into which someone had dropped some demountable boxes with a casual hand. A Shetland pony and a very ancient cow with an udder nearly down to her hooves grazed between the boxes. I parked under a large Moreton Bay fig and got out. My back was aching. Too much driving. But I stretched carefully then walked over to a little thing that looked a bit like a large porch on the side of an old weatherboard hall. I banged the bell and a young man came belting up the side path from some backwoods region.

“Hi! Can I help you?”

I booked a cabin for three days. The idea of finding a missing wife in three days struck me as wishful thinking but this young bloke said I could stay longer if I liked. He said he did breakfast but I'd have to go to the café along by the jetty for other meals. He said they had badminton, ping-pong and basketball in the old hall, pony rides and clock golf if I fancied either. I couldn't help a grin, thinking of me on that pony which looked a suitable size to pick up and tuck under one arm. I told him I had come up to see Lee Palmer so if he could just point me to my cabin ...

The cabins were quite comfortable and roomy. I dropped my bag, poured myself a glass of water, then went out and drove on down the road, turned left, then right, then left again, and came to an old ramshackle house next to another hall. This one looked more like an abandoned church, going by the shape of the windows, but a large sign said PALMER ACADEMY OF MARTIAL ARTS. An old faded sign with the Scout logo on it had been taken down and was resting on a couple of crates. It reminded me of the days when every Scout hall was surrounded by crates of empty bottles. Alas, the days of bottle refunds are long gone. Now they hang round waiting to be used as an offensive weapon.

I went over to the hall door and looked in. The place had been done up as a dojo with a polished floor, some attractive posters and banners, benches, change rooms, lists of classes available and their times and charges—including ‘Ladies Keep Fit’ and ‘Tots Exercise’. I wondered whether Mr Palmer could make a living in a place this size.

I was still standing in the empty hall when a voice behind me said, "Hi! Would you be Bob?"

Lee Palmer came and loomed over me. A big broad man with a heavy chin and a habit of bouncing on his feet.

"Yes. You're Lee?"

"Sure am." My first thought was that he was too chipper to be missing a wife and child. But my next thought was—it was all a façade. This was a martial arts instructor. He wasn't going to let himself go to pieces. "I've got a class at six so come on over to the house for a little while."

We went next door. His house was untidy but not oppressively so. Plates had piled up in the sink and I could smell something burnt on the stove. There was a pair of female slippers by the old couch beyond a small dining-table. It was one of those big all-purpose rooms with some chairs and a couch in the sunny window. One of them had a plastic train with a cord to pull it along looped over the rungs. As I looked around I could see other bits of evidence that a woman and small boy lived here. Had lived here.

"Want a drink, Bob?"

"Something cold, if that's convenient."

He took a bottle of mineral water out of the frig and poured two glasses.

I sat down and said, "Now, tell me about your wife and son and exactly when they went missing—and what's happened since then."

"Well, I can tell what's happened since. Bugger all. The cops won't listen till they've been gone long enough to be lost ten times over."

"True. But it saves getting bogged down in people late home."

"And even then they just treated it like Emma and Toby had gone visiting or run away with some other guy. They really know how to make you feel rotten. It was my sister who lives the other side of Beaudesert who said I had to get on to a private person. She put up the money to hire you."

"That's a decent kind of sister you've got."

"Yeah, she is. But, see, she knows Emma and she knows she wouldn't just walk out without a note or a phone call." I wondered if the sister believed passionately in her brother or whether this had something to do with families and reputations ...

I nodded. "So on the day Emma disappeared what happened?"

"Nothing happened. That's what's so peculiar. She takes Toby to play-school four mornings a week but not on Fridays. That's her morning for vacuuming the house and cooking some biscuits. I've got a fairly full schedule later on but in the morning I was doing some repairs out the back of the hall before one class at eleven. I'm pretty fit, y'know, Bob. I could do more classes but I can't get more people. So we garden and I do a bit of handyman stuff around the place."

In the next twenty minutes he told me he was pretty fit at least five times. I could see his conversation might pall on even the most devoted of wives. I didn't

say so. He came home for lunch but Emma and Toby weren't there. His sandwiches and a banana were on the table. He waved a hand at the now empty table. He didn't worry about them being gone as Emma often went along to the shop. Other times she went to see people about sewing. "She's very good. You name it, she can sew it. She did things for other people. Like repairs and a bit of dressmaking." And sometimes she went along to see her mother. His brow seemed to darken. "Bloody old witch. But even she swears black and blue that Emma didn't come by that afternoon."

I've got a mother-in-law who has never touched my finer feelings. My ex-wife Barbara's mother Susan. It wasn't so much that she was a snob, a social-climber, it was more that she constantly pointed out to her daughter ways in which I had failed to take advantage of a situation to improve the family's place in the world. "You should have seen—" was one of her favourite lead-ins. I should've seen opportunities waiting, problems looming, people to be buttered up, situations to be avoided.

I wondered what Lee's mother-in-law was like.

"We came here because of her—but I often think it was the worst thing we ever did. I got this hall for peanuts but that's about the only advantage I've found in coming here. She didn't even want to baby-sit so we could have an occasional night out, go to Gatton maybe."

"Did she ever have any ideas where Emma might be, something your wife might've said to her previously?"

"Well, if she did, she wasn't telling me."

"Where did you meet Emma?"

"In Brisbane. I worked at a centre there. Mainly karate and kung fu. It was pretty good. I didn't really want to leave and come up here but Emma thought it would be a nicer place for Toby to grow up in."

He told me something of his background, of what it was like setting up business here and getting known and encouraging people to come and learn karate and judo or join exercise classes. He told me people were a bit cool on the idea at first. They thought the place would end up full of hooligans giving people deadly karate chops but now people were getting pretty keen because they saw how it got the young people disciplined and working towards various goals.

I nodded. "So what do you think has happened?"

"That's it, Bob. I haven't a fucking clue. She's just disappeared into nowhere and taken Tobe with her. It doesn't make sense."

"And you are absolutely certain there was no other man in her life, no girlfriend, no one who might just have urged her to come to visit—and then persuaded her to stay away?"

"Absolutely. I don't pretend to *understand* Emma. Women always say men can't understand women and vice versa, y'know. But I reckon I knew her. You can't

spend seven days a week with someone, coming home for lunch, having them come next door to help out, and not *know* them."

I nodded cautiously. In theory.

— v —

Lee left me to look round the house and garden while he went back to take a beginners' karate class. In a way this was a godsend. Usually you have to look round people's personal rooms and belongings with someone breathing down your neck. My impression of Lee was of someone pretty rough round the edges but quite intelligent and ambitious. Emma was harder to picture. Lee gave every indication of still seeing himself as a happily-married man. But that didn't automatically mean that Emma saw things in the same way.

I felt sorry for him. Except for his sister there didn't seem to be anyone in his life he could really open up to. He was like someone determined to carry on as normal—and it was tearing him up inside. But was that all he was? He was adamant that they hadn't argued that day, that they got on really well, that their little boy was healthy and happy. But did he ever lose the plot? Were there occasional outbursts? And did their modest financial situation get him down? I jotted a few questions in to my notebook. It might be worth talking to the play-group mothers, gossiping round town to get a feel for how people saw the young couple.

But I felt I needed to drive round the district. Were there any natural hazards? Places to fall into, get caught in. The dam, obviously. Had anyone ever drowned in it? Other places. Dangerous corners. Cliffs. Waterholes. Somewhere that Toby might have got himself into trouble and Emma followed to save him ... A town dump. Abandoned fridges. A car-wreckers'.

And Emma's mother. Was she the sort of mother a daughter would confide in?

I had no image of her. But Lee had said she ran a small riding-school. I pictured the sort of place you sometimes see on the outskirts of country towns. Some dry paddocks. A few drums with bars set across them. Some yards and sheds all needing some repairs. Some local kids on shaggy ponies.

And if Lee didn't like her—there was a good chance she didn't like him.

Might she have urged her daughter to leave now before there were more children, before she lost her youth and attractiveness, before she got ground down by debts and failure?

I went round the house carefully. It was full of evidence of Emma's skill: embroidered cushions, tapestries framed on the walls, a sewing machine with a filing cabinet beside it and a big chest-of-drawers with each drawer containing materials carefully covered in tissue paper. In one corner was an old-fashioned dress dummy. Someone had painted 'Cleo' across its 'chest'. Toby's room was furnished with curtains and rug and quilt all showing Thomas the Tank Engine. Toys spilled out of a plastic crate and there was a small plastic table with paper and crayons left in what looked like the middle of a drawing. Hard to tell with a three-year-old when a picture is finished.

There were various baskets of clothes sitting waiting in the laundry. The old house had a verandah back and side. The front had a bank of windows and a path leading through some geraniums and petunias out to the gate and ten steps took you into the hall yard next door.

Out the back were a couple of mandarin trees and some neat rows of lettuces and carrots. Also a sandpit with some toys and one of those swings that come with their own stand. As I stood there looking out to what I could see of the neighbours a large marmalade cat uncoiled itself from some peaceful spot under the house and came up the back steps and suggested it was hungry.

I told it it would have to wait. It went over to two bowls on the verandah and lapped some water but the other bowl was empty and shining. "So pussy," I said, "are you so well loved that your young master and mistress would never abandon you voluntarily—or are you a nasty old fleabag that would scratch me for the pleasure of it?"

It suddenly seemed a very important question.

I sat down on an old vinyl armchair on the verandah and the cat immediately came over, leapt on to my unwilling lap, and settled down to purr. I tickled its ears. It wore a collar with a little tag which said TIGGER and gave a phone number.

"Well, Tigger, I think you had better come inside. For all I know you may be a detective cat and can point out the clues I have missed."

The cat consented to be lifted up. I got the feeling he was used to being carted round in various awkward configurations by a small boy. I took him into each room. He merely blinked yellow eyes, looked round casually, and showed no sign of getting excited about anything. In the front hall was a dresser with several nice family photos. Emma looked cheerful enough and Toby looked a pretty typical little kid with a front tooth missing.

Of course abuse can happen in families which present a composed and pleasant front to the world. It doesn't *have* to be black eyes and broken bones and nightly screaming.

I put the photo frames back. There was a small silky-oak desk in the lounge room, along with a bookcase. The books were a curious mixture. Some kids' books on the bottom shelf. A couple of Mills & Boon, several books of home handyman advice, *Small Plot Vegetables*, a couple of Agatha Christies and a Jeffery Deaver. A couple of old Westerns with 'John Palmer' scribbled on the fly-leaf. And a lot of books on the various martial arts. Less expected were Japanese travel books and grammars and a couple of hard-hitting political exposés and books about corruption.

The desk contained various books and ledgers to do with his classes, who had paid for what, what advertisements and equipment had cost. There was a receipt book. Also several files containing tax details. Lee Palmer had cleared \$12,000 last year. He probably needed everything his wife could make. And it didn't seem very likely Emma had been kidnapped for ransom.

Another file contained details of payments on this house. And a third contained household bills. I put everything back. I could see no particular reason to look into this personal stuff more carefully. Lee might be cheating his customers. He might be failing to pay his telephone bills on time. He might be involved in letting a buddy store stolen goods in a back room at the hall ...

But if anything he might be doing had a bearing on his wife's walking out then it wasn't obvious. Had Emma's mother known some fiddle was going on here and urged her daughter to walk out before the whole grubby pack of cards came down? Or had Emma herself finally come to the point where she could no longer turn a blind eye to something Lee was doing? I couldn't really make myself believe any of this. Somehow their lives seemed too small and open and ordinary.

Was Lee interested in the deals and scams and fiddles that other people, more powerful people, carried on—because he was doing the same thing or because he was planning to do something? Again, it was hard to picture.

He had left me, a stranger, in his house, unsupervised. Did he know I would go and look around. Undoubtedly.

The cat had meantime climbed on to the double bed in the room opening on to the back verandah. He was curled into a ball, his head half-hidden. But as I stepped into the room he raised his head and watched me. I walked over and opened several cupboard doors. No shortage of female clothing but it wasn't for me to say whether Emma had taken anything with her or not. I assumed Lee had given the police some indication of what she had been wearing when she left home last Friday ...

There was of course the tiny possibility that she hadn't left home at all. This old house was on low stumps. It would be a job to dig a hole under there, bent double, but not impossible. Could Lee have killed his wife in a rage and buried her? Would he kill his son as well? I don't pretend to be able to distinguish real pleasure in fatherhood from fake pleasure. Hadn't I been putting on just such insincere pleasure for the last two days? I had even managed a reasonable facsimile of the real thing.

Or might he have sent his son away somewhere?

Now that I came to think back it struck me as a bit surprising that it was his sister who had insisted on contacting an enquiry agent and had even offered to pay. I'm sure there are plenty of such caring and helpful sisters around. And yet it was ... odd was probably too strong a word. Was there a payoff? For helping him to hush up a spur-of-the-moment crime Sis got to keep a cute little boy? But if so she would have to have a suitable way of incorporating another child without comment. Maybe she acted as a foster parent. Maybe she already had scads of children of her own. Maybe she was a white slaver. Maybe she kidnapped children on demand. Wanted: three-year-old white Caucasian male with blue eyes.

"Puss, I think you're the only sane thing around here."

The cat stood up on the quilt, arched and stretched, then came over and sprang lightly down.

“It’s a puzzle, isn’t it? Not a thing that looks out of place, no suspicious stains, no sign of a domestic rumpus, no gaps where personal things were taken ... though Lee has had plenty of time to make everything look perfectly normal again ...”

Maybe that was the point of giving me the run of the house. If questions were ever asked I would be his proof that nothing untoward had happened in here ...

— vi —

I waited till Lee returned. By then it was nearly eight o’clock and I had taken pity on the cat and given him a handful of dry food and the remains of a tin covered in plastic I’d found in the frig. I’d also helped myself to several slices of bread, some cheese, and half a rather tired tomato.

“Sorry about that, Bob. Meant to be back sooner. I can do us a steak and some chips if you’d like.”

“Is there a café in town still open?”

“There’s the Rivoli. We sometimes went out to give Toby a treat. It’s nothing special but they can do us fish and chips.”

I wasn’t very hungry now but I didn’t think it would hurt to get a hint of how people round town might regard Lee. Was he on friendly first-name-terms with everyone? Or was he still seen as a stranger and a bit of an oddity in this country town?

Town is an over-estimation. Maybe twenty houses all up. A small weatherboard church. About four shops. A garage. The pumping and filtration plant along the foreshore of the muddy-looking dam. A jetty with a couple of boats tied up. A handmade sign: Learn to water-ski.

“Tobe was always at me to get a boat. We were thinking about it. Just a rowing boat.”

There was a gap of about six metres between the water and the shoreline and the mud didn’t really look very attractive. A little boy *might* plough through it. But it was a big might.

“Do kids play on it, rafts, homemade canoes. Go swimming. Jet-skis. Anything at all really?”

“When it’s really boiling people do a bit. Anything to cool down. And when the dam is full it’s nicer.”

“Did Toby ever try to go in when you weren’t looking?”

“No. We’ve got one of those inflatable backyard pools. He liked that. And I don’t see how he could go in and nobody notice in the middle of the morning. People would see him.”

My experience is that people don’t necessarily see what’s going on under their noses. Or they don’t take it seriously. Or they see it as someone else’s business. Or they have all sorts of private reasons for not coming forward ...

All those police pleas for witnesses to accidents to come forward, for people with information ... Sometimes it is very obvious that there were other people in the

vicinity, that the crime could not have been carried out in silence, that there must've been more perpetrators ... and all you get is a few crank calls.

The café had four tables and a yard adjacent with a hand-painted sign: Function area. It reminded me a bit of my childhood. Red laminex tables. Faded ads for lollies and ice creams. A middle-aged woman with tizzy yellow hair and a pink apron.

“Lee!” She looked up from wiping down the counter. “I haven’t seen you in a while.”

I tried to read things into this but it just appeared to be a straightforward statement of fact.

“Hi, Julie. This is Bob. He’s come to help me find Emma and Tobe.”

For a moment she simply stared at me. Then she said, “So it *is* true, what people are saying—that Emma’s gone away?”

She didn’t seem to know whether to commiserate or not.

A sort of spasm of emotion came over his rather heavy face. “She didn’t *go* away, Julie. Some one took her. And Tobe.”

Julie looked at me then back at Lee. She seemed to be unsure what to say next, maybe because Lee’s sudden intensity didn’t invite any sort of light response.

