

**From Davitt to Deconstruction:
Politics and Social Commentary in Feminist Crime
Fiction**

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Abstract

What first attracted me to crime fiction written by women? Many things, but foremost amongst them were the strong female voice found in the first person narrative, the mythical themes of challenge and resolution, social analysis and politics.

Especially politics

In this dissertation I'll investigate the manner in which women writers appropriated the crime genre in the 1970s and 1980s and gave voice to the feminist utopian ideals of equality, access to work and participation in political structures. In doing so, I'll ask, did the writers set out to explore politics close to the feminist heart through the crime novel's stylised conventions of fast moving story line, the charismatic detective, exposure of corruption and the first hand observation of the social disjunction caused by it? I'll also question the authors' reasons for choosing crime when other literary forms were available to them. Was this choice made because crime fiction reflected women's changing status? Because it challenged one of the most masculine of literary bastions and gave the genre a whole new lease on life through the female voice? Or did other factors contribute to their decisions?

In exploring crime fiction published since the nineteen seventies and interviewing writers about their literary intents, I will argue that crime fiction increasingly has become the genre in which major political themes are played out. Whilst many feminist non crime writers explored dysfunctional relationships with their partners, parents, and children, feminist crime fiction writers were interested in exposing dysfunctional social and economic relationships. These politics were framed in different ways and not all crime writers actively set out to write polemically. Nor did they see their fiction as

a political tool. For many, the crime novel's structures lent themselves to an inadvertent exploration of social themes, an organic process, if you like, of crime and punishment, social analysis and utopian resolution.

My exploration of these themes commences in Chapter One, with a broad overview of the scope of the 'political' issues central to my thesis. A serial discussion of politics, of crime writers' interpretations of their political ideas is covered in Chapters Two, Three and Four. The politics that influenced the manner in which I write concludes the dissertation.

The achievement of a happy balance in relation to a multiplicity of social and political concerns, I assert throughout my work, confronts women crime writers every time they pick up their pens to write. Whether they set out to write deliberately for women or for a wider audience, to argue against feminist interpretation or, separatist, embrace it, in creating a female victim, a female villain, a female crusading detective, in anticipating their female readers, they are recreating and redefining the ways in which women see the world.

And that, I will argue, is political.

From Davitt to Deconstruction:
Politics and Social Commentary in Feminist Crime Fiction

1.

The Box under the Bed

It was a blonde. A blonde to make a bishop kick a hole in a stained glass window. Raymond Chandler¹

I am a crime writer. If you asked me when it all began, I'd say 1992 when a teacher friend of mine was posted to the South Pacific island of Kiribati. She needed somewhere to store her household goods. They were duly dispersed to friends all over Melbourne: the fridge to Footscray, the bed and dining table to St Kilda, the clothes and crockery to South Melbourne. A box of crime novels came to Northcote and me.

I hadn't been a great fan of crime writing up until that time. I equated it with phallogocentric novels by authors like Carter Brown that my teenage brother read. They had titles like, *Murder is My Mistress*, *A Bullet for my Baby*, *Cutie was a Corpse*, *No Blonde is an Island* and there was usually a scantily dressed woman smoking a cigarette on the cover, big-breasted, a red-head or a blonde with very red lips and nails. If she wasn't smoking a cigarette, she was usually holding a smoking gun. Crime novels were peopled with men in trilby hats, their trench coat collars turned up and throwing their faces into shadow. They stood, often under a lamp-post, and looked up indifferently while a woman in a back lit window took off her clothes or was strangled to death.

¹ Chandler, Raymond, *Farewell My Lovely*, Chapter 13, 1940, quoted in the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 190

Even when I was a kid I thought my brother's Carter Brown novels portrayed women in a limited way. They were either spider-woman villains — a 'character type (which is) marked by her monstrous threat to a 'civilised environment',² or victims, a focus of the privileged male gaze, a mystery, 'their (dead) body, the feminine other.'³

Those women were also 'bad' in other ways. They were cantankerous, nagging, ambitious, demanding, sexually assertive, *unfeminine*. As such, they veered fatally away from the socially coded manner in which women were meant to live — submissive sexually and domestically. The women of crime fiction implied danger, a world where no-one was safe. Sex seemed to be inexplicably linked with guns and the action was played out in dark places, at night, when good people were safely in their beds.