Then she got business-like. “Well, what can I do for you? I was just going to close up seeing I haven’t got any customers.”

“Would it be too late to get fish and chips?” I said mildly. “I’m not sure that I want to trust Lee’s cooking.”

She laughed at that. But it was a loud embarrassing titter and I felt rather sorry for her. Finally she looked up at the clock and said, “S’pose I can. You’ll have to wait a few minutes till I heat the oil again.”

“That’s okay. I’ll get a couple of drinks from the frig. What would you like, Bob?”

I didn’t really fancy another mineral water so I came over and took out a ginger beer. Lee obviously wasn’t a vegetarian but he was either fairly health conscious or he just had an addiction to mineral water. Julie busied herself with frying our dinner and getting out what remained of a bowl of coleslaw.

I could understand her feelings. She didn’t particularly want us here. She had probably been thinking in terms of putting her feet up and watching a bit of TV. But we were customers and she probably didn’t get knocked over in the rush most days.

Two kids, seeing her bustling round inside, came in and bought some chewing-gum. They looked over at us then they came over and said “Hi, Lee. Whatcha doing here?”

“Hi, boys. Bob, this is Grant and this is Mike. They’re both doing well. What is it next? Orange belt?”

They nodded. They didn’t seem to know what to make of me. They said, “See you,” and went out again. Lee spoke about them with enthusiasm. It was then that I decided I genuinely liked Lee Palmer. He might be a good actor. But he couldn’t

have made those two boys look at him with both liking and respect if he really was a charlatan. Or a sadist.

We ate our meal without dawdling. Lee did most of the talking. I said I wouldn't bother with coffee but I would get a couple of extra bottles of drink to take back to the Lazy Cabins. Lee went on out while I paid Julie and thanked her for staying on.

"That's okay. I didn't know what to say to Lee. There's all sorts of rumours going around but Cleo says Emma has just gone off to visit a friend in Brisbane. That's why I got a bit of a surprise when he said that about you."

"Emma is missing. But with luck there's no reason to be seriously worried."

"No. She always seemed happy with Lee. And Toby is a cute little fella."

I didn't know then that a generally friendly attitude towards Lee could very quickly change into something quite the opposite.

— vii —

I dropped Lee off home and drove back to my cabin and made a few notes and entered in the cost of my meal and the cost of filling up with petrol on the way here. Then I put Lee and Emma and Toby and Deborah and little Aidan and everyone else out of my mind and slept the sleep of the weary. It was already after seven next morning when I heaved myself out of bed.

I didn't really want to scoff down corn flakes and toast and coffee. I would much prefer to simply lie in bed another hour. But I thought I'd better go and see Emma's mother Cleo. I tried to tell myself she was sure to have sensible ideas on where her daughter was and what her daughter was doing and why she'd simply walked out. I tried very hard. But in my experience parents are often the last ones to know what has gone wrong in their children's lives. Of course the reverse is often true too. But children don't have the same responsibility towards their parents' happiness and safety. They didn't choose birth. At least not unless a particular view of reincarnation turns out to be correct and that isn't a road I've ever chosen to travel down. They didn't choose their parents. They aren't responsible for their parents' attitudes to life, to money, to status, to achievement, to health, to religion, to love and marriage. If my marriage had gone pear-shaped (or any other shape) while my daughter was still small I would've done my best to keep things organised and on a fairly firm and even keel.

But none of this pointless pondering was getting me out to visit Lee Palmer's 'bloody old witch'. I made my bed, tidied up, and went out.

On the other side to the Palmer house and hall was a paddock with someone picking pumpkins. I drove on past several more houses (wondering how Lee's few neighbours saw him and his home life) and passed an old farmhouse with sheds and a number of big trees around it. Beyond it I came to a road turning off with a sign post giving directions to various places and standing apart was another sign with two posts well dug in to say 'Marwood Equitation Centre'. This sounded very grand for what I assumed was a small riding school. I had been to a place near Warwick for a

few riding lessons, courtesy of Rachel's weird sense of humour, but I wasn't really expecting something on that scale.

I hadn't passed any other cars and it was a curious thought; if someone had come by and picked up Emma and Toby, a friend, a neighbour, a relative, would anyone have noticed? If Lee had been preoccupied or if he was busy with his class ... he might be looking out the door but it wasn't very likely ... Another car just might happen to come past ... But really the likelihood of being seen was very small. And even if Emma and Toby had walked along that quiet road there was only a small increase in the likelihood.

As I drove down into a slight dip then crested the rise I left the town and the dam behind me. The road curved around and crossed a bridge at the head of the dam. To my right I could see the small creek which fed the dam. Off this road was another, running parallel with the creek, with the entrance to the riding school which was situated in a long strip along this side of the creek.

This makes it sound small and makeshift but really I was impressed. Neat, sparkling, beautifully designed, not a thing out of place. But small. There were a couple of cars, a float, a small truck. There were four horses out in a jumping arena. I counted ten doors on the row of stables. But it obviously wasn't on the same scale as the place I'd gone to. I wondered if scale mattered. People pay incredible amounts to go to inspirational talks. I wondered what it would cost to come for a session here.

I parked and got out, my feet scrunching on the gravel. Would Cleo Marwood be out there on a horse or was she inside doing office work or setting out their morning tea? I couldn't guess. I thought back to that dress dummy with Cleo across her chest. But there was nothing cruel about the image. It was almost as though someone had been poking mild fun.

I was still standing there debating when a gate opened and a woman came walking through. She looked very neat and smart, not a thing out of place, her hair neatly rolled up in a hair net. If this was Cleo she might well find her son-in-law a bit of a slob. Neither his house nor his business was remarkable for neatness. But I would be more suspicious if they were as tidy as this.

It was Cleo. She came over and introduced herself and asked if I was interested in a course. I introduced myself and said I had been asked to look into the disappearance of Emma and Toby. I wondered if she could spare me a couple of minutes.

"Nonsense!" She looked at me more closely. Her voice suggested she had gone to a very expensive private school—or she was as meticulous with her words as she was with her fences. "Emma's gone to Brisbane to visit a friend."

"Can you provide me with an address or phone number?"

"No. I cannot. Nor would I if I could. You'd better come into the office for a few minutes. I don't want my daughter's affairs made public."

The office was a small room with some cupboards, some nice photographs, a large map of the centre, a computer, and a fax. She directed me to a chair. I

wondered if anyone had ever ignored Cleo. It wasn't that she was rude or unpleasant. She was in her fifties but her face was quite pleasant. I suspected she usually got her way simply by force of character and absolute confidence that she was right. And how had Emma felt about her mother?

"So you say your daughter is in Brisbane but you don't know that for sure?"

"Of course I do. Emma was a bright and intelligent young woman with a good job when she married that—that moron. I'm not in the least surprised she has taken a few days respite away from him."

"Has she ever gone and taken Toby without letting her husband know before now? You realise she is now officially listed as a missing person?"

"I do not normally have any dealings with police but if they want another opportunity for egg on their collective faces that is up to them. And I hardly see that my daughter's life is any of your business."

"So it was her husband's decision to move back here?"

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"If she grew up here, if she has friends locally, whereas her husband is a stranger in town, then she may have confided her plans to an old friend."

"I think you will find that it doesn't take three years to get to know everyone around here."

"True. So she doesn't have any old friends—only new ones."

"My daughter is an attractive and popular woman. The question doesn't arise."

"Mrs Marwood, you are under no obligation to help me, I have no official status in this business, but if there is even the *slightest* chance that your daughter did not leave willingly then I hope you will reconsider your attitude."

"I don't think I like your tone of voice, Mr Creighton. We are not the sort of people who turn up in sordid domestic quarrels and hostage dramas."

"You may not be. But if someone has kidnapped Emma then they may not have taken that into account."

I had assumed that because neither Lee nor Emma was making obvious money that there wasn't any money in the case. But now I wondered. It wasn't that this place, situated outside a small country town, would fetch major money as real estate or as a business. But I would go bail that there was some money in the Marwood background. If it hadn't been Emma's choice to come back here, though I was inclined to believe it had been, then might Lee have seen possibilities to touch his mother-in-law for an occasional small loan? Even so, it wasn't the place to come for his line of work. The fact that he liked youngsters and seemed to have a good rapport had no doubt helped him get going. But there simply was no large pool of people out there to entice into that shabby old hall.

"I don't think this conversation is getting us anywhere—"

"Have there ever been any threats, any pressures, old boyfriends, neighbourhood quarrels, anything at all, that made your daughter upset or worried?"

I was surprised she let me get all that out.

“Of course not. You don’t seem to realise that my daughter is not the sort of person people like you have to go hunting for.”

“I’m sorry, Mrs Marwood, but there are no people anywhere immune to crime and hurt. But I will leave you to your work. Thank you for your time.”

The whole thing was deeply disappointing. And was it simply her view that nothing could’ve happened to Emma—or was it that it was Lee who had called in some help?

— viii —

As I went out the gate and crossed the yard a man over in the jumping arena turned round. For a moment I was startled, then my old brain said ‘I know that bloke’ then it tried to track down a place, a time, then hardest of all a name. I finally dredged up Peter. Peter who? Nothing came to light. But he was obviously going through the same process. He came over to the fence and said, “We’ve met, haven’t we?”

“Bob Creighton. And you’re Peter. But I can’t do better than that. I met you when I was staying with the Holmes family that time.”

“That’s right! Ghastly business. People still discuss it—why we hadn’t seen that anything was terribly wrong.”

“So what are you doing down here?”

“Oh, this is work! I still have the farm.” I vaguely remembered his wife but decided not to ask after her. I don’t think she liked me. She was not unlike Cleo in believing that everyone else’s lives should be an open book when the police came calling; only hers should be sacrosanct from official gaze, or unofficial for that matter. “I come down here a couple of times a year to run master classes in showjumping, course-building … my line of expertise. What about you, Bob, what brings you in to see Cleo?”

“It seems her daughter and grandson are missing.”

He looked surprised. “She hasn’t said anything to us.”

“She maintains her daughter is visiting friends.”

“I see. And you don’t think she is?”

“No. But as Cleo is determined to be as unhelpful as possible it’s hard to get a real sense of the daughter, what might have happened, and whether there is a normal ordinary reason for her absence.”

While we were speaking the other riders had come over and dismounted and gone over to a picnic table to have a drink. The morning was warm and dry. Behind us was a small truck and Peter led me over to this. I wasn’t sure if he didn’t want the others to overhear.

“This was my invention, Bob. I got that sick of packing and unpacking everything that I designed the truck so that everything inside folds up or lies down or can be swung up. I use it for lunch, for taking small classes, for harness demonstrations, you name it, it’s been worth its weight in gold.” He wound up a handle and raised one side to let me look in. “Natty, isn’t it?”

“I’m impressed.”

“So, Bob, how long do you think you’ll be around here?”

“Good question. I’ve still got various avenues to follow up.”

“Well, if you’re not frantic—would you like to come up and see the course I’ve built in Cleo’s paddock? It’s one of the best crosscountry courses I’ve seen—if I do say so myself. A couple of the others are coming out to ride it when I go up to check on my water jumps. A real challenge to keep them looking reasonable in a paddock with no permanent water. That’s how Cleo got the paddock in the first place.”

I looked around. No sign of a crosscountry course in these manicured yards and paddocks. Peter saw my gaze. “Oh, not here. Over the bridge and up the hill. There’s a sign on the gate. It’s about half a kilometre from here. We’re going up about one if you’d like to join us.”

I wasn’t sure that I could put on my time sheets: visit to paddock to look at horses and jumps. But then it was a constant problem. What constituted, for someone in my position who mainly depended on chatting to people for results, work? I said I would. With luck it would help Cleo mellow towards me. She *must* know if Emma had old friends here, people she saw without Lee, people she had grown up with ... maybe even an old flame or two. If Emma had been in her late teens when she left here for Brisbane and her meeting with Lee there was ample time to have had affairs. Not that I really thought Cleo would take kindly to Emma going out with local pumpkin growers or the youngster at the Lazy Cabins. It might even be why Emma had left home in the first place: to get away from her mother’s critical eye.

But were the intricacies of the mother-daughter relationship relevant? Had Emma run away from Lee, from her mother, from the town, from something I couldn’t guess at—or had she been enticed away? Someone who said casually “Come out and have lunch with us, bring Toby, we’re going to ... ” Going to what? And where?

I told Peter I would be happy to join them. I would drive up after a spot of lunch and meet them all there. As I walked over to my car I had the curious feeling that he was simply standing watching me with a thoughtful look on his face. But when I had opened the car door and climbed in he was walking over towards the others. I wondered if I should have told him to keep my visit low-key.

— ix —

I drove back to the Palmer home but there was no one around except the marmalade cat.

“You and I, puss, might be beginning a beautiful friendship—but you can’t answer my questions and that is what I really need. Someone to give me an insight into Emma, Toby, the whole family dynamics.”

The cat jumped up on to the wooden railing along the back verandah and pushed himself against my hand. I patted him absently. He was in several of the photos of Toby. Obviously the sort of good natured cat which will allow himself to

be picked up any-old-how, draped here and there, dressed up, put into a cubby, and generally given what a less good-natured beast would regard as a hard time.

“You’re missing them, aren’t you, puss. I wonder if they’re missing you?”

But no one was around to tell me about the family and the cat and whether Toby was somewhere asking “Can’t I go home? Tigger will be missing me.”

I waited about ten minutes but Lee didn’t turn up. I had no idea of his daily timetable and I didn’t feel like barging into the middle of a group of size-20 women wearily taking themselves through a slimming routine.

I drove slowly round town. In fact I spent the next ten minutes driving to and fro in the hope of both getting a very clear sense of the town and perhaps seeing somewhere that should be investigated. A subsided bank. An old rubbish tip. A place along the dam which might entice a small boy to go down to the water, a playground with hiding places ...

Then I went round to the café and ordered a plate of toasted sandwiches and a cup of coffee. I also asked Julie if she could do me up an extra packet of sandwiches, a banana, a piece of vanilla slice, and two bottles of bitter lemon. It might get to be a hungry business watching riders and horses flashing by while I merely stood around in the dry grass.

She served two men who came in leaving a flat-bed truck with a small ride-on-mower on it; she served a small child who came in wanting a packet of Smarties. I didn’t think parents gave their small children Smarties in these more careful days. Then an elderly man came in and said he would like a cup of tea and a rissole with chips.

“Won’t be a minute, Les. Take a pew.” She waved in my direction. I wasn’t sure if this was intentional or not. But the old bloke wandered down and plonked himself across for me.

You never know with men. Some can talk the hind leg off a donkey and others think they’re being loquacious if they say “Hot day”.

Les, fortunately, was one of the ones who soon get wound up. He told me he didn’t think it was going to rain. He said it wasn’t much of a year for pumpkins (‘full o’ bones’) but he’d seen worse. He complained about the Beattie government. He took a swipe at John Howard for “letting too many Asians in”. I said I thought he was doing his damnedest to keep them out—if they came by boat.

This old codger asked me how else they would come—if not by boat?

I was beginning to wish Julie had waved him in the opposite direction. “Most come by plane these days.”

He seemed to consider that. Then he said, “Doesn’t make sense. Either you keep the lot out or—” He couldn’t decide on the or.

“Well, drop him a line. Tell him his policy needs to be consistent.”

This old codger simply stared at me then he said, “Whatcha doing in these parts?”

“At the moment I’m having lunch. But I’m also trying to find where a young woman called Emma Palmer has gone.”

The name seemed to ring a bell. “Wife of that fella that teaches the kiddies to break bricks with their bare hands?”

“Sounds like the same. Have you actually seen them breaking bricks?”

He suddenly grew confiding. “Did. Once. You wouldn’t believe it. I said to my nephew, when you can do that, you’ll know you’re clever. He said it’s all technique. Do you reckon it is?”

“A fair bit. But you’ve got to be fit, your mind focussed. Do you ever see his wife round town?”

“Sometimes. She’s a looker all right. Better than her mum. And she smiles at you. No one’s ever got a smile out of that—” He couldn’t seem to decide how to describe Cleo.

I did consider calling her stuck-up, hoity-toity, got tickets on herself ... but as this old-timer started chomping on his lunch I thought there is something to be said for Cleo’s way of going about things. I’m not really struck on spraying spit and crumbs of beefburger.

“Did you know Emma before she married Lee?”

“Well, I don’t know about know exactly. She went out with a young fella that was mates with my grandson for a while. Dunno what happened. Took off for Brisbane a few weeks later. Then she come back years later, married. Didn’t want to settle down here maybe.”

“Do you remember the man’s name?”

“My grandson? Course I do.”

“No, the other young bloke.”

He worked his jaws around his meat for a while then said, “Josh, I think. Josh Brodie.”

“Does he still live round here?”

“Dunno. Don’t keep up with things these days. Still a few Brodies round the place I’d reckon. I don’t get out much. This is my treat. Julie always gives me a bit extra. I come in once a week. Have something nice. Have a bit of a chat. Sets me up for the week.”

He got stuck into his chips with a gusto before they got cold.

Time was getting along but I was still vaguely hopeful he might drop something else besides his lunch. I was tempted to talk about Cleo and the riding school but he dismissed it as “more money than sense” and told me he’d heard people paid a thousand dollars a week to come there. I wondered how many horse people would pay that—if it was true. On the other hand if you got accommodation, all meals, Peter’s master class and a ride in a dry paddock it might well be worth the money.

I tried to bring him back to Emma and her old friends but he preferred to go on about the way the kids came in here and made “such a racket you can’t hardly hear

your head think" and then he told me about Julie's husband who had gone off with a woman who was going round getting "them census forms they make you fill in". I commiserated.

"Yeah, things go on here, you'd never believe."

"What sort of things?"

"I've seen 'em with me own eyes, down the back of Craig Merton's sheds when he gets the pickers in, y'know. Not a stitch on. Carrying on there round the back." He tapped his nose. "Orgies, y'know. Fellas lining up. Disgusting, that's what it is. I said to him he should tell 'em where they get off. He just laughed and said, doesn't bother me, so long as the work's done. And I said, yeah, well, it's botherin' me. All that naked business."

"But it's not local people, is it?"

"Heck no! But it doesn't take long for the young 'uns to think they'll get in the swim. Next thing—they're off to the coast. We're not good enough for 'em any more."

I suppressed a sudden desire to laugh. The old duffer was dead serious.

"Would young Emma be one of those ones, do you think, that wanted to go off to the bright lights for some of this so-called fun?"

"That's dead right, mister, so-called. They get there and they wonder what's hit 'em. I've seen it on the TV. Police saying it's too dangerous to go around some streets, there's that much drugs and sex." He dropped his voice on sex. I was pleased to know he didn't hide behind euphemisms all the time.

"She was a very pretty girl, I'd say." Possibly I should've said 'is'.

"Who was?"

"Emma Palmer."

"So she's gone too, eh. I reckon you'd better go down and hunt round that there Fortitude Valley. I've heard you fall over 'em on the corners." I assume he meant sex-workers.

"She has a young son. Little tyke called Toby."

"Yeah, I've seen him. He plays in that playground down by the pump house."

"Has there ever been an accident at the pump house?"

He chomped a while. "Don't reckon so. But you never know with machinery. They tell you these planes are that safe you wouldn't believe. And then you see 'em blowing up. You wouldn't get me on one."

I agreed. But time was passing. I thought I'd better leave him to his own devices. I said it had been nice meeting him and I might see him round town again.

"Probably won't. I put m'feet up most arvos. Read a comic or two. Have forty winks. And I gotta look after my cat. It's a brother to the one the Palmers've got. A ginger."

"Their cat seems very nice and friendly."

“Yeah, s’pose it is. Don’t reckon cats go much on that karate stuff.” He wheezed so much I thought I’d have to start banging him on the back. But he was obviously tickled that he had come up with what he regarded as a funny statement.

I said it was nice meeting him, took the bag of things Julie had done up for me, and went out. The day was hot and still and I didn’t really fancy walking round a paddock but I didn’t have anything else planned to do. I might try the play group but they were obviously a morning collection of possible information. Would Emma share with other young women if she was really miserable here? She might. But if she was planning to leave so suddenly I had the vague feeling she would keep it secret even from other women. A small place like this wouldn’t take long to spread a vague hint all around—and when it got back to its starting point it would probably have hardened into a certainty.

— X —

I passed Peter and four riders on my way out to the paddock. The sign was there. Crosscountry Course. Marwood. Enter at Own Risk. I drew into the verge and waited for them to reach me and unpadlock the gate. Then I thought I might as well go in and find myself a nice possie to watch them from. The paddock had a neat post-and-rail fence alongside the roadside but wire elsewhere. There was a small flat place just inside the gate then the land sloped away on the north side of the area. There was also a rough track that swung around to the south-east and ran along a long rocky ridge. The paddock was large, at least a hundred hectares at a guess, and timbered.

It was hot and still up here on the ridge and I strolled along for several hundred metres. Here and there I could see some substantial jumps. I wondered where Peter’s troublesome water jumps were. Of course spectators always like water jumps; they wonder if the riders will end up in them. But what do you do if you don’t have a dam or a creek or a windmill? Perhaps some sort of impermeable material laid in a ditch. I didn’t think riders would take kindly to having to jump over a concrete tank or something equally hard—but then I am a novice in such matters. But as I walked I found myself wondering about the paddock itself. Had Cleo bought it, going cheap maybe, because it didn’t have water. Or had it been excised from a local farm. This seemed more likely. Now and then, through the trees, I had glimpsed what appeared to be some sheds in the distance. We seemed to have left flat vegetable country behind and I caught sight of a few cattle grazing in the far distance. I was musing on this not very exciting subject when something else was gradually brought to my attention.

I have a keen sense of smell. It is the one of my few attributes that has come in most useful over the years. At one stage I even thought of writing a pamphlet about smell as a forensic tool. Most cops can pick up the smell of marijuana at ten paces. Other things have been known to help in an investigation; someone who smells of an animal, the smell of paint, chlorine, perfume, wine, burnt plastic, various plants

... you never know what smell you have left behind for someone else to smell. And this smell was of something dead.

It was faint up here. But I felt I should climb down the small escarpment and see what it was. A dead fox. A dumped dog. An animal which had got into the paddock and couldn't get out again. Something some local hoon had shot. A koala. Did they have koalas here?

But as I followed the very faint sound of flies and the growing smell I felt increasingly worried. It wasn't a bird or a rat or a hare.

— xi —

Caught in under the overhang and partly covered by rocks was a dead body. I could see the hair tied up with one of those spangly things girls use on ponytails. It was a temptation to go in close, handkerchief over my nose, and try to get an idea of what had happened. But the person was very clearly dead. Already the heat had bloated the features.

I turned and hurried back up the ridge and along the track. Peter was just giving his students a talk on how to tackle the first jump.

He turned. They all looked at me. I was puffing. "Sorry. I'm afraid your ride's off. We'll have to call the police."

"What is it, Bob?" Peter looked worried.

"Not for me to say but there is a dead body up there under the ridge. It's been dead for a while. Has anyone got a mobile?"

Peter took one out of his pocket. "What do you want me to do, Bob?"

"Ask them to send a team here, tell them how to get here. I can wait and show them down if you would all like to continue your ride somewhere else."

People sort of milled round. They wanted to know more. But they didn't want to look ghoulish. Peter turned away to call up triple-o. The horses snorted and looked uneasy. All this psyching up for a gallop and now they were condemned to stand around. I didn't blame them and I wondered if horses could smell what people couldn't.

He turned around in a few minutes and said gloomily, "They said it will be a while. I'm not even sure they believed me. Soon know, I s'pose. So ... what would you all like to do?"

Several of them (two men and two women; all maybe in their thirties) said they might as well return to the Centre. The others said, seeing they had come all the way up here they might ride on up the road a way and then return. It didn't take Einstein to see that they wanted to have some insights to take home with them at the end of their week.

Peter agreed and all five rode away up the deserted road. I was left to the stillness of a bush paddock. The occasional sound of a magpie. The faint little sounds of the bush. But I had a different question burrowing away: if that was Emma Palmer then where was Toby? And if it wasn't Emma—then who was it?

I walked back along the track, half-expecting to find I had dreamed up the whole thing. I had been hired to find Emma Palmer. Okay, by hook or crook, alive or dead, I would find her. But the smell was still there. I walked on. Was there another grave site. But after a long walk along the curving track, then a long hot walk back, then another walk in the other direction I hadn't come upon anything suspicious. Was Toby in there under the rocks or under his mother?

The place which had seemed such a normal paddock an hour ago now seemed gloomy and full of a kind of waiting and sinister apprehension.

— xii —

I hadn't wanted to contaminate a possible crime scene but the two men who turned up eventually had no such scruples. They tramped down the slope, grumbling, and saying things like, "yeah, a bit whiffy" and then "strewth, yeah, looks like she's copped it for sure". It isn't my job to teach my ex-colleagues their jobs but then these were local men who probably didn't get to see many corpses ...

"Look, I'd go carefully if I was you. There's a good chance she's been killed. So the CIB won't be any too happy if you walk all over everything."

"How do you know she's been killed? Could've just fallen down the rocks there."

"And carefully covered herself up at the bottom? I don't think so."

It wasn't the way to win friends and influence people. But they finally accepted it might be a better idea to call in the heavies before trying to move the unfortunate woman. They tramped, puffing, back up on to the rutty track and walked back towards the gate. I hoped no sharp lawyer would ever call on me to say they did everything by the book. I turned and followed them.

One of them had got back into the car to radio in. The other was standing there pulling out a smoke. He took it from his lips and tapped it on the back of his hand. "So how did you come to find the dame in the first place?"

I took out my wallet and showed him my identification. He put bushy eyebrows up. "How come?"

"A bloke called Lee Palmer asked me to see if I could contact his wife who went missing last Friday, just check that she was okay. I came up yesterday to have a look around. He had her and his son listed with Missing Persons but he wasn't too sure he was being taken seriously."

"So you reckon this is his wife?"

"I don't know. I've only ever seen a photograph of her. You'd need to get her husband or her mother to have a look. And there's no sign of the little boy—unless he's somewhere in there underneath her."

"Nasty." He lit his smoke and went on over to the car.

I could go and sit in my car and eat the food I'd got Julie to pack. But I wasn't particularly hungry and I found the waiting round pretty hard to take. If this wasn't Emma then it wasn't my case and I had better get back to the main game. If it was Emma then I didn't fancy the next few hours. I walked back once more along the

track. Out of sight of the two men I circled round very carefully. I wanted to have another look at the slight indentations I thought I had seen before. The ground was dry. The grass was dry. But I was almost ready to swear that the body had been dragged. Here and there was the sign of a shoe heel catching an open piece of earth. Here and there was the faint sign of broken grass stalks. It wasn't an obvious trail. But I thought the body had been hauled quite some distance.

The puzzling thing about it was that the body did not seem to have been carried down from the road but up from the bottom fence.

— xiii —

When I got back up to the road the car was gone. Had they been told it would be some time before reinforcements would get here and had ducked off to get some sustenance? Or had they gone to get Lee and bring him out here?

I finally took out my tucker bag, selected a sandwich and sat there eating slowly. I wondered how far Peter and the others had gone. I wondered how long I would end up waiting here.

A half hour went by. I sometimes think that the reason so many people opt out of careers in police, army, air force, emergency services, and all the rest is the sheer amount of waiting. I always carry a book or two.

But as I sat there peacefully I heard the riders coming back up the road. I put my food aside. They would probably find the idea of eating just after viewing a dead body pretty gross. But then, although it never gets any easier, I have seen a lot of dead bodies.

“Did they turn up?” the young woman named Ailsa called out.

“Yes, they've gone for reinforcements. I don't know when they'll be back.”

They all came and milled around for a couple of minutes. The horses had obviously had a fair work-out as they were sweating in the heat of mid-afternoon.

“What do you think, Bob, should we hang around?” Peter looked at his watch. I wondered what delights Cleo might have waiting back at the Centre.

“Not a lot of point really. They can come and interview you there. Or are you leaving soon?”

“No. We'll be there another day.”

“Good-oh. But the thing that is really worrying me is how to prepare Cleo in case this is her daughter. Do you think you could very gently break it to her but making it clear we don't yet have an identity. If it's a stranger it's only an unpleasant blip for her. If it is Emma then at least it won't burst on her like a thunderstorm—”

“But it still will be,” the other woman Lauren said. “Her daughter. My God! How's she going to cope with that?”

“I know.” It wasn't the moment to say that Cleo had hardly been proactive in the search for her daughter. “But while you're all here can I ask you all a question. When were you last up here and how often would Cleo's people usually come up here?”

“We haven’t been up at all,” the group said. But Peter looked worried. “I came up here on Monday,” he said carefully. “I was working on that jump down there.” He pointed. “I was here maybe half an hour, maybe a bit more.” The thing he was pointing to was a large bank, gently graded on one side but with railway sleepers on the steep side and a single pole set about a metre out from the edge. It looked like an instrument of torture to me.

“Would people have known about you coming up here?”

“Cleo.”

“And anyone who saw you coming up here.” Ailsa was obviously a stickler for the precise facts.

Peter nodded. “Bob, do you think … well that she was here already?”

“It’s possible. But I doubt if it would have made a difference to anything.”

“It would’ve tightened the time frame,” Ailsa said. “Made it easier to check alibis, that sort of thing.”

“The clues would’ve been fresher.”

“People might remember cars on the road.”

“And what about the little boy?”

Listening to the others Peter got a kind of hunted look on his face. Poor bastard. Unless he had taken to crime then I doubt if it would’ve made a speck of difference. And if I was right in thinking the body had been moved here it might only have been brought in the last day or two.

But after they had accepted that there was nothing they could do here and turned and clattered off down the road towards the bridge I was back to sitting in this strange sort of suspended moment. Then it occurred to me that my camera was in the glovebox. It wasn’t the sort of thing to show every grain of dirt, every broken twig, but I trailed wearily back down to the overhang and from a sensible distance fired off a couple of dozen shots of everything, body, surroundings, aspects. Then I walked back up again. I was beginning to feel that I had more than earned my keep.

About ten minutes later three cars came up the slope and pulled in untidily on to the verge.

— xiv —

They didn’t want me around. But they asked where they could contact me. I gave them the Lazy Cabins address, my mobile, and for good measure Damien’s number.

No one had told me to do or not do anything so I drove round to the Palmer home and called out for Lee. He came out from round the back of the house. “Oh, hi, Bob. Any luck?”

“I’m afraid it may be bad luck. I don’t want to get your hopes down yet, but I’m afraid the police have found a body up in Cleo’s back paddock. It’s not for me to say but they may come to ask you to say whether or not it is Emma. I hope it isn’t. But I think you need to be prepared.”

For a moment he just gaped at me. Then he said quite calmly, “And Toby?”

“No sign of anyone else. But they’ll know when they move her.”

He stood there for a long moment trying to digest this. “And you think it is Emma?”

“I don’t know, Lee, but yes I think it’s quite likely.”

“And how did she die?”

“I don’t know. I don’t suppose they’ll know for sure until they can get her out of there. She’s up there in that rocky bit. Do you know if she ever went up there with Cleo?”

“Yeah, once or twice.”

“Riding, walking, in the car?”

“She wasn’t really fussed on riding but sometimes Cleo would talk her into coming out for a ride with her. Look, shouldn’t I be doing something? Going up there maybe?”

“If you want. But I think I’d better warn you—if it is Emma—then the police will probably want to ask you some tough questions. The husband is always the first suspect.”

“But—I was the one who listed her as missing! I called you in! I’m the one that wanted to find her—”

“Doesn’t matter.” It was the first time I had seen him get angry. It is always a curious question. The mildest person. And then they get angry. But how angry is angry. How violent is angry. It is often hard for an outsider to know. And marriage, like parent and child, is the most intimate and the most dangerous of relationships. “It’s a natural response. Most women are killed by the men in their lives. But it may not be Emma. I’m just warning you to think back to last Friday. Who was around. What classes you had. How many people saw you that morning. Things like that. They will probably ask you.”

I think at that moment he hated me.

He went inside without another word and got a shirt and sunglasses and came out with his car keys; a minute later he drove away.

I didn’t know whether to feel sorry for him or not.

The cat came out from under the verandah and came over to me. I have never been very fussed on cats but I bent down and gave him a tickle. “Things aren’t looking good, Tig.” Because if it wasn’t Lee, and it wasn’t Cleo, then we were like a scientist up against a mysterious invisible particle. Who might be the X factor in this situation?