The Politics of the Sexual Stereotype

For feminists, the crime genre's portrayal of women is a paradoxical one and the female duality of victim or villain remains problematic for crime writers and readers alike. The violated victim, be it someone's daughter, mother, wife, forms a sub text to the crime narrative, her role as victim belying the feminist assertion of the strong woman able to survive independently and on her own terms. Female victims are punished for walking in dark places alone at night, for letting men into their flats, for having sex, for being too beautiful to resist. Their naked bodies are scrutinised with a kind of voyeuristic delight by police, photographers, forensic pathologists, and of course, the reader. Bodies which rigor mortis and decay have made grotesque retain their sexual beauty and are as posed

² Hirsch, F., *Detours and Lost Highways: A Map of Neo-noir*, Limelight Editions, New York, 1999, p. 188

³ Ludlow, Christa, *The Reader Investigates: Images of Crime in the Colonial City*, *The Australian Journal of Media & Culture*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 1994, p. 44

as a film star on a silken bed.⁴ Whether deliberately or unconsciously realised, the moral message underscoring the text is that women must be good, not refractory, lest this happen to them.

One of the first challenges for feminist crime writers was to give these victims a voice. They did this in a number of ways. Some writers attempted to discreetly lower a curtain over the corpse, thus resisting the genre's convention of presenting the victim's violation in a salaciousness manner. Rosie Scott, whose novel *Glory Days* is explored in greater detail in Chapter 3, replaced the privileged male gaze with one of female understanding and pity. Writers such as Sara Paretsky and Gillian Slovo provided an analysis of the social factors which led to the victims's death and gave the reader enough autobiographical details to ensure that she was seen as a person and not just a corpse.

Dilemmas such as these rarely applied to male characters because a male victim does not have the same martyr's cache. His strength must be diminished before he can be dispatched. Male victims are often *othered* in some way: they may be gay, foreigners, strangers in town who fail to understand the amorality of the city and blunder into its web. This *otherness* has a 'feminising' effect, rendering them weak and vulnerable. Early crime writers such as Dorothy L. Sayers and Agatha Christie, it has been argued,⁵ feminised their male characters by giving them characteristics different from those of other British male sleuths. This enabled them to stand apart from established social relationships, to increase their intuition and to provide an outsider's inside look, rather like someone viewing an alien culture through a window. In Christie's case Hercule Poirot is Belgian, a dandy and effete. Sayer's Lord Peter Wimsey is war damaged.

⁴ At a lecture on crime I attended at the Museum of Sydney a former police officer said he was disgusted at the way dead bodies were idealised in crime fiction. He added that rarely are the bodies naked and after they have been dead a few days, they certainly aren't beautiful.

⁵ Munt, Sally, *Murder by the Book: Feminism and the Crime Novel*, Routledge, London, 1994, p. 27

The tradition continues with contemporary female crime writers such as Elizabeth George, who has created Thomas Lynsley, a foppish cross between the late actor Lesley Howard and someone from a Noel Coward play. P.D. James's melancholy Adam Dalgleish is a poet as well as a cop. Susan Geason's Syd Fish displays all the trademarks of his female creator's feminism: tolerance, empathy and friendship with women, as well as his traditional sleuthing skills.

Female villains can be difficult for female crime writers to pull off. Crime readers have come to accept that male villains can be corporate criminals, gangsters, corrupt public servants, politicians, evil doctors or lawyers and serial killers. Male sexuality, however rampant, may be seen as a reflection of a flawed character but is not usually punishable by death and men generally escape the moralising that sexually rapacious women attract. In crime fiction written by feminists, women's active engagement in economic and social crimes is less likely to be portrayed, suggesting a writer's failure of nerve when it comes to extending the imaginative parameters of her narrative in making her female characters as 'bad' as the men.

The Politics of the Re-gendered

The regendering of crime fiction became particularly problematic after women appropriated the traditional 'private eye' and sexually reassigned him into the female detective who began appearing in hard-boiled fiction written by women in the nineteen seventies and eighties. Those early female operatives seem to have been constructed, as much in reaction against the males of detective fiction, as in imitation of them.⁶ Like their genre brothers,

⁶ Munt, S., 1994, p. 27

the new breed of female private eyes walked the mean streets alone, independent figures who observed the city with detachment.⁷ In investigating and solving crime they exposed the misuse of male power through the structures of church, politics, capitalism and state.

Could you put a female in the hard-boiled world and have her come across as a female and not a man dressed up in sheep's clothing?

Marele Day⁸

In their regendering were women crime writers, as Marele Day has suggested, merely creating women who were men in sheep's clothing? And if they were, what further was to be done with a female private eye whose personality traits mirrored those of the private dicks of the 1940s and 1950s, like Hammett's terse social outsider Sam Spade? At worst misogynistic, lonely and depressive, at best, as exemplified in Raymond Chandler's Phillip Marlowe, a moral crusader. And how were female crime writers to reflect the social changes and politics that had taken place in the wake of the civil rights movement, the Vietnam war, feminism and the coming of age of baby boomers intent on reshaping the world to meet their own expectations?

These questions were answered when I opened the box under the bed and began reading my friend's books. The authors' names; Sara Paretsky, P. D. James, Sue Grafton, Marcia Muller, Patricia Cornwell, Marele Day, Liza Cody, Gillian Slovo, Val McDermid, Susan Geason were all new to me. Their publicity photos showed women of a certain age, who had been teachers, doctors, lawyers. Some had worked in offices and shops. They were what Sally Munt has defined as 'typically white, professional and middle-class

⁷ Ludlow, C., 1994, p. 53

⁸ Day, Marele, in conversation with Stuart Coupe, *The Life and Crimes of Marele Day*, Mean Streets, No. 1., October, 1990, p. 57

often holding a Ph.D from a well-known university,' intellectuals who 'integrated liberal feminism into (their) texts as political discourse.'⁹

The art work on the books' covers was a revelation too. Like those on the covers of novels by their male counterparts, nightmare scenes abounded. There were corpses, dark alleys, pools of blood, skeletons and swags of long blonde hair, but there were also tough looking women standing braced and ready for action. The novels were peopled with female private investigators, female cops, female forensic pathologists, the kinds of women you'd go to if you were in trouble and needed a woman on your case – and particularly if you wanted that woman to be a feminist.

One of the earliest of these texts was P.D. James's *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman* (1972). By its very title, the novel seemed to throw down the gauntlet to those squeamish about the gender appropriation of the genre. Other writers followed, creating women detectives who worked and lived in dangerous places, particularly the city with its mysterious dark and shadows, its ever-present threat, but also in idyllic rural settings and in class and gender structured organisations such as universities and hospitals.

In crime fiction, Maggie Humm ¹⁰ has asserted there is a need to acknowledge that 'the mystery often operates as the unacknowledged feminine, in a genre where the detective is usually masculine, rational, objective and 'truth' seeking. A female investigator, therefore, must cross the boundaries into this masculine world of perpetual threat, thugs, darkness and corporate crime. In doing so she must not only solve the crime, she must avoid the occupational hazards of her sleuthing job. These are not just the physical dangers of her work, the bashings and car chases and nasty phone calls, but the disapprobation of her colleagues, society and the law which

⁹ Munt, S. 1994, p. 27

¹⁰ Humm, Maggie, in Bloom, Clive, (ed.) *Twentieth Century Suspense*, MacMillan, London, 1990, p. 236

make it clear to her at every opportunity that she is transgressing the gender divide.

I read all the books in the box.

Then I started buying new releases.

Before I knew it I had become a serial reader of crime.

The Politics of the Hero

As writers like Chandler have shown us, crime fiction is the literature of crusaders. It relies on what Joseph Campbell¹¹ defines as an archetypal hero: the moralist risking their life by confronting adversity and winning in the end. In taking his heroic journey through departure, initiation and return, the hero transforms his inner and outer worlds. In similar ways, the male private eye becomes 'the representative of man, and yet more than a man ... the focus of morality, the mythic hero.'¹²

The female detective is equally mythical. Female detectives are Bodiceas, Joans of Arc – women determined to take on the male establishment, often at great risk to themselves. Whether deliberately or unconsciously developed, these themes have led crime writers such as Jennifer Rowe to create 'fairy tales for grown-ups' leaving no end untied, and an explanation for everything.¹³ In fairytales and myths, it is usually the woman, a beautiful princess put to sleep or locked in a tower who is rescued. In feminist crime fiction it is the female detective who has agency as the rescuer.