I went inside and helped myself to a cold drink from his frig and sat down and put my feet up on another chair. There was a copy of the *Gatton Star* on the table but I didn’t feel any great interest in local doings. I tipped my head back a little and closed my eyes.

I must've nodded off because I was woken by the sound of a car door slamming. I sat up and looked around, a bit bleary-eyed. Great Sleuth Sleeps on Job. The cat continued to snooze on the couch by the window.

It was Lee. He came up the path and slammed inside. He saw me. For a moment his face worked. Then he said simply, "It's Emma."

I'm not much into New Age Guy stuff. No hugs. No telling people they need to get stuck into their grieving. I said, "I'm sorry, Lee. What now?"

"They want me to come in for questioning? What should I do?"

"Take soap, towel, toothpaste, clean underwear, a tracksuit. Ask them to call you someone from Legal Aid if you want support. Where are they taking you? Laidley or Gatton?"

"Gatton."

"What about your sister?"

"Yeah, can you call her and tell her what's happened. She's in the teledex under Deanne Smith."

"Okay."

"Bob, I don't know if you'd stay here, just keep an eye on things ... and I won't be back in time for my class this evening. Could you whack a sign on the door." He waved vaguely in the direction of the hall. "And Toby." He'd had himself pretty well under control but now he broke down and started sniffling. "They didn't find him there. Maybe he's somewhere out there. Maybe he's trying to get home. Maybe someone's found him."

I didn't particularly want to get drawn more and more into this mess but I didn't feel I could say no. But after he had fiddled round vaguely, wiping his nose and saying he couldn't believe it, I watched him drive away and then I came inside again and made my first call to Damien and Mark. I had been hired to find Emma. I had found Emma. Did they want me to stay with things or leave it all to the police now?

I got through to Mark and after he'd discussed it briefly with Damien he came back on and said, "What's your take on it, Bob. Do you reckon he's responsible?"

This was the sixty-four dollar question (or in these days of rising prices six thousand and sixty-four dollar question) and I still couldn't decide. "On a scale of one to one hundred I'd say I am ninety per cent sure he didn't do it. But he may have a heck of a job convincing them he didn't."

"Have you got a line on anyone else?"

"No. And there is still a small chance it was an accident and someone panicked and tried to hide it."

"And hiring us might make him look good. Yes. But if you're willing to stay on and do a bit more digging, Bob, that's okay from this end. Give us a ring tomorrow and let us know how things are shaping."

Then I rang Ms Smith. There were two numbers listed for her. I tried the one marked (w) first and got her at what sounded like a hair-dressing salon. I said I had some serious news for her and would she prefer I ring back after work.

She sounded like a million middle-aged Australian women. She said, "Is it about Emma?" I said it was. "Okay, shoot. I've been worrying all week." I wondered what to read into this. Did she think Emma's absence meant something serious or was she secretly anxious about her brother's occasional outbursts of violence or did she know that the family had been threatened or pressured in some way ...

I told her what had happened and that Lee had gone in to be interviewed.

"Okay. So should I try and see him tonight?"

"They may simply get him to make a statement then let him go. In which case he might like to ring you."

We finally arranged it that she would take the day off tomorrow and drive up here. If they had charged Lee she would stay on here and look after everything. Then she asked the question that had been hanging fire. "Do you have any idea where Toby might be? Do you think he's dead too?" Her voice caught on 'dead'.

I had to say no, I really had no idea, but I had one more question for her. "Do you know of anything in Emma's life that might've involved threats from someone, anyone really. Friends, relatives, neighbours, schoolmates, an old boyfriend, anyone at all."

I could hear voices and noise in the background. She sounded a bit flustered. "I'll give it some thought and I'll come up and see you tomorrow. Expect me about nine. Thanks for telling me what's happened."

I thought of ringing Cleo but I wondered if she would want my condolences. Would she feel any sympathy for Lee? I didn't think so. Yet, surely, she would want to give all the help she could to finding her grandson? I thought I would write up my report on today's work, have something to eat, and think seriously about ringing her. Or would it be better to wait till tomorrow and take Lee's sister out to the Centre?

I was still mulling on this when I had a call on the house phone. "That you, Bob? Peter here. I tried you out at the Cabins and thought you might be here."

"Yes, I'm afraid Lee identified the body as Emma. He's gone to make a statement."

"Be put through the third degree more likely," he said drily. "Cleo is certain the body was put in her paddock in an attempt to implicate her. Is that likely, do you think?"

"It's possible. But I think it was just a handy place which didn't get a lot of use. The body could have lain there for weeks without being found."

"I hate to think about it, us riding past, probably not noticing, or maybe just thinking it was a dead animal."

"I know. Look, do you think you could do something for me. Try to find out from Cleo the history of the paddock. When she bought it. Who from. Whether

there's ever been any problems. Fences. Stock getting in. People who wanted to ride there. Local people going in without permission. Anything at all. And you can probably tell me when you built the first jumps."

"Yeah, I'd say it would be nearly two years ago now. Before that she used to take rides up there, just jumping logs, that sort of thing. But then she invited me to run a couple of jumping classes and I had a look at it and said, you could make a first-class permanent course up there. I said I would plan it so that it would be flexible and could be jumped in various ways. She said, okay, go for it." I wondered if those were Cleo's exact words.

It might simply be that someone had realised the paddock offered all sorts of possibilities for stashing unwanted bodies but if I was right in thinking the body had been dragged up from the bottom boundary rather than brought in from the road then there was a good chance the person knew the place already. There was another puzzling aspect to this. Lee was a big fit man. I didn't know exactly what size Emma was but if she was anything like her mother who was one of those small neat very self-contained people then Lee could probably pick her up with one hand tied behind his back. Why drag her ... and risk leaving clues along the way?

I finally went round to the Lazy Cabins and got my bag of overnight things. I told the young bloke and his mother what had happened and said I would keep the room on but I would be round at Lee's place tonight as the small boy was still missing and there was always the small chance that someone might try to ring with information.

They made a lot of noise and exclamation and said it was absolutely terrible and how Emma Palmer was a very nice person and I finally managed to get away. Then I went round to the café to get a quick snack. Julie had a young girl of about twelve helping her and the place was buzzing with people and news. As soon as she saw me she said in a loud voice, "Bob will be able to tell us what's going on! We just heard it on the six o'clock news. Poor Emma."

Everyone turned and stared at me. I never got to give a retirement speech, how my thirty years on the force were the happiest years of my life, blah, blah, and how I would "miss all you old sods" etc etc. But I've heard tough old cops say it was the most terrifying moment of their life, having to get up there and "say a few words" ... I felt a bit like that now. I hedged. "What did the news say?"

"Just that the police were investigating the suspicious death of a young woman here and that she was found in a paddock."

"It was Emma, wasn't it?" someone else said.

"I'm afraid so. I don't know how she died, but she had been dead for at least four days, and she was up there in that big paddock where the jumps are."

"You mean High-n-Mighty Cleo's paddock?"

"Mrs Marwood's paddock, yes."

"So Lee was going to drop her in the shit, was he?"

Someone else laughed. It was hard to get heard over the rising din. But I said, “Did anyone see Emma last Friday?”

Most of them shook their heads. But an oldish woman came pushing through the crowd in the doorway and said unexpectedly, “I did! I heard ‘em havin’ a right set-to last Friday morning. You could hear ‘em all down the street.”

“Did you actually see them?”

“Didn’t need to. She was goin’ on about leavin’ him for another fella an’ he was sayin’ he’d kill her first. It was really nasty.”

She had a captive audience. Everyone turned and urged her to tell them more.

I just about had to bellow, “Do you know what time this was?”

“Course not! Who goes lookin’ at clocks all the time!”

This was greeted with more laughter. But I hung in there. “You must have some idea. Just after breakfast. Mid-morning. While you were getting lunch. Something you’d been listening to on the radio?”

But she refused to be drawn. And someone else said, “Go on, Diane, what else did you hear?”

This was obviously more to her liking but Julie suddenly intervened. “Go on, get out! This is a café, not a TV show. Show a bit of respect for Emma.”

“Well, he didn’t show any respect for her I don’t reckon.” Diane got the last word in, then people began drifting out on to the roadway where they could spread out and gossip. I didn’t like the mood. It would either get uglier or people would realise Diane was just milking the moment for every drop she could squeeze out of it then people would drift off home again.

The café was left with me, with Julie and her likely daughter, and two teenage girls sitting near the back. When I looked over at them I was surprised to see they were crying.

I went over to them and said I was sorry it had happened like that but I hadn’t realised people already knew what had happened. They looked up at me and one of them said, “It’s not your fault. But I hate it when that old bitch is always badmouthing Lee. She just hated them all. Even Toby.”

Julie came over and stood beside me and said the words I didn’t want: “So where is Toby?”

“I don’t know. The police haven’t found him up there. We can only go on hoping that he’s alive.”

“I’ll pray for him,” she said quietly. Normally I don’t go much on praying. But there was something nice and gentle and compassionate about the way she said it.

“So who is Diane?”

“She lives over the back behind their house.”

“Mmmm. Diane who?”

“She and Merv Trotter. But she was a Brodie before that.” Julie turned away to go back to the food she had in the deep fryer. But a curious kind of pinng! had

gone off in my head. I always liked old Gyro Gearloose with his light bulb. I had been looking for a third line of enquiry and I thought I just might have found it.

Was it something personal between Emma, between Lee, between Cleo, between them all—and the Brodie family? Some bad blood that went back years ...

— xvi —

I got Julie to shove some chips in a bag and a slice of pizza. I could fill up on what was left in the Palmer frig. It didn't seem the moment to spend time away from the house. As soon as I pulled in beside the gate I knew I'd thought right. A car had pulled in and three youths had got out. One of them had his hand on the gate.

I took out my notebook and jotted down their licence plate. It was the sort of car they wouldn't want any cop looking at too closely. Then I went over to them. It was time to play the heavy.

"I wouldn't even think about going into that yard if I was you."

"Says who?" I sometimes think teenage boys stand in front of the mirror and practise sneering. It doesn't take them long to get it down to a fine art.

"I am Detective-Inspector Robert Creighton and if I find you inside this yard or the next one or the *slightest* bit of damage done to the property I'll have you up in front of a magistrate so fast your feet won't touch the ground."

"I bet you're not." But I could see they were wavering. They weren't big city toughs. Just kids who'd got stirred up.

I didn't bother with showing them anything. I just stood there and watched them. It took them two minutes to get the message, turn, bundle into the car and drive off with more noise than one car should make. I added 'bald tyres' and 'missing muffler' to my notes.

But were they all I had to worry about? Come dark and they might be back. With reinforcements.

I walked around the corner to look at the next-door house. It had a high wooden fence so its occupants couldn't actually *see* into the Palmer's back yard. But they probably could hear raised voices. I wasn't so sure about the content of the supposed argument. In fact I was dubious about the whole claim. But Diane Trotter had made it in front of a large audience so it wouldn't take the police long to hear about it. And the girls? I would go bail they were in one of Lee's classes encouraging girls to learn karate or judo. I had wondered about other men in Emma's life. I suppose it was really more likely that there were other women in Lee's life. He had more opportunities. And he looked pretty good in his martial arts poses, dressing gown and all. I wondered who had taken the various photographs of him posing I had seen scattered round the house. Emma?

The Trotter house appeared to be deserted so I came back and went in and ate my food, now rather cold, and made myself a cup of coffee and had a banana. And as I ate I doodled. The shape of a different question. An X-factor. I got up and went to fetch their phone book and looked for Brodies. In fact there were a lot of them in the district. I made a list of those who appeared to live reasonably close. Was any

one of them that old boyfriend of Emma's? And what kind of boyfriend? Just a casual acquaintance maybe. Or someone who wouldn't take no. Or one of a group that went round together.

I finally sat back and took my shoes and socks off. All afternoon grass seeds had been working their way through into my ankles. Now I went over them carefully. They were like me, tired and grubby and sweaty. I wanted to take a shower but I didn't feel comfortable about leaving the place unwatched just yet.

The night was warm. I decided I'd just grab a pillow and a quilt and sleep on the couch. If there had been a fight in this house then Lee had had plenty of time to tidy up but forensics might still get something from the back rooms. If Lee and Emma had had a barney in here the Trotters could not have heard them.

I turned a page and made a list of things that might tell against Lee. The list was quite long.

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The noise started about ten. A car came past, radio blaring. Next minute something sailed through the window just above the sofa where I'd been planning to sleep. I went over and turned all the lights on. It was a peculiarly bad choice of missile. A plastic lunchbox filled with stones. With luck it would show a nice set of fingerprints. I slipped a clean tea-towel under it and put it on a chair. Then I went out to watch. There were two cars and the fools were driving round and round the block. Each time they came round I managed to get a bit more of their licence plates, not the same hoons as before, and each time they irritated more people trying to get a good night's sleep. If it hadn't been founded on such a sad afternoon the whole juvenile thing would have been funny. By about the fifth time around and after some more rubbish had been thrown in, though only into the yard, other people had just about had enough. I saw a big tractor come chugging slowly up the road from the turnoff and next minute the driver had turned across the road. The engine was turned off and the driver jumped down. I walked the hundred metres towards him.

“Thanks, mate. It was getting pretty bloody awful.”

“And who might you be?”

A man of about forty, seamed and sour-looking; he obviously wasn't out for kudos.

I told him and asked what had brought him out.

“My son,” he said grimly. “I told him if I ever catch him out hooning I'd make sure it was him and his car that got the worst of it.”

I thought he was probably right. Any car slamming into this massive vehicle would be likely to come off very poorly. Even so, he had parked in such a way that they would have plenty of room to see him before they hit, if they hit ...

For all that, it was a close shave.

They came round the corner by the dam, both cars doing nearly ninety, their tyres screaming, the music still blasting out their open windows. Then there were immense screechings, yellings, fishtailings. One car hit the back of the tractor a

glancing blow, spun round, and ended up facing back the way it had come. The car behind managed to stop in time.

The tractor driver had something very deliberate in the way he walked over to the waiting car. Then I heard someone yell, "Go! It's my Dad!" But the driver was obviously too upset to obey. The tractorman put his head down to the passenger window and said without apparent heat, "If you're not home in ten minutes I'm calling the police."

I couldn't help admiring him. No bluster. No blow. No empty threats. The car came to life again and the driver managed to back, in jerks and starts, then turn and drive away.

The other car had a badly bent bumper but its driver too managed to follow. I wondered what tomorrow's fall-out would look like.

I said I wished there were more parents like him and more kids might survive to grow up. He only shrugged and lit a smoke. Then he said, "So is it true that Cleo Marwood's daughter's been killed?"

"Well, she's dead. I haven't yet heard how she died."

"Late news said she was shot. Hard to believe. Do you know where it happened?"

"She was found up in Cleo's big paddock."

"Was she now? That is strange. I've never known him to go up there."

"Who? Lee?"

"Of course. Who else?"

"You knew there was trouble between them?"

"No. Never heard that. But it's the usual way of things."

"I heard that Emma used to go out with Josh Brodie. Do you know any Brodies around here?"

"Sure. Wads of 'em. Why?"

"Well, the person who got all these youngsters stirred up to come round and chuck stuff at Lee Palmer's house was a woman called Diane Trotter. I am told she used to be a Brodie. I wondered if she was just being malicious or whether she knows something I don't know."

"I wouldn't think she knows much. Never met a Brodie with much in the way o' brains. But Josh's father reckons he's done all right in Brisbane."

"Does he ever come back here?"

"Oh, I'd reckon so. But don't ask me how often. I have an idea it was him I saw at the garage last week."

"Do you remember what day?"

"Nah. Dave there might remember. Look—what are you getting at?"

"I'm not absolutely sure. That big paddock that Cleo bought—you wouldn't happen to know who she bought it from?"

"Well, I'd reckon she bought it from Quentin Brodie, Josh's dad. Yeah, I seem to think there was some trouble over it. Quentin did some sort of deal with a mate of

his to push up the price, he reckoned Cleo could afford to pay top dollar. But don't ask me for the details because I don't know."

"Look, I appreciate your time. I'd better let you get on."

By which I meant I'd better get back and keep an eye out myself; no guarantee the little thugs weren't creeping into the back yard ...

He nodded, then said, "So how come you're hanging round here?"

"I'm a retired detective. I do a bit of freelance work for an agency."

His perpetually grim experience suddenly lightened a little. "Well! Whaddya know! I used to dream of being a detective when I was a kid. If you've got time before you leave, mister, come out for dinner and tell me what it was like."