¹¹ Campbell, J. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Fontana Press, London, 1993, p.49

¹² Munt, S. 1994, p. 2

¹³ Rowe, Jennifer, *Clues to the Puzzle, Mean Streets*, No. 2, February 1991, p.45

In crime fiction with a female protagonist, the female hero enters a labyrinthine world and escorts her client to safety or avenges their death. One of the arguments supporting the popularity of crime fiction written by women is that women need female heroes who straddle the under and over worlds like a Colossus. Moral figures who act as story tellers, explorers, social commentators and resolvers of mystery – roles that traditionally have been assigned to men. Female readers of crime fiction identify with the female investigator's strength, take comfort in crime fiction's highly moral tone and its restoring of social order. The scientific neatness of its problem solving allows them to escape from their traditional social roles and empowers them.

Crime fiction is also a genre of expectations. It gives women licence to behave in ways which reverse the traditional order of things. They can probe and investigate or challenge authority. They reclaim and appropriate. Reject motherhood and caring relationships. They can also behave violently and this violence, as American crime writer, Sue Grafton has said,¹⁴ moves them into the same camp as soldiers and maniacs. By participating in violence, however vicarious, Grafton argues, neither the writer nor the reader is the same again.

Feminist readers expect a crime novel with enough potential perpetrators to tie their attention up in knots. The characters must be women with whom they identify, or who are sufficiently different from themselves to be interesting. The female investigator works both within and outside the law, debating with herself and others about justice, legality and violence, and in this way, violence against women is explored through a feminist narrative. Female investigators must be faced from time to time, as many women are, with dilemmas about violence, sex and relationships. About whether to

¹⁴ Grafton, Sue, in interview with Geoff Popple, *G is for Grafton*, *Mean Streets*, No.1, October 1990, p.41

expose transgression or keep their mouths shut, or whether to take a beating or to turn and run. Their story must race along too. It needs wit and humour. Place must play a role.

These complexities introduce numerous constraints for a feminist author. Most problematic of them is just how far she can pursue feminist polemical interests in a novel which must, above all, be a pacy read, full of submerged clues and red herrings, dramatic and obfuscating yet resolved with clear explanation, all dots dotted, all *ts* crossed. Step beyond these parameters and the author enters a dangerous place. A novel that's political themes overwhelm the narrative will fall flat. Avoid any social discourse and it becomes insubstantial flummery.

A woman writing about women needs to decide where she will place her characters. Will they revolt against patriarchal convention? Will she make villains of them, even if this is seen as 'politically incorrect?' Will her violated female victims endure the kind of gaze from her female investigator that is traditionally privileged to men? Will her investigator work within or subvert male ways of doing things? In addressing these, the author redefines the role of women in society, and adds her voice to what traditionally has been a male narrative.

The Politics of Domestic Relationships

When my food arrived he moved to the stool next to me

'If you had a decent sex life you wouldn't need to gratify yourself like this,' he said, his mouth curved into a grin, his teeth white and even against the dark beard.

'My sex life is okay.'

'Yeah,' Morelli said. 'But sometimes it's nice to have a partner.'

Janet Evanovich¹⁵

As is the case with their male counterparts, a female investigator's occupation leaves little time for her to establish or nurture relationships. If she has a family and friends they are usually long-suffering, hostile and neglected. The traditional 'female' roles of housekeeping or personal beauty maintenance are not high priorities, unless perhaps in desultory jogging or trips to the gym. Like the men, many female detectives make do with casual sex and junk food. Sara Paretsky's V. I. Warshawski, for example, drives her friends mad by the cavalier way in which she treats them. Sue Grafton's Kinsey Milhone, has a bad haircut which she inflicts on herself with a pair of nail scissors. Marele Day's Claudia Valentine is a divorced woman who lives in a pub.

Most female detectives drink alcohol, often to excess. In relation to sex, many have partners they met in the line of duty, such as fellow cops. Their on-again, off-again sexual relationships form a central theme in the novel, until the sexual tension is resolved with the characters either enjoying some hot sex or avoiding it altogether. Lesbian detectives such as Dorothy Porter's Jill Fitzpatrick in *The Monkey's Mask* and Claire McNab's Carol Ashton lust after clients and suspects, and as a result get into sexual trouble like many of their male counterparts.