I said I would. Though I could think of few things less enticing at this minute.

He turned the tractor and I heard it growl off into the night. I went back to the house. Tigger had climbed in under the sofa and he only came out when he was sure it was me.

"I don't blame you, you poor old moggie. And I don't guarantee it's safe. But some things we just have to take on trust."

Including the fact that the Brodies were somehow involved in the whole horrible mess.

— xviii —

I felt as though my head had hardly hit the pillow when the phone rang. To my amazement the old clock above the kitchen bench said it was already after seven.

"Yes?"

"That you, Bob. Peter here. I'm sorry I haven't managed to get anything out of Cleo. She thinks you are some sort of grubby little private eye who is most likely sneaking in and going through her rubbish, or words to that effect. I tried to convince her otherwise but I'm afraid she's the sort of person who is never going to take kindly to anyone wanting to ask her some very personal questions."

"More fool her then. If there is still a chance of finding the little boy alive then it's about time she put her skates on."

"She thinks it should all be left to the official police. It isn't that she has a high opinion of them. But she thinks you're getting in the way and muddying the waters."

"Well, keep at her. Oh, and by the way, I found out last night that she bought that paddock from a Quentin Brodie and that he managed to screw her over the price. It may be that there is some bad blood between Cleo and the Brodies that caught Emma up in the middle of it."

Peter made some vague noises. He had always struck me as a vague person. Only when horses and jumps got in the equation did he seem to gain in stature and confidence. But the real question in all this—was it possible that Emma had been shot in mistake for Cleo? If there was some sort of ongoing feud over the paddock then it was just possible that one of the Brodies had shot into the paddock, maybe planning to scare Cleo ...

Because, if the news report that Emma had been shot was correct, it seemed curiously unlike Lee's most probable response. If he'd had a fight with his wife—would a martial arts instructor immediately go into the house and get a gun, assuming he owned one? As a clever piece of sleight-of-hand? Maybe. But guns provide more clues than karate chops—in a place where probably every second person now could do a basic karate chop.

— xix —

Deanne Smith arrived just before nine. She got out, a big plumpish woman with a riot of red hair, and with her was a boy of maybe sixteen (I'm not good on ages) who obviously had Down's Syndrome. She said immediately, "Mr Creighton."

I stopped myself yawning and said, "That's me. You're Deanne. Any news of Lee?"

"Yeah. They charged him this morning with the shooting death of his wife."

"I'm sorry."

"So am I." She sounded grim and determined. "This is David. Say hello to Mr Creighton."

The boy chuckled and said, "Say hello to Mr Creighton." I reached out and shook his hand. Then I said, "Come on inside. I've got a lot of questions."

"Look, there's just one thing you need to know. When I got to thinking about what you'd said last night I knew there was someone in her life Emma was scared of. She never said anything to Lee because men always take it the wrong way. They think you must be encouraging them."

"You mean, someone in Emma's past was still ... stalking her?"

"Something like that. I know she left here because of someone. I don't know his name. She just said he was a Grade A creep. She went to Brisbane. Then, after she'd married Lee there, this guy turned up. I don't know any details. So that's why she came back here. She reckoned he wouldn't want to leave his life in Brisbane to come back to a little dead place like this to bother her. Lee wasn't keen on coming here. He didn't think he could make a living. But Emma convinced him her mother was lonely. So he moved. And of course he soon found out that Cleo didn't want him here. But he'd moved so he got stuck into making things work."

"So how did you hear about this business with Emma and this bloke?"

"I was complaining one day about a man I knew and she said something about going through a similar experience. She told me a bit about it. But she seemed to be pretty confidant she'd left the problem behind."

"You're absolutely certain you never heard the man's name?"

"Pretty sure."

"It wasn't Josh Brodie was it?"

She gave the matter considerable thought. "No, I honestly don't know. It doesn't ring a bell."

"Well, look, I think Lee is quite safe where he is. It's Toby ... if there's the slightest chance he's still alive. I think it's time I made a visit to Mr Brodie."

“You mean—this man is back here.” Deanne looked worried.

“I’ve no idea. But I think it is his father we should pay a visit to. He used to own the paddock where Emma was found and I’ve got a hunch he’s also put some other Brodies up to spreading false rumours about your brother. I don’t quite know how to play it. I’ve never met any of these people.” I needed to check the relationship too, make absolutely sure Quentin *was* Josh’s father …

“I don’t know, Mr Creighton. But I’ve always found it best to just be up front and say things straight out.”

“You’re probably right.” Except that Deanne’s life as a hairdresser in a small town was a bit different to mine. “You and Dave might like to come in my car. And I’ll need to ask someone how to get to their farm.”

I bundled them in and went round, hoping the café would be open. Julie, fortunately, was out the front collecting a small box of something, I didn’t enquire; I asked her without preamble if she could tell me how to get to Quentin Brodie’s farm and whether he was Josh Brodie’s father.

“Yeah, he is. You have to go down here below the dam and then turn across and then turn right again. What’s on?”

“It’s only a very small chance but he just might know what’s happened to Toby. I can’t leave any stone unturned.”

“You won’t get any confessions out of Quentin,” she said drily. “But I know him quite well. Would you like me to come?”

It might turn into one of those farces where more and more people seem to join the tour. But I said I would be very grateful if she could spare the time. She went inside and asked her daughter to start setting up then she got in the back seat with Deanne and I did quick introductions as I drove down past the pump station and past a small orchard and turned across the kind of causeway that formed the bottom bank of the dam. Julie directed me up a back road, just a rough gravel road, and then to the right gateway.

I said to Deanne the best thing might be if Dave sort of went wandering round the sheds and she went after him, make it look like she was calling him back before he got into mischief, while Julie with me in the background went up to the house. I hoped Julie was capable of staying calm and natural while she explained we were going round all the farms in the district asking if they had seen Toby Palmer …

But then, in the way such things can happen when you’re all primed for a particular course of action, the farm appeared to be deserted. It was a rough-house junky sort of place. No garden to speak of. A few ancient fruit trees. An old weatherboard house, not maintained. And yet if he got a good price from Cleo Marwood for his top paddock he couldn’t be *totally* poverty-stricken. Maybe he was a gambler …

“Right,” I said quickly. “Hunt everywhere you can think of. They may not be gone long.” And we all spread out, calling “Toby! Are you there, Toby!” and such things …

It was young Dave who found the kid under the house.

He was a sight I wouldn't want to see again. He was still gagged. He hadn't been fed for a week. He hadn't been near a toilet and he was filthy. His eyes were terrified. His hair matted and full of dirt. His hands where they had been tied were skinned and bruised and full of pus.

This brave little kid had managed to work his hands free but had then waited till the house was empty and crept out and hidden under the house. I could imagine the panic when they found he was gone. It was only later we found Quentin had driven off to town to see if he was trying to get back home (we must've just missed him somewhere along the way) and Josh had gone up to the top paddock to search in case he'd heard them talking about Emma being up there. Something along those lines.

Even so, the boy had just about had it. I lifted him and Julie put an old travellers rug around him and gave him a sip of water from the bottle I keep in the car. Then we piled back in, Deanne and Julie laying him out across their knees in the back. He seemed to recognise his aunt but a few minutes later he dropped into oblivion.

“Best thing for him,” Julie said quietly.

I got her to direct me on the fastest way into Gatton and the hospital there.

A lot of fussing and exclaming and to-ing and fro-ing and calling the police. Julie, knowing several people there, took charge and explained where we had found him.

But the cops were suspicious of the whole wild story. They seemed to believe Lee had killed his wife and then tried to kill his son. I'm not sure if they then thought Toby had managed to get away and hide at the Brodie farm or whether Lee had stashed him there to make the Brodies look guilty.

Julie started to get upset and say, “But it wasn't *like* that! You must listen!”

I came forward, showed my identification, and said quietly, “I think we're looking at a stalking case. I think Emma left home to get away from Josh Brodie and went to Brisbane. She married there. Then either by accident or by design Josh found her. She packed up and moved back home. I don't know the details. But she was enticed out to the Brodie farm and Josh, or just possibly his father, shot her there and dumped her up in her mother's paddock. I think they hadn't decided what to do with the kid, whether to try and set up a ransom situation, hand him over to someone in the family or just let him starve to death.” I didn't add that the police should have initiated a full scale search of the area the minute they realised Toby wasn't with his mother.

“You can prove this?”

“It's not up to me to prove anything, mate. But I know that Josh Brodie was seen in the local garage last week. I know that his father sold that paddock to Emma Palmer's mother. I know that Quentin Brodie's sister lives next to the Palmers and

has been going round town spreading the rumour that she heard Lee and Emma have a right barney in their yard—even though all indications are that Lee was at work with a class at that time. And four of us are witnesses to the fact that the child was found gagged and starving under the Brodie home. I definitely think they are worth investigation.”

“But why would Emma go to the Brodie farm if she didn’t like the Brodies?” Julie said with a frown.

“I don’t know how they got her there. But it is possible that Diane Trotter came to her and said she urgently needed to get out to see her brother and that her car was on the blink, something like that, and Emma was a kind-hearted person and she and Toby got in the car and ran Diane out to the farm where she was probably invited to come in and have a cup of tea. I can’t guess the exact pattern of events. But sometime during the morning one of the Brodie family shot her. Later on she was dragged up and left in her mother’s paddock. It was obvious she had been dragged *up* the paddock, not carried *down* from the road. You could see the faint marks of her heels.”

I wasn’t privy to all the discussions had, the decisions made, the release of Lee Palmer that afternoon, the decision by the police to go to the Brodie farm.

Late that evening the town was electrified by the rumour that Josh Brodie had shot himself at his father’s farm.

— xxi —

I don’t know the exact course of events. But the gun that Josh Brodie used, or that had his fingerprints, not necessarily the same thing, matched the one used on Emma Palmer.

Lee camped himself by his son’s bed. The hospital wouldn’t commit themselves beyond the fact that Toby was ‘stable’. Deanne and Dave moved in for a few days to mind Tigger.

I rang Peter and told him that Toby had been found and that I was leaving for home later in the afternoon. I thanked him for his invitation to come up to Cleo’s paddock. The body would have been found. Eventually. But a wait of a few more days would almost certainly have been fatal for Toby.

“Do you want me to tell Cleo—or will the police be doing that?”

“You can if you like. I don’t feel a lot of sympathy for a woman not prepared to put the safety of her daughter and grandson before her own sense of herself. You can tell her, if you like, that we found Toby gagged and starving at the Brodie farm. It wasn’t a pretty sight. The poor little lad probably wouldn’t have made it through another hot day without water. The gag on him was knotted so tight he couldn’t get it undone. But I don’t wish any more grief on the stupid bloody woman. Just tell her Toby is safe and in hospital in Gatton.”

“Will do. Thanks Bob.”

Deanne made us a nice lunch. I said over it, “It is a curious thing. Two men in Emma’s life. I wonder if she knew there is stalking legislation now? And why did

one wish her all happiness while, in the other, the love if I can call it that had turned to hate.”

“You hear about stalking on the news. But you never think it will happen to you. Or you think the person will lose interest if you don’t give them any encouragement. You know, Lee didn’t want to come back here. He thought he wouldn’t be able to make a living in a little place like this. But really it was Emma. He came for her sake. And she made it work.”

“What do you think it was about her?”

“She was a bit like her mum. She had a real sense of confidence in herself. But she wasn’t stuck up. It was more a sense of style. She made you feel you were really someone when you were with her. Cleo just makes you feel inferior. Or tries to.”

“And Lee liked her for the person she was—and Josh resented it that he couldn’t use that sense to get somewhere?”

“Something like that. But the thing about Lee and Emma, Bob, was that they absolutely loved each other. They were stronger together. They made a good life in a place most people want to get out of. They could’ve made a good life anywhere, that was what the two of them were like. You could see they were happy together a mile off. I think Josh hated that. He wanted to make them unhappy. I think he ran into Emma in Brisbane and she had everything he was never going to have. I hear women talk, Bob. There’s lots they say to their hairdresser that they never tell to the other people in their life. I don’t gossip. I just sympathise. I help if I can. I try to make them feel good about themselves.”

“I’d say Lee is lucky to have you and Dave. Toby too.”

I left the Lazy Cabins about three, after telling Deanne and Dave to come and visit me if they ever find themselves down Surfers way. I left it to Deanne to talk to Julie, to Cleo, to everyone. I was glad to be gone.

Later when I came to check my notebook to write up a report for Damien and Mark I noticed my cryptic comments ‘bald tyres’, ‘missing muffler’; I thought I would leave that one to the man on the tractor … And he would have to do without me as a dinner guest …

But it was hard to get to sleep. The eyes of that poor kid. I hoped the hospital would allow his aunt to bring Tigger in to sleep on his bed. I have heard that a cat purring is very helpful in healing. And it probably beats hollow all that jargon about ‘grieving processes’ …

- end -

## NOSE-TWITCH

- i -

The relief to find that Deborah and the baby had gone home when I got back from the Lockyer was overwhelming. I didn't think I could take a crying baby. I don't think I had ever really noticed before how necessary a few hours to get my mind sorted out, a glass of whisky at my elbow, a chance to sit back and close my eyes, really was. Maybe that was why I had come to resent my wife, long before I got accused of corruption, the simple fact that I could walk in after a hard and traumatic case and she would start in on me. Why hadn't I picked up something, didn't she know we were having her sister over for dinner, why hadn't I remembered to put the garbage out last night, hadn't she reminded me to get milk on the way home ... There were times when I dreamed of a small Kings Cross flat only large enough to swing a very small cat. There were times when I seriously considered picking up the heavy skillet and braining her.

I even took comfort in the image: The Day I Brained Barbara.

And then the feeling would fade and life would go on.

Deborah had left me a note to say she was going home, she had been away long enough, she was very grateful for my offer to help money-wise but just what I could spare and she would send me some photos. She said Alice and the others had been very kind and she hadn't told them anything about me. That didn't mean they weren't all busy putting two-and-two together. She added as a PS that Alice had offered her a bed there if she ever wanted to come back. Possibly Alice, being in her eighties, was worried about the moral aspects of it all. But I was inclined to think that Alice was also looking for a way to head her daughter off at the pass. Her daughter, possibly with the best will in the world, though possibly for more mercenary reasons, wanted her mother to move into a Home. Alice had her heels dug in and was fighting a doughty rearguard action.

The next few days passed peacefully. I went into a pet shop and wandered round vaguely looking at some very cute kittens; then the aberrant moment passed. Cats would be a trouble for someone who was 'in demand'. Of course, after the last hectic days, the stream might dry up. I hoped it would. There are limits.

I walked on the beach. I had a game of morning tennis with my neighbour Russ Taylor and a couple of his old mates at the club. I went to the library. I lounged out on my balcony and enjoyed the afternoon breeze. I watched TV. I checked my little cactus gardens for signs that Deborah had over- or under-watered. I dropped a postcard to my longtime friend in Sydney, Petra Day, to ask why the heck she hadn't warned me about Deborah and the baby. Cryptic comments about men getting responsible had gone right over my head.

And then I had a ring one night.

— ii —

The caller said she was Mia Prentiss and that she was Lina Jessup's cousin. The name rang a faint bell but I didn't get the connection straight away. She sketched in a background and I said, "Right you are. I remember. Yes, how is she?"

"Oh, Lina's fine. She's still in Meringup. Her daughter's at the uni in Toowoomba. And she said it just might be worth talking to you. I don't know if this is a good time to ring you?"

"Good as any. What's the problem?"

"It's actually very hard to describe. It's our youngest daughter. Something seems to have made her terrified of something on the farm. It really doesn't make sense. She can't explain it. We've talked to her teachers at school. We've taken her to the doctor. I've never had anything to do with a psychiatrist. But it really doesn't make sense. We've all gone over every bit of the farm. We cannot see a thing that's different from usual. But the poor little kid is really in a bad way. She's not eating. Her schoolwork is suffering. She doesn't go to visit her friends any more. I really don't know what to think. We know you're not a counsellor or anything like that and I don't suppose there's anything you can see that we can't. But Lina said you were good at coming at things in ways we might not have thought of. I know this might be asking you for the impossible. And if you think we should take Midge to a psychiatrist we'll do that. We're not rich but we can certainly pay you all your expenses—and we've got a spare room."

I'm not keen on staying with strangers but sometimes it can't be helped in small country places. I said I would come up and just have a look around and hope that their daughter would feel able to talk to me.