Those characters who do not have the odd casual fling, may have given up on sex altogether to remain celibate, fulfilling the liberal notion of androgyny as 'balanced', no longer (needing) the external man, incorporating him, or at least his 'best aspects' within herself.¹⁶ By doing this, the male can

¹⁵ Evanovich, J., *Three to Get Deadly*, Scribner, New York, 1997, p. 129

¹⁶ Munt, S., 1994, p. 41

be excised from the narrative – and dispatched. Extreme examples of this include the proliferation of widows or those whose partners who have died in the line of duty such as Patricia Cornwell’s Kaye Scarpetta, or as a result of their relationship with the detective, such as Gillian Slovo’s Kate Baer.

But it is in the area of social justice that the female detectives’ politics and political consciences are finely tuned and well maintained. Many are left-leaning, often asserting the view through their texts that crime is a form of social transgression brought about by economics, poverty and class, and presenting a Gramscian analysis of society as a vast school full of moral lessons and political analysis.¹⁷ The private lives of the female operatives reflect their creators’ liberal views. The characters live independently, avoiding the constraints of the patriarchal nuclear family.

Morag Shiach believes women detectives need to stay outside socially stereotypical roles if they are to maintain their crusading. She is unimpressed when ‘traditional’ male/female domestic relationships and household domesticity begin creeping back into the feminist crime narrative,¹⁸ arguing that these roles weaken and diminish her. Domesticity becomes a kind of honey trap, seducing the female detective and pulling her back into the role she has escaped. If female detectives were created as a reaction against the idealised domesticity of the mothers of the nineteen fifties, such domesticity must be avoided at all costs. How can a female detective transgress the gender divide, Shiach asks, if she is an active participant in it? She needs to be an instrument of change, an example of how women can survive without the props of social convention.

¹⁷ Nyman, J., The Politics of the Personal, *Journal of American Studies of Turkey*, No. 7, 1998, p. 13

¹⁸ Shiach, M., Domesticating the Detective, Taken from Slater, M. (ed.) *Women Voice Men: Gender in European Culture*, *Intellect*, UK, 1997, p. 13

These choices can also be pragmatically determined by a writer, as Sue Grafton notes. 'When you are writing hard-boiled P.I. fiction,' she asserts, 'you can't worry about baby-sitters'. For the same reason (Kinsey Millhone) has no pets. 'Readers will obsess about things like not feeding the cat.'¹⁹

But while domesticity remains a dilemma for women, for the men of crime fiction there is little expectation of a domestic life. They remain indifferent to the state of their flats or tidy them only when chaos makes it necessary. Some, like Dexter's Morse and Dibdin's Zen, may display an interest in food, wine, music and art. This domestic aesthetic doesn't diminish the men but shows them operating confidently in both worlds, unconstrained by the limitations domesticity imposes on women.

The Politics of Political Correctness

*It shouldn't be hard for a private eye to be more politically correct than Miss Marple.*²⁰

Australian crime writer, Susan Geason, believes political correctness has become the bête noire of feminist crime fiction. The term was first used, according to Gillian Bottomley, 'to describe left-wing purists who chastised comrades regarded as bourgeois recidivists, and thus, ideologically unsound.'²¹ Political correctness is viewed with suspicion by many crime writers, readers and critics, who see it as driving the political themes in feminist crime fiction. The critic, Geoffrey Bensley has noted, for example, that the rise of feminism 'fogged the issue a bit in relation to violence and gritty thrillers,' and believes that political and sexual correctness and crime fiction are often at cross-purposes. Whodunnits, he argues:

¹⁹ Grafton, Sue, *Meanstreets*, No.14, p. 36

²⁰ Bensley, Geoffrey, Trench Coats are Out of Style? *Meanstreets*, No.12, Dec 1994, p. 22

²¹ Bottomley, Gillian, Redefining the PC Argument, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 May, 1997, p.17

*are often written by women, so sometimes they have to be taken a bit more seriously. Tough thrillers are mostly written by men, and they're full of violence and poor attitudes towards women, so their standing slides a bit.....The correctness gap has closed slightly, but there probably hasn't been any actual reversal. Gritty, anti-middle class private eyes may not be quite as correct as they used to be, but they're probably still correct enough.'*²²