"Usually she's a bright little girl. So all this is very strange. But we would be very grateful."

I didn't tell her that it was when she said 'the poor little kid' that I decided to come. It isn't that I think I'm good with kids. But it is adults that screw up their small worlds. And it is usually adults that can put the pieces back in some sort of fashion. Or so I hoped ...

I told Damien and Mark what was in the wind and said I'd be away for a few days. They wished me luck. I hoped their kind of luck came with knobs on. I felt I was going to need a bit of the stuff.

— iii —

I drove. I drove and drove. Up the northern end of the Darling Downs, the Bunya Mountains faint and dusty on the horizon. I sometimes think I've done more driving since I retired than any commercial rep I've ever met.

But I didn't expect to be here long. They would soon realise this had been one of their poorer ideas in their attempts to help their daughter. My nearest approach to psychiatry had been investigating a break-in at a psychiatrist's office one time and watching them at times strut their stuff in court. I knew some of the jargon but, like

a lot of my colleagues, I wasn't terribly impressed. Does making up a name and calling it a something syndrome make it easier to deal with? Does this make it an excuse for crime? And, more pertinently, what kind of syndrome had this unfortunate child developed and was there a cure?

I turned off the narrow strip of bitumen. A mailbox had 'Cooroo Downs' painted on it. I drove over a grid and headed up a long shallow slope crossed with contour banks. Where the cultivation met a low stony hill topped by dusty grey trees hanging limply in the heat a sprawling yellow farmhouse with louvred-in verandahs and low hedges stood comfortably. The usual hodge-podge of farm buildings surrounded it and three child size bikes were leant up against the side fence. As I drew in a netting door opened with a bang and I heard a young voice call out "He's here!"

At least I didn't have to be anyone. I didn't have to decide how to approach lists of unknown people who might or might not have some information. Or something to hide. I would simply listen to their story, talk to (or try and talk to) Midge and if any thoughts came to me I would pass them on. Put like that I could possibly tell myself it was a mere drive in the country.

A boy of eleven or twelve came out to the gate. "Are you Mr Creighton?"

I said I was. He said he could carry my bag for me. Then he said, "You've come to make Midge talk, haven't you?"

"No. Just hear what you all have to say about her problem."

I hoped they hadn't been telling her that she would *have* to talk to me because I was the police or anything silly like that.

"She is really weird now. She doesn't talk to anybody."

"Poor child."

"Yeah, she'll probably have to go away soon. If she gets any skinnier."

A woman in her thirties came out and said, "Hullo, you must be Bob. Chris, you take the bag in and put it in the spare room."

I hadn't brought much. And none of it valuable. So I left the boy in charge.

Mrs Prentiss bustled round, putting the kettle on and asking Chris where were Janey and Midge.

"My husband will be in soon. Then maybe we can have a little chat over lunch."

"Does Midge join you for lunch?"

"Oh yes. But she doesn't eat. We've all been worried sick."

Chris had come back and I felt he was tempted to say he hadn't been worried sick. But then most boys that age aren't particularly big on empathy with little sisters.

About ten minutes later, and after being introduced to Owen Prentiss and the two girls, we all sat round a table in the sunroom. It was all very pleasant with striped green-and-white curtains and big pots of green ferny things. I don't know

what I would have assumed about Midge if I had simply seen her without any introduction.

She was the normal height for her age. She had blondish hair in two little ponytails. But that was where normality stopped. She was extremely thin and pale and her eyes seemed to be sinking into her childish face. But it was a different quality about her that was so disturbing. She was like a child which has ceased to interact with the world around it. She was listening to a completely different script. And it was a play which was destroying her.

Afterwards I wondered if I was being fanciful but the image wouldn't go away. She never spoke during the meal, just nodding or shaking her head if anyone asked her anything. I felt that her father had little patience with her. If the family decided on some dramatic step his would be the guiding hands. It was Mia who looked at her daughter regularly and I could see the concern in her face. The other two children largely ignored their little sister.

I chatted with them all. What did they grow here, how had the season been, how long had they lived here ... general things. Owen told me he grew canary seed for the market. "Good money in it, people still keep on keeping their budgies, but it's a holy terror to harvest. Seed's so small." It is a curious thing that, although I had seen wheat being harvested and so on, I had never thought about where the seed you put in your pet canary's cage comes from. A place like this it would seem.

Owen told me he'd lived here all his life. Mia told me the kids went to school locally. I asked them what it was like.

Chris and Janey looked at each other and grimaced. "It's okay," they said almost in unison.

"And how do you like it, Midge?"

She turned and looked at me with those sad eyes and just shrugged very slightly.

"Answer properly," her father said sharply.

I was sorry I had precipitated something. Midge said almost inaudibly, "Okay."

All in all, I was rather glad when the meal was over. What had at first seemed a happy close-knit farm family obviously had serious rips and jolts in its fabric. Was it just Midge or were there other problems? Low prices? Drought? Marital problems?

Was Midge reacting to some never-spoken-of tension and conflict she divined between her parents?

Owen was the first to leave the table. He said Chris could come up to the sheds to help him. Mia gestured slightly with a slant of her head towards Janey and he said she might as well come too. Then Mia and Midge and I sat on at the table.

"Would you like to tell Bob what's troubling you, darling?"

I didn't think Midge wanted to do anything of the sort. But then, if it was a problem easy to put into words, she would probably have long since shared it.

"I don't know. I get so frightened." She looked at her mother, then at me. "I can't tell you."

I suggested to Mia that maybe Midge and I could just sit a little while and talk about other things. Mia hesitated then got up and took our plates out to the kitchen.

I had thought to ask Mia when they had first noticed the change, what the first clues were, what their initial responses had been, but I have a theory that simply talking, about anything, helps. I had never thought much about the therapeutic uses of this policy. It was usually in the hope that some wide boy and bad hat will let a discrepancy slip. People think they mind every word but after a few minutes that sort of rigorous control begins to ease, almost unwittingly.

I have no belief in myself as ‘good with children’ but I have also noticed that people who do have that reputation often set about turning children inside out. Children have as much right to privacy and self as adults.

We chatted for quite a long time about school. I told her about my childhood in Bondi Junction in Sydney. I told her a bit about the police. But I just let things meander along as though we had all the time in the world.

I didn’t even try to return to the question of what she was frightened of. She brought out a rather ugly doll (ugly to me, anyway) and told me she was called Mitzi. Then she said with those strange terrified eyes. “I wish I could tell her things.”

“Is she not a very good listener? Some dolls aren’t. I can remember my daughter getting cross with a doll because she said it was being too cheeky. I thought that was a bit hard on the poor doll. After all, it was doing its best to be friendly.”

For the first time since I’d met her a wan little smile appeared on Midge’s face.

But it just sort of faded away as though she’d been caught out and had to let it go. I asked her if she would be willing to show me round the farm, or a bit of it. She got up obediently and trailed out, the doll hanging limply, and I went with her round the sheds and chookhouse with its hens and bantams and turkeys, a swing in a tree, an old truck in the back of one big shed, a big galah that came down and hopped around us. I asked her several questions but she only nodded as though she hadn’t really heard me.

Afterwards I asked Mia if she was sure nothing had happened to Midge’s hearing. She said the doctor had checked and she seemed to be able to hear quite alright. It was just something about not responding. I thought of things like autism but a child wouldn’t suddenly develop it at the age of seven surely. A brain tumour? Mia said, no, she had seen no sign of headaches. To be honest I didn’t know the symptoms of brain tumours—apart from death somewhere down the track.

For now we only went round the sheds. When I asked Midge where the road went to that curved away to the left she shook her head but I thought her eyes grew even more frightened. It was her eyes ... something seemed to look out of them. But I didn’t know what I meant by that.

Then she edged back towards the gate and I didn’t try to keep her with me any longer.

Mia came out, still drying her hands on a towel. So we talked of possible physical problems. But I didn't really think it could be a pain that was making her so removed from ordinary life. Could it be a mental illness?

“It must be. It absolutely must be.”

“Is her behaviour different in any other ways?”

“No. She is like someone retreating from life. She knows she shouldn't be. That we expect certain things from her.”

Yes, I had got the impression that ‘tough love’ was in vogue here. I wasn't quite sure how indulgent or how tough the parents could be.

“Bob, I really want to ask you something. I haven't known how to bring it up. We go to church. We expect the kids to know the Bible, bit by bit. I know the Bible talks about possession ... though I've never known quite what it means. And people would never speak to us again, I don't think. They would feel we had done something to open the way for it. That we hadn't believed and done enough ... ” She looked at me with anxious eyes.

I suppose I looked startled. People aren't in the habit of asking me if their children are possessed by ... anything. Was this really why I was here? To show that this was possible. That I would be the person who would eliminate other possibilities in the way their family doctor had eliminated any common complaints. I definitely didn't like the thought. The calm good sense of Lina Jessup had encouraged me to believe her cousin would face life in the same sensible down-to-earth way. But why should that be so? My relatives are hardly cloned copies of me.

“No, I'm sure she isn't. But give me another day to look around. Where does that road go to?”

“Just round the hill and up the back paddocks.”

“How long would it take me to walk up?” I didn't in the least want to walk up but I felt I needed to get some sort of ‘feel’ for the farm as a whole.

“No. Look, give me a minute to put my farm shoes on and I'll take you up in the old jeep.”

I let her do this and a few minutes later we drove away round the curve of the dry hill in an old roofless jeep. We drove through the thin dry timber, over a bit of a culvert, then she pointed out the junction where an unused dirt track ran away to the west and a Cyclone netting gate gave on to an unused-looking track that ran up the side of their large cultivated area. She turned the jeep and went on up towards the back of the farm. As we came out of the belt of timber we found ourselves in an open area of dry grass. A little way on we came to what looked like an ancient rubbish dump. Mia stopped the vehicle and got out.

“This was a little tip we used, and so did some other local people many years ago. We didn't really want to share the area but the shire council paid us about ten dollars a year. People would come in that side gate and dump a few things.”

“How long ago did it close?”

“Oh, I’d say—at least thirty years ago. Long before I moved here. The kids like coming up here. We’ve gone over it carefully to make sure it’s safe. It’s really just that old tractor. They like to pretend. We chopped other things up for firewood and buried a bit of old roofing iron.”

“Does Midge still like coming up here?”

“No, not really.” She seemed to give the question renewed thought. “She does come up, but only if we drive up. She won’t walk up any more. And when she gets here she mainly just stays close to the jeep.”

I nodded and spent ten minutes wandering round the area. I could still see the faint dimples in the earth where ditches had been excavated to take the rubbish. Then Mia ran me right up to their back boundary. There was a gate in it but it was tightly tied up with wire.

To call this wild country would be misleading. It wasn’t very wild. But I could look out into some more timbered hills and down into a steep dry gully which curved round and ran parallel with that little side track where neighbours had once entered. I could look out to more rough timbered country to the west and then it gave way again to distant cultivation. There was no sign of any habitation except a very ancient settler’s hut down towards the gully on the west side of the Prentiss boundary fence. A couple of black cattle grazed near the hut. It looked as though a strong wind would blow it down. It was already leaning dangerously to one side. There was nothing near it. The dry grass grew right up to it. No sign of those little extras. Washing line. Tank. Garden fence. Planted trees.

I pointed to it. “Who owns that?”

“It’s an old boundary riders’ hut. No one’s lived there in living memory. We told the kids they were not to go near it. It isn’t safe.”

“No. Talk about the Leaning Hut!”

She smiled slightly. Mia was quite an attractive woman but it was true: she didn’t smile much. Was this because of Midge or just a naturally serious disposition? “But someone must own the land?”

“Yes. It belongs to a man who lives in Brisbane. He lets a neighbour of ours run a few head of stock on it. But the creek is dry so they have to walk all the way back to the trough they share with the farm back there.” She pointed vaguely.

“Have there ever been stories—you know, people coming in, duffing cattle, using it to stash things. Any old scandal. Something Midge might’ve heard and not known how to deal with.”

“I can’t think of anything.”

“And on your property—can you think of anything? A dead animal. A fallen tree. A story Midge might’ve heard and misunderstood. Some old gossip.”

“We’ve been over it and over it. Owen and me. We’ve tried and tried to get her to tell us what’s going on. I honestly don’t see how anyone can go round being scared all the time. Because that’s what it is. There is never any let-up. No days when she’s nearly normal.”

I nodded. "You said she won't walk up here any more. But that she will come if you drive."

She considered this. "She doesn't want to come. But then she is like someone forcing herself. And the others tease her. She gets in the car and closes her eyes. I really don't know what to think. I do get cross with her. It just seems so totally pointless ... "

"Pointless?"

"I don't how to describe it, Bob, but it's getting all of us down. And I'm afraid Owen is going to start losing the plot with her."

"Yes, it's possible. But I'm sure it's a physical fear. I wish I could be more specific. There is something here somewhere that is frightening her. That's why I wondered if anyone ever used that hut."

"No, I'm certain they don't. No one round here would. And no one else even knows about it."

"The owner of the land?"

"He comes up about once a year to check the fences and water and so on. He lets Bill Gamble put some stock there. I suppose Bill might go into the hut if he was up here and it started to rain or something. But Bill is just an old moocher. He doesn't come up often."

I went over and over all this; the slightest change in anything, the slightest discrepancy, something that made her look twice, signs of something getting through the fence, any likelihood of people duffing stock, wild dogs, tame dogs ... I ran out of invention. But Mia just said no each time.

— iv —

Over dinner I asked if they had a dog. A dog, I thought, might sniff out something I couldn't. Owen said they'd had an old black Labrador but he'd died last month and they hadn't replaced him yet. "No pets then?" I said.

"Only the bantams and that pest of a galah."

The kids tried to say the galah wasn't a pest and could talk a bit but he quelled them with a look.

"We did have a kitten once but he got run over. Janey wants a pony but that would lead to quarrels." Mia didn't sound very sympathetic.

I supposed the kids had around the normal complement of books, toys, gadgets, of your average child. But I had the odd feeling that this wasn't really a child-friendly household. It might simply be the sense that these children were kept firmly in their place, something a lot of politicians advocate but which seems to abnegate the reasons for having children in these heir-casual days, or it might be something emanating from Midge, the sad aura around her ... or lack of money.

And there was no nonsense about staying up for the late movie. Midge was sent to bed at eight o'clock. The others went half-an-hour later. So tiredness couldn't be a problem.

But Mia said to me, "Midge is asking for you. She says there's something ... If you wouldn't mind."

Midge had a little back room on the western side of the house with a bunk bed, a shelf, and a small lo-boy. I pulled up the small chair and sat down gingerly beside her. Outside was very quiet and still. The night remained quite warm.

She put out a frail little hand and I took it. It was very cold and trembly.

"Things will get better, Midge. Once we find out just what happened a couple of months ago." I felt I was always stabbing in the dark. Yet I could remember a strange case many years ago, not my case, where a small boy had unwittingly become a secret witness to a violent robbery. He had responded by becoming terrified of garden gnomes. The connection was one that would never occur to an adult. Something that would connect in the mind of a three-year-old maybe. It was years ago but I think the key to it was that one of the men was short and squat and wearing the same coloured outfit that a neighbour's gnome wore. Something like that. I couldn't see a connection here but I wondered if Midge had witnessed something which she didn't understand and had possibly blocked out ... or tried to.

"I hear her crying," she said in a tiny wisp of a voice. "But I can't do anything."

"Do you know who she is?"

"No."

"A little girl?"

"I think so. I never see ... I don't exactly see ... I don't see ... it isn't a face."

She closed her eyes as though they were hurting her. It was as though the effort to speak of it had completely drained her and her hand went limp.

I didn't push her any more. I just tucked her hand into bed with her and said, "We will find out what happened ... "

"She is dead, isn't she?" Her voice had slowed and slurred slightly.

"Yes, I think she is. But everyone, even if they are dead, deserves to have the truth known." This sounded incredibly pompous. But then, Rachel even as a small girl, could not bear any sense that she was being treated as a baby and talked down to. I'm not sure if other children feel the same way.

She seemed to take that as reassurance and in a couple more minutes she had drifted off to sleep. I got up with a creak and went out to sit with Owen and Mia. The other children had gone to their rooms though I could still hear sounds. Mia got up and brought in a pot of tea and some buttered bun.

"Can you think of any case around the district where a small girl, any child really, went missing. Got lost, got taken, disappeared, anything."