Geason believes that the crusading feminists of nineteen seventies and eighties crime fiction pay a high price for their moral absolutism. Her concerns include the need for female private eyes such as Grafton's Milhone to get a good hairdresser, a decent meal and a loving relationship. Geason finds male detectives 'more believable moral relativists.'²³ She attributes the development of the goody-goody female detective to a number of factors including the nineteenth century's morally uplifting literature for girls including various dying swans from Dickens, the March women, Katy Carr and Jane Eyre. She also blames the masochism women later absorbed from Charlotte Bronte, Jean Rhys, Rosamond Lehmann, Georgette Heyer. According to Geason, feminist crime writers also have been influenced by the Puritan wing of the American feminist movement which largely sees the female role as one of service to higher good.²⁴

Contemporary crime writers of the *lipstick* school seem to be less troubled by feminist expectations. Tart Noir, for example, is an internet-based group of crime writers who 'drink too much, smoke too much, dress extremely well and haven't told our parents when we'll be back tonight ...'²⁵

²² Bensley, Geoffrey, 1994, p. 23

²³ Geason, Susan, *Ain't Misbehaving*, in *Killing Women: Rewriting Detective Fiction*, ed. Delys Bird, Angus and Roberston, 1993, p. 111

²⁴ Geason, S., in Bird, 1993, p. 111

²⁵ Henderson, Lauren, *Tart City*, <http://www.tartcity.com>

They make much of their liberated sexuality and call themselves *tarts*, because:

It's a potent four-letter word. Sweet, sour, sexy, bad, with a touch of cheesecake. It seemed to sum up the detectives in a certain segment of the crime fiction genre, the independent-minded female sleuths who are tough enough to take on thugs and corrupt cops, tender enough to be moved by tough, tender men (or women, as the case may be.) These are the neofeminist women, half Philip Marlowe, half femme-fatale, who make their own rules, who think its entirely possible to save the world while wearing a drop-dead dress and stiletto heels. Our heroines are Modesty Blaise and Emma Peel, our morals are questionable and our attitude always needs adjustment.²⁶

The American novelist, Janet Evanovich, introduces female characters whose behaviour, dress and relationships challenge the need for the self-denial and beauty effacement inherent in earlier feminist texts. Evanovich, a former writer of romance fiction, allows her hero, Stephanie Plum, to straddle both worlds, providing her with the trappings of female beauty, an ambiguous attitude towards it, at times displaying her sexuality, at times rejecting it. Plum has strong familial ties but also preserves the independence of the feminist. She is surrounded by eccentric and assertive women, including Plum's grandmother, the carousing Mazur, who leaves the reader in no doubt as to the genesis of Plum's sassiness. Plum's father, a lone male in a feminist household, can only retreat to his armchair in a kind of bemused shock, to watch TV silently.

²⁶ Henderson, L., see note 25

The only representation of narrative which not only re-discovers historicity and the historical novel, but also promises a continuation of the historicist project is the narrative of women's emancipation. Ferenc Feher ²⁷

Despite the similarities that female detectives share with their genre brothers (the dry wit, the ironic way of looking at the world with a disassociated way of moving through society and occasional love indiscretions that complicate their work) there remain significant differences. Given, for example, Day's concerns about creating female characters who mimic the worst of male detectives, why do women crime writers continue to define the world in male terms by using a masculinist genre?

Carolyn Heilbrun argued in the late 1980s, that women's lives had been controlled by male narratives. Women, she maintained, realised this and in their writing broke through to self-realisation.²⁸ Regardless of new developments in crime writing, feminists continue to maintain that women have been caught in a world structured by man-centred concepts and have had no way of representing themselves. They assert that the formation of male identity is as a seamless unified, phallic self. Conversely, female identity is less fixed and is more responsive to others.²⁹ Detective fiction provides a powerful female voice with which to explore and contextualise women's experience. The female detective provides women with a dual narrative, the domestic, inner world and the external one of crime and threat.

²⁷ Feher, F., *The Historical Novel and Post-Histoire* in Milner, A. and Worth, C. (eds.) *Discourse and Post-Structuralism, Feminism and the Moment of History*, Centre for General and Comparative Literature, Monash University, 1990, p. 36

²⁸ Heilbrun, Carolyn, *Writing a Woman's Life*, Ballantine Books, New York, 1989, p. 60

²⁹ Heilbrun, C., 1989, p.

That women write fiction which draws on their lives is nothing new. Generations of writers from George Elliot, the Bronte sisters, Virginia Woolf and Iris Murdoch to name just a few, have used their novels to give voice to their frustrations about the social limitations imposed on them. In Australia, social realist writers such as Jean Devanney, Eleanor Dark, Dorothy Hewitt and Rosie Scott have documented the ways in which women have participated in political and social activism. Contemporary novels explore the profound and unsettling experiences of women's relationships. Feminist crime fiction is part of this narrative continuum.