They both communed briefly in silence. But finally Owen said, "Nope. Nothing comes to mind, Bob. Not in my time. This is a very safe district."

"No accidents that might look frightening to a child?"

Again they shook their heads slowly. "The little Grosvenor boy died from meningitis but that must be at least six years ago. Midge might've heard stories. But

it is all in her mind, isn't it? She's got some bee in her bonnet and if only she'd just tell us we'd know what to do."

"I've heard of children having imaginary friends, Bob," Mia said. "And their imaginations can run away from them. But Midge was never like that. And we don't let them watch adult things on TV."

"Mmmmm ... It *is* in her mind. But I think it's based on something real that happened. Something she saw or heard ... or overheard. That's why I was wondering about that old hut. If anyone had ever come there."

"I'm sure they haven't, Bob. I've been thinking about it all evening, ever since you pointed to it. But it just sits there."

"There have never been problems with local teenagers coming up there? To drink. To fool around. To run away from home for a while?"

"No. I don't think so. It's too far for the young ones to come. I really think most people around the district have forgotten about it, anyway. It hasn't been lived in since ... I don't know, sixty years ago. There's no water now. The old tank rusted and blew away down into the gully one time when there was a strong blow. You wouldn't go there for a picnic."

"No, it isn't an attractive spot. But sometimes things appeal to children that wouldn't appeal to adults. Anyway, if any memory comes back to you, let me know."

When Mia took the remains of our late snack out to the kitchen Owen leaned over and said, "I've heard of children getting a shock when they see animals, you know, for the first time. Specially horses. You don't think Midge might've seen ... "

"She might but I don't think so. It seems to have a dead child in it somewhere. But children do misunderstand things they overhear or only glimpse. Or some older kids might've started out to tease younger ones, not realising it would be taken as true."

"So what should we do?"

"Nothing just yet. Just be normal. But if she ever starts to talk about something that doesn't seem to make sense just be sympathetic and let her talk. Don't tell her not to be silly or anything like that."

He looked sceptical but nodded. "Care for a game of checkers?"

I didn't particularly. But I agreed. It might give me more of an insight into Owen Prentiss. But I didn't think he was the key to anything apart from imposing a fairly narrow proviso of what was acceptable conversation on his children.

My bedroom had a pink chenille quilt and a vase of white daisies and pink geraniums on the bureau. The daisies smelt faintly of dead ants.

— v —

The next day being Sunday the family got up early to go to church. They seemed to expect me to come with them. Going to a local Lutheran church might give me an insight into their neighbours. But I felt that the key to Midge was here on

this farm. I said to Mia that if they wouldn't mind I'd like to have a good walk round the farm before the day hotted up.

She shrugged. "If you want. Help yourself to more toast if you'd like. And I'll leave a water bottle in the frig for you. It's thirsty work walking round the hill."

They drove off about half-an-hour later, Midge wearing pink all over. I waved and she gave me a tiny wave back.

I think I realised then that this had turned into my own personal crusade to save Midge from whatever was destroying her. I just wished I could get hold of a more concrete idea than this vague nebulous sense of something glimpsed. I trudged up to the top of the hill behind the sheds and saw away to the east a small mob of cattle gathered round a trough. In front of me were the long sweeps of cultivation going down to the distant road where I could see an old farm truck trundling along. In the still air I could hear its faint roar.

Behind me the land fell away slightly to the back fence and the rough land beyond. I turned and walked down at an angle to where I could see the beginnings of the tiny gully that went down to the track and under it in a single concrete pipe and then wound its way down till it spread out into a shallow ditch that was more like a faint dry grassy pond. From up here it was clearly visible. But I hadn't particularly noticed it when Mia had driven me along the track yesterday.

I quartered the dry hillside. What I wanted to find was any sign that the earth had been disturbed, that someone had come in here. Nothing obvious but I picked up a stick and poked in under tree roots and beneath dry logs, and turned small rocks over. Several times I simply stood still and sniffed the air. I looked up into the trees in case something had got thrown up or a nest had been wrecked. I went over the grassy ground carefully. Could someone have lifted some sods and buried something and carefully replaced them. It was possible. Bodies get found because someone has been quick and careless. Or because they are unlucky and someone decides to cut a drain, a canal, the foundations for a building, widen a road, anything.

If there was any disturbance then it wasn't obvious.

So what about the old dump? That would be an easier place to bury something. The earth would be less compacted. But it wasn't the place where Midge seemed most afraid. How seriously should I take this?

I walked on down to the gate and out on to the grassy lane then down on to the slope and towards the hut. Had a vehicle come up here lately? Not obviously. There was a very faint sign of tyres but how far back? Two months? Four? When was the last rain?

The hut was unattractive. The stovepipe chimney had rusted and collapsed downwards. There was an ancient sacking bed. There was a rough wooden table and broken chair. The place was dusty and dirty. I went over the place carefully. It was probably safer than its lean suggested. And I was certain that someone had been in here. But it might simply be the old 'moocher' who kept his stock here. There was a

slight sign that someone with cowshit on his boots had wiped it off just outside. And I found the rotting remains of a filter tip in a crack in the boards. But if a crime had been committed then I didn't think it had happened in here.

I walked on down to the gully. My legs weren't fussed on the exercise. And I was sweating by the time I reached the dry creek bed with its fringe of scrub and trees. I sat down on the bank for several minutes and looked around. Somewhere unseen I could hear a butcher bird and there were tiny marks in the earth near me. A lizard maybe.

I wandered up and down, looking for any sign of people. About fifty metres back towards the lane I came upon signs that a vehicle had driven down towards the creek, not just a vehicle but someone had made a small campfire in the creek bed. There were also signs of feet, possibly someone lying down on something, a sleeping-bag maybe. Old Bill Gamble might boil the billy. He might stretch out on an old rug or tarp and take forty winks. But I couldn't really see the point. Why not go on home and sleep in comfort?

I hadn't brought my camera but I slipped my mobile from my pocket. It is possible to take pictures with it—though I'm not familiar with all its intricacies. Gadgets have never been my love. I couldn't stand to spend my life in a lab looking down microscopes and running fibres through machines and staring at flakes of paint. But what I did have in my phone was some handy numbers including a friendly acquaintance who has checked out some genealogical details for me occasionally. He lives in Brisbane. I didn't know if I could get through clearly from here or whether I'd need to go back up the hill. And he might not appreciate being rung up on a Sunday morning. Still, it was worth a try.

I had asked Mia, as we drove back yesterday, for what she knew about the old man who owned the paddock. It wasn't much. But worth a try.

My lucky day maybe. I got through. Not a brilliant connection. But adequate. I had only three bits of information. His name: Abe, probably Abraham but it might be a nickname, Batterby. His age: probably late sixties. And as well as this land he owned a hardware store in Brisbane. Suburb, name, chain ... all not known. But Batterby wasn't a common name.

He said give him five minutes to check the phone book etc.

While I waited I walked slowly back up the rise, then climbed through the fence and walked along the side of the Prentiss cultivation. I might as well go back to the house and get some paper to write things down. I was just coming in the back gate when he rang back.

"You're in luck, Bob. Only one in the phone book. All the others are Battersby."

I scrawled for my notebook and pen as I went in. I wrote down the number he gave me. Did I want him to check out anything more, urgently? I said I would try the number and if I had no luck I'd get back to him.

But before I chanced my luck again (what sort of routines did Abe Batterby follow of a Sunday?) I went in and had a long cool drink and a couple of lettuce leaves from the crisper.

— vi —

The unknown Abe was home. But he sounded grumpy. “Yeah, that’s me. What d’you want?” Obviously not his The Customer Is Always Right voice. Maybe he slept in of a Sunday.

I told him where I was ringing from and I believed he owned a big paddock up here.

“Yeah, I do. What about it? Do you want to buy it?”

Heaven forbid!

I thought it was time to play the heavy so I dumped my name and title on him. I wanted to know who had permission to come on his land apart from himself and Bill Gamble.

He said, “No one. What’s been happening? Some yobs?”

“Could be. What about family? Friends? Neighbours? Has anyone ever asked you about it?”

“Nah. Only got a daughter and it must be a while since she’s been up.”

“Does she have children?” He obviously wasn’t in the business of volunteering information, burbling on to strangers, telling all and sundry his personal details.

“Yeah. Got a little girl.” Another silence.

“And her husband—does he ever come up?”

“Nah. Hasn’t been up there in years.” Another long silence then he said in a slightly different tone, “He never comes up.”

“But you’re not sure?”

“Who did you say you are?”

I told him again.

Moments like these you sit back and wait. There was something, I thought, going round in his mind; much harder to tell what someone’s thinking, what kind of thoughts they are, by phone.

“Thing is,” he said at last, “the bastard left her and went off to Sydney. Then he came back, wanting to take the little kid out. She let him.”

I wasn’t sure if it was the information or whether he simply wasn’t used to telling family things to strangers. Social workers and counsellors aren’t good with older men—because older men aren’t good with social workers and counsellors.

“And he didn’t bring the child back?”

“Bloody bastard grabbed her and headed straight back to Sydney. Susan is still trying to get her back.”

“What is the child’s name?”

“Charlotte. Silly prissy name—but she liked it, so I kept my mouth shut.”

“And you are absolutely sure he took the child back to Sydney?” I put a slight emphasis on Sydney.

“Looks like it. He lives there now. But we can’t be sure till they find the poor kid.”

“But your son-in-law does know where this paddock of yours is, he knows how to get here.”

“Yeah. For sure. I sometimes wonder why I bother with it. But Bill Gamble pays me enough to cover the rates and all and leave a bit over. Land belonged to my granddad. So what’s it to you?”

I nodded slowly to myself. It was a long way to come. But it would throw the mother off the scent. She would be completely focussed on looking for him and the child in Sydney.

“Is there any chance you could come up here—to your farm?”

“Wouldn’t think so. Who did you say you were?”

I told him once more.

“So why do want me to come up? What’s the matter with things there that Bill can’t fix?”

“Do you have a dog?”

“Yeah, a beagle. Alfie. Why?”

“Would you be willing to bring him and something that belonged to Charlotte. I am still guessing but I think there is just a chance that someone has been on your land. How long ago did Charlotte disappear?”

“Don’t know exactly. About two months, I’d say. My daughter says the cops are looking for her.”

From the way he said it I didn’t think he put much faith in the police.

“In Sydney?”

“Yeah.”

“Look, I know this is only a hunch and you may not want to come all the way up here on a hunch. But there is just a chance that Charlotte was brought here, not to Sydney. Maybe your son-in-law wanted to decide whether to run with her or simply give her back. I could call the police in here but it is only a small possibility and it might lead to gossip unnecessarily.”

I was more concerned about gossip hurting Midge than this old grump.

There was another long silence, and I was glad I was on the Prentiss phone, not my own, then he seemed to bite on this unpleasant bullet.

“Yeah, well, s’pose I can do that for little Charlotte. She was a cute kid. Lots of blonde curls. Always called me Grampy.” He seemed to mull on the thought of all that driving. “Don’t reckon I can get there before about four. What do you want me to do?”

“Bring the dog and something of Charlotte’s, maybe a toy or a piece of clothing. I’ll come over to the old hut and keep an eye out for you.”

I hated to think what this old grouch would say if we came up absolutely empty-handed. But beagles are good dogs on scents. It just might tell us something. I didn’t like to think on further from that point.

The family came home from church. Mia bustled round in the kitchen. Janey laid the table. Midge just seemed to melt away. One moment there. The next gone. Owen said, "Find anything?"

"I'm not sure. But I think someone has been on the land next door. I've asked Mr Batterby to come up and check things with me."

Owen stared at me. "You mean to say—you've persuaded that old coot to drive all the way up here just for that!"

"I know it's a long shot."

"That old coot hasn't put himself out for anyone round here in his lifetime! A couple of people asked him if they could go riding up there. I don't know exactly what he said but it wasn't any too polite." He shook his head slowly. "So what do you think might have happened there?"

"I don't know yet. Don't get any hopes up. It's just a hunch at this stage."

"The idea of Abe coming up here on a hunch—it must be a damn good hunch." He seemed to find the whole thing hard to accept. But I got the impression I had gone up slightly in his estimation.

We sat over lunch and I asked them a bit about the district and I asked about Lina and her husband these days, their daughter, their garage; then I said, "Would you hear a vehicle coming up that side road, do you think?"

"Depends. If I was outside I might. If I was ploughing I would probably see it. Hard to say really. I don't usually notice Bill when he's taking stock in or out."

It would need a little bit of luck. But if someone came in late and with maybe a small sedan or a station wagon ... I stood outside after lunch and listened for vehicles. It wouldn't need a lot of luck to come in unnoticed.

The day got hotter and stiller. I wondered whether Abe really would come. A willy-willy got up on the long slope and went whirling away up over the contour banks taking bits of stubble and dust with it. I found the heat and dryness oppressive. My flat in Surfers spoils me. All the critical things people say about the place are true. The crime, the impersonality, the shade thrown across the beaches, the litter, the prices, the sharks ... but it beat this place hands down.

No one else seemed to find the afternoon unpleasant. Or if they did they didn't say so. Owen snoozed in a chair with a newspaper. Mia did some sewing. Janey and Chris played snap in a half-hearted way, then watched an old Disney movie on TV. There was no sign of Midge.

I went looking for her and found her sitting on the south verandah. Even with all the louvres open the place was stifling. She had a jigsaw puzzle of an English village scene set out on a small table but she wasn't doing it. I came over and drew up an old chair by the table.

"Why do they call you Midge?"

"My Aunty Narelle named me Mirelle. I don't like it. I like Midge better. But Chris says midges bite. I don't bite."

"No, I've never seen anyone less fierce than you."

I wasn't sure if that was a good thing to say. I found her ability to sort of drift back from any sense of human contact or relating quite daunting.

"The little girl you hear in your head ... do you think her name might be Charlotte?"

For the first time in my brief encounters with Midge I felt I had in some way engaged her attention. She turned and looked at me with those tragic eyes.

"She might have a name." She had begun to tremble. "I hear her crying. She is always crying. I can't make her stop." She began to cry herself. I hoped Mia wouldn't choose this moment to come in and ask Midge to come and help with something.

"I know. But it won't be very long now. Old Mr Batterby is going to drive up this afternoon and help me look for the little girl. We might be able to find out what happened to her."

"She cries and cries ... but she says something ... I can't really hear it properly. There is a sort of crackling noise in my head. It makes me have a kind of hot pain. I can't get away from it."

"Yes, I know. But the pain will go away when we find her and know what happened. I think there was a campfire. I think, just maybe, she fell into the campfire. That would hurt her and there is no doctor close by."

I think for the first time Midge saw the sounds and images which had been threatening to torment her to death as something related to real people and real events. I don't pretend to understand such things. I'm a fairly skeptical old sod. But I think I could *just* believe that a little girl out in that paddock, and dying in pain, somehow managed to transfer her own pain and terror to another small girl. Or Midge had unwittingly touched something that had that fear in its print. I was only guessing. But if I was even half right there would eventually be an end to Midge's private hell.

But I had the feeling it was more than an accident. That somehow it involved an element of truth and justice telling ... I wasn't sure what I meant by that either.

— vii —

I took my car and drove down towards that unused gate out on to that lane. It was still very hot though it was clouding up slightly. A thunderstorm might be very welcome here but I didn't need it right this minute.

But would Abe Batterby come? Would he bring his dog? Would the dog be any help? I tried to formulate alternative plans. If he didn't turn up I would see about trying to convince the local cops to call out a sniffer dog. Failing that I would need to take an even closer look at the landscape. Somewhere here there was a clue. The trouble was—I *couldn't see it*.

It was a bit after half-past-three when a new-looking Mitsubishi wagon turned up that long lane. I got out of my car, climbed through the fence and went down towards the place where something, some vehicle, had turned down to the gully in the past. The car stopped and a grizzled-looking man got out. A beagle jumped

down and followed him towards me. His face was red. His manner suggested a severe lack of neighbourliness. I didn't totally blame him. Although I wasn't sure I would want to patronise his business.

“You the sod that rang me?”

“Yep.” I introduced myself and pointed out where I thought a vehicle had turned down. He took a plastic bag out of his pocket. Inside it was something small and pink. Some part of a small girl's wardrobe.

“Whaddya want me to do?”

“If you and Alfie would come down to the gully with me. Then let him smell whatever you've got there.”

It didn't work very well. In fact it didn't work at all for a while. Abe seemed to think I was a charlatan and a time-waster. Alfie sniffed the piece of cloth, which turned out to be a little sort of tank-top thing, and looked up at us. He knew he was supposed to be taking it all seriously. He just didn't understand what we wanted.

“Go on, Alf,” I pointed to the remains of the campfire. “See what you can find.”

It took him long agonising minutes of running round vaguely, barking up at us, getting distracted by country noises. I bent down and took him lightly by the collar.

“She's here. Charlotte is here. Fetch.”

He ran up and down the gully a bit more. I went up the bank again and Abe followed me. Then it suddenly seemed to strike the dog. He put his nose to the ground and ran up the bank, passed us, and went on running up the slope.

“Might be a fox,” Abe said drily. “A few back here in the timber.”

“Could be. Let's see where he goes. Don't talk and distract him.”

Abe gave me another of his grim looks. He was probably in his late sixties, a big seamed withered man with a doughy face. I wondered if his daughter took after him. But he walked slowly and quietly up behind the animal. I had no idea if Alfie was following the child's scent, the man's scent, a fox's scent, my scent even, but I thought it was more than odds on he was following the smell of burnt ash and charcoal.

Alfie turned towards the hut and then he turned back; he ran a couple of sorties, then he seemed to get his bearings and went running off up towards the fence to the Prentiss farm. He squeezed under the bottom wire and kept going. Abe and I quickened pace. He went across the faint shallow dimple in the earth and now I found myself looking up the low hill behind the house. I wasn't certain but it seemed to me that there was something a little odd about the culvert from this angle.

Alfie gave a sudden sharp bark and went scrambling up the dry watercourse. He came up the last bit below the pipe and turned and looked back. Then he began scrabbling with his front paws.

“What the bloody heck!” Abe had begun to puff.

I looked up and saw Owen walking out along this track towards us. He strode out like a man with purpose. I came up to Alfie and said, “Good dog, leave it now.”

Abe came up behind me. Owen reached us on the track and looked down. “What is it? What’ve you found?”

“Don’t know yet. Abe, can you hold Alfie back a bit. I’m just going to remove a couple of these stones.”

Underneath the concrete pipe it looked as though the earth had fallen out and someone had wedged some stones into the gap to hold everything firm.

Owen came down and joined us. He looked a bit surprised but not convinced that this was anything remarkable. I managed to work a couple of the rocks out. Alfie struggled to pull away from Abe and throw himself into the small hole. His paws scrabbled at the dry earth, his nose was snuffling nineteen-to-the-dozen.

“What the blazes is it?” Owen was watching the dog in amazement. “Nothing could fit up there except a dead snake or something small.”

“Have you done any repairs here lately.”

“No, I hadn’t noticed that gap. And it hasn’t rained to wash the soil out.”

I didn’t like to keep messing with what might well prove to be a crime scene but I knew that neither Abe nor Owen would take me seriously if I said we should send for the police now. Owen reached out with two big farm-hardened hands and more stones and earth came rattling down. “Do you want me to go back and get a crowbar and a shovel,” he said when he paused to wipe his sweating face.

It would make life easier but I was worried about the damage it might do. I got down and pushed my head into the now sizable hole. I couldn’t be sure if I could smell anything more dramatic than earth. I put my arm in as far as it could go and wriggled my fingers around. They touched something that felt like plastic.

— viii —

Owen wasn’t wild about trudging back up to the house and calling the nearest police. Abe seemed to think we should just give Alfie his head.

I thought it was about time I threw some weight around. I said there was something there—and regardless of what it was we now had to leave it to the police to sort out.

The difficulty with all this was that the clouds were growing darker. And the nearest police were some thirty kilometres away ... and might not relish a little Sunday afternoon jaunt—no matter how strongly we presented it.

But I finally managed to get Abe, Alfie, and Owen all to go up to the house. Alfie was panting like a locomotive, his tongue lolling. Abe was a bright brick-red. I thought they’d better get a cold drink while Owen rang in. Once I’d got rid of them I did a bit more very cautious excavation. Then I sat down on a nearby log and wiped my hands on my trousers. It made no difference to the dirt and didn’t help the trousers any but the dry gritty feeling on my hands was unpleasant.

It was nearly forty minutes before all three of them came trooping back up the track.

“You’re in luck, Bob,” Owen said, though his tone suggested the luck was dubious, “Sergeant Halford is out this way because of a missing horse. He said he’d come on here and have a look.”

I nodded. I hoped he would hurry. It wasn’t simply the heat, the clouds, the restless dog; it had a lot to do with Abe and Owen. I didn’t find either of them particularly inspiring company. And they both remained sceptical that anything important was hidden under this small culvert. Owen was certain the family hadn’t put anything there but he still thought it was probably just a bit of junk.

But I felt certain now. Whatever was hidden here would explain why Midge couldn’t bring herself to walk along this track.

— ix —

Sergeant George Halford was hot and disgruntled when he drove in in a police four-wheel-drive, got out and walked across to us. “What’ve youse found?”

I went over and met him. “Bob Creighton. Thanks for coming. We could’ve gone on and pulled whatever is there out. But as it is has been hidden with such care I think there is a strong possibility it should be treated as a crime scene.”

“Oh you do, do you?” He didn’t sound naked, just weary. “So what d’you want me to do?”

“I can feel plastic in there. I think there’s a good chance something is wrapped up in it. Someone has gone to a lot of trouble to bury something here so it wouldn’t be noticed.”

“Kids?”

“No. My kids don’t do—” Owen sounded disgruntled.

“The dog is keen to get at it. Looks like something dead,” Abe butted in. I got the impression there wasn’t much love lost between him and Owen Prentiss.

The sergeant, not particularly young or fit, got down cautiously and put a long arm into the hole. “Yeah, definitely feels like plastic in there.” Having said that he withdrew his arm and straightened up. He looked a bit nonplussed. I could see him thinking ‘where the heck do I go from here?’ I knew the feeling.

“We can go two ways now. You can call in the CIB blokes and hope it is worth their while and not just some stupid prank—” Owen shot me a critical look, “or carefully remove the thing ourselves and risk damaging any evidence.”

“If it’s been here for months,” Abe cut in, “there probably isn’t much to be found.”

“Even so, I’d prefer you ring in and get the go-ahead if they can’t come today. I don’t want nasty questions asked down the track.” Halford seemed grateful to me for making the decision. He walked back up to his vehicle to call in. I sat back down on my log. Alfie gave me a reproachful look. He had done all the hard work and now he was just expected to sit and look on.

Halford finally returned to us. “They say find out what it is.” He handed Owen a small shovel he’d brought down from his vehicle. “Might do the trick.”

Owen went at it with a will. His whole attitude seemed to be: let's get this madness out of the way and get Abe off my land. He made a pile of earth and stone up on the track above him. Then the small shovel caught the plastic and tore it.

“Can we drag it out, whatever it is?” He turned to the sergeant.

“Don’t see why not.”

The storm was thickening around us. Another hour and we might be surrounded by thunder and rain.

But it took Owen a good ten minutes of wriggling and shifting and puffing and pulling before the thing finally came loose and shot out.

“Oh, my God!” His face went pale and he turned away. I didn’t think Owen was in the habit of taking the deity’s name in vain. It had to be a deeply disturbing moment. Halford reached out to help him with the bundle. Whatever it was was swathed in the sort of clear plastic that comes in reams round your new whitegoods. It was tied round firmly with some sort of grey duct tape.

But we could see inside. A grim sight. A child, badly burnt, seriously decomposed.

— x —

Halford helped Owen lay the bundle down on the roadway. Then he went to call in again.

Abe sat down, mopping his brow. I felt he whisked the handkerchief over more than his forehead. “I’m sorry, Abe, but I think it might be your granddaughter.”

He nodded. “I know so.” The words came out in a cracking whisper. Poor old sod.

I asked him if he would like to go up to the house with Owen and get a cup of tea. I didn’t think Owen had any alcohol in the house unless he kept some medicinal brandy for moments like these. But he shook his head. “Not yet.”

I suggested to Owen that it might be a good idea if he went and warned his family that they were going to have a police investigation all over their paddock quite soon. He nodded. “S’pose so.”

Abe and Alfie and I sat there.

Finally he seemed to pull himself together enough to say calmly, “What do you think happened?”

“I don’t know for sure. But I think your son-in-law did come up here with Charlotte, maybe just while he decided whether to return her home again or abduct her and disappear. He camped down in the gully for a night or two. But whether it was an accident or he did it on purpose I wouldn’t like to say. She may have tripped and fallen into the fire and struck her head on something, a heavy frying-pan maybe, and her hair caught fire.”

“Knowing that little sod I’ll bet it was deliberate. I knew from the moment I set eyes on him he was a crook. Shifty-eyed little bugger. But would she listen? Oh no, I just needed to get to know him better. Soon’s *she* got to know him better she came round to my way of thinking. Too late then. She had the kid.”

“But would he hurt his own child?”

“To get back at Susie maybe. And he didn’t like getting some tough talk from me. I said if he touched her I’d see he got put away. He just laughed.”

Well, at least Abe had cared that much for his daughter. My first impression was that he regarded his daughter as a nuisance. And Susan may have been right in thinking that threats and tough talk weren’t the way to go. Just letting her husband slip out of her life, unchallenged, might’ve saved a lot of grief.

But the son-in-law, Gary, may have decided he wasn’t tamely going to walk away. He might be the sort of bloke who is convinced fathers are discriminated against. He may have set out to give Susan a fright. He may have wanted to get back at his father-in-law. He may have seen himself striking a blow for Father Power. But then that might seem okay as a theory. What happened when he arrived here? A child for whom the long drive to ‘Grampy’s farm’ had palled; grizzling now and tired. Where was the promised day of treats. And she wanted to be home, with her own little room, her toys and dolls and pets and all the routine of home. Instead she was hundreds of miles away in a strange place with an angry man.

He probably didn’t feel he had taken all these risks just to have her whinge and whine and want to go home.

But what happened next?

Did he hit her in the hope of getting her to shut up. I didn’t know but that was a heavy blow to the head from what I could tell through the swathe of plastic. Had she fallen back into the campfire and her lovely blonde curls caught alight?

What happened in that last space of life for that little girl?

The terror. The knowledge she wouldn’t be going home to a safe home. The fear of her father’s anger. The pain.

Had she died of her injuries—or had Gary killed her knowing he couldn’t take her to a hospital or surgery in that state?

And then—the final question: where to bury one little girl? If she was found on her grandfather’s land it wouldn’t take long to point the finger. But what about somewhere on the neighbouring farm.

If he had buried her here without wrapping her first it wouldn’t take long for the body to be reduced to a small skeleton. I imagine he had used the plastic to avoid any blood dripping on to his sleeping bag or belongings. But the likelihood that he had left fingerprints, DNA, maybe a hair or two, even larger clues on the plastic seemed pretty strong.

Even so, he had done a slick job with the burial.

“Abe, did your son-in-law work as a builder, stonemason, brickie—something like that.”

“Builders’ labourer … when the little sod bothered to look for work.”

I wondered if little wasn’t meant to be taken literally.

And if a little girl had not ... I found this as distressing as all the rest. What if Midge hadn't known, hadn't felt, hadn't heard, or seen ... The body might lie here for years undisturbed while Sydney was scoured for Gary and his daughter ...

And what if they had taken Midge for drugs, hospitalisation, electric shock treatment ... what if Owen and Mia, fed up with what seemed like self-indulgent nonsense, had forced Midge to live life 'normally' ...

Two cars from Dalby arrived. As the body had already been moved they decided to take the bundle with them. They tied tape around the culvert. They asked Abe and Owen and myself to make ourselves available for questioning. They ignored Alfie.

The first faint rumble of thunder and flashes of sheet lightning interrupted the conversation.

— xi —

Mia wasn't wild about having her house invaded. But she put out tea and mugs and a packet of shortbread creams to go with the last of the bun. Then Abe said he would take Alfie and find a motel in Dalby for the night. They put off the rest of their questions till Monday. The first thing was to get the body autopsied. It might make the distinction between accident and murder.

Another half hour and the storm was cracking all around us. Chris and Janey stood in the front window and seemed oblivious to anything but the rain and thunder and cracks of lightning. Then Chris said loudly, "Look! It's hailing!" No one else seemed to find the hail exciting. I sat down in a comfortable armchair. It had been a long day. And retired cops don't do any more walking than owners of suburban hardware stores.

Midge came over. She bent over and said in a tiny whisper. "Is it true? Is it Charlotte?"

"Yes. Poor little girl. But we would not have found her if it hadn't been for you. She was trying to tell you things but she didn't understand why everything had ended so terribly."

"She did cry a lot. I think she said, daddy, don't hurt me. But I might just think that hearing her crying, I don't really understand ...."

"Yes, but I think it was her daddy who brought her there. We won't know for sure till the police find him."

"Will he go to prison?"

"It does seem likely."

She seemed to try and take in the implications of all this. Then she said, "Can I sit on your lap?"

"If you'd like to."

She climbed on. It was like having a small frail fairy sitting there. But I was touched. I wondered if this was the real problem beneath everything. Owen and Mia were good parents in the conventional sense, plenty of healthy food, sensible routines, care for their children—and it had produced healthy, well-behaved,

obedient children who were probably a pleasure to schoolteachers and other parents ... but there just didn't seem to be a lot of love and physical affection in this household. Maybe if Midge had been able to climb into her father's lap from the moment when frightening images and sounds began to play through her mind and give her bad dreams she might have been able to speak of it all more easily. I don't know. No child comes equipped for what I can only see as some kind of psychic experience. It is how it is dealt with that makes the difference.

But what was Midge hearing? Some kind of imprint in the moments before Charlotte died? Or was the spirit of the dead child somehow trying to get inside Midge's mind. All this was beyond me. I know there is the occasional cop who believes we should employ psychics to look for missing people but I was never enthused ...

— xii —

I don't know what the cops out here thought of me. I hoped they wouldn't need to question Midge, not unless she volunteered. I don't think they were wild about the idea anyway. What they really wanted was not some small child hearing voices in her head (most cops are wary of children as witnesses at the best of times) but a man named Gary Adam Hardy.

They found him about a week later. In Mt Isa. The moron had put in for a labouring job under his own name. I hoped it was a sign of some remorse.

It was good to get home. I didn't do a thing for the next day or two. Then I put a cheque in the mail for Deborah, told Mark and Damien what had happened, and treated myself to a pub lunch. I wasn't really comfortable in my mind about the Prentiss family. Mia had said to me that the souls of people can't speak. They have to wait till Judgement Day.

I said, did she know that for sure?

“Of course, it is in the Bible.”

I'm not great on what's actually in the Bible so I didn't argue.

“But it doesn't have to be souls. It is even possible that if it was a still quiet night and Midge woke and heard the little girl crying ... and then dropped back to sleep she might not know, next morning, what had happened. And I know of several cases where bodies have been found simply because by moving the undersoil you change the sound and texture and feel of it. The road over the culvert may have changed sound slightly and she didn't understand why.”

Mia seemed better able to accept such down-to-earth explanations than anything which might challenge her view of the Bible. I hoped that, whatever she believed, she would help her little daughter come through this long dark tunnel safely. I had said to Mia that Midge needed lots of hugs and cuddles and Mia had said, not responding to this (maybe she thought she already gave all the hugs and cuddles necessary), that she hoped Midge would soon be back to 'normal'.

To this I said, “I have seen horrifying things in my career and no one goes untouched by being close to violent death, it doesn't matter how tough and

experienced they are. Just let Midge take her time and if she would ever like to ring me up just to talk about it, that would be fine by me.”

She said politely to this, “That is very kind of you but I don’t think it will be necessary.”

Necessary wasn’t quite the word I’d had in mind.

But about a week later I had a ring and a little voice said, “Bob, is that you?” and the little voice asked me what she could do for Charlotte. I assumed Charlotte would eventually be buried in Brisbane, far away from her impromptu grave, so I said, “Could you plant a little tree or a bush and it could be Charlotte’s little tree?”

She liked the idea and asked me what kind of bush it should be. Not being a gardener I didn’t know of anything named for a Charlotte so I said, “It will be your bush too so I think you should choose your favourite bush.”

She gave this some thought and then she said, “I think it could be for Alfie too. He was such a nice little dog, wasn’t he?”

I agreed that Alfie was a ‘nice little dog’—“and very clever too.”

- The End -