There are paradoxes in this. Traditionally, detective fiction promoted all that was unified, phallic and 'celebrated the privileged male gaze.'³⁰ What made the female investigators different from their brothers was their femaleness: their connections with their community of friends and lovers, parents, children, dysfunctional at times as these relationships might be. 'Functioning within a fantasy environ of post-feminist opportunity, these powerful detectives resolve three unstable forms close to the liberal feminist heart – the individual, the family, and the state.'³¹ In appropriating the male hero and turning him into the crusading feminist, female crime writers take this reclamation of narrative even further. In reshaping what was traditionally a genre written by male writers and featuring male detectives, they assert through their female detectives a woman's right to self-protection. By solving the crime they also assure an increasingly corrupt world that there are women who, for a price, will defend the needy and expose transgressors.

³⁰ Munt, S., 1994, p. 31

³¹ Munt, S., 1994, p. 31

The Politics of Place

What you see on the surface goes down much further in Melbourne than in Sydney. And that brings in that whole corruption thing, the beautiful face and the rotten body underneath. Marele Day³²

In 1995 I began to write crime myself. Living in Northcote, I was missing my home in Balmain: the suburb's old houses, the pubs, the housing commission flats. I wanted to sit in the front bar of the *William Wallace* or the *Dry Dock* pub and listen to codgers in blue singlets talking about the good old days on Cockatoo Island. To watch the trendy young girls and the old ladies in their bowling whites shopping at Woolworths. My desire to write about all of these led me back to Sydney. I was shocked at how dramatically Balmain had changed.

A further defining feature of crime novels is their strong sense of place. The Australian academic and writer, Drusilla Modjeska has argued that women write about the cities in which they live, as if to give shape to the terms of their lives, arguing that whilst our cities are very different, the ways in which women live in them remain paradoxical and ambiguous. Women are practised on the peripheries, she asserts, and our memories, our stories are formed in movement between inner and outer, past and future, centre and margin, between the physical environment and the social world.³³

In crime fiction the urban landscape takes on a character of its own, both labyrinthine and challenging. It plays no favourites and is as likely to consume the hero as it is the villain of the piece. Walter Benjamin saw detection and the rise of the crime novel as fear of anonymity in the urban

³² Day, Marele, *Mean Streets*, No. 1, 1990, p. 57

³³ Modjeska, Drusilla, (ed.) *Inner Cities: Australian Women's Memory of Place*, Penguin Books, Melbourne, 1989, p. 2

crowd.³⁴ It also has been asserted that the dark side of the glittering city and the detective's psyche which often mirrors it can represent, 'anxieties about ... the elusive but threatening nature of women'. In the dominant discourses about crime, Christa Ludlow argues, 'we find attempts to promote unity; to centralise control in the figure of the detective and minimise dissent.'³⁵

This focus shifts in crime fiction written by women. Like their male detective counterparts, female private investigators know their cities as intimately as they would a lover's body. But unlike their male counterparts, they are trespassing, failing to obey the coded constructs of movement in the city that set aside areas where women are to work, to care for their families, to play. They carry no passports, acknowledge no *droit de passage* that sanctions their access and allows them occasional forays into the city's gendered spaces. For women, the need to be careful in the city's dark places becomes a kind of genetic memory, passed down by our cautioning foremothers. To do their sleuthing work, female detectives need to over-ride this most potent of warnings and endlessly put themselves at risk.

That the city is a primary theme in women's crime fiction is hardly surprising. The city and its complexities have always featured in utopian writing. Its skyscrapers and underground spaces, its shifting populations and dark places, its decline and its gentrification offer the crime writer a contemporary maze, metaphysical as well as metaphorical through which characters move, noting the city's decay, challenging the city's social crimes and solving them. Traditionally, the detective 'was portrayed as an independent figure who could observe the city with detachment — the direct opposite of the emotional, obfuscating woman.'³⁶ The male detective, and the criminals he pursued, are the violated city's developers, demolition men

³⁴ Benjamin, Walter, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Zohn, H., NLB. London, 1973, p. 43

³⁵ Ludlow, C., 1994, p. 48

³⁶ Ludlow, C., 1994, p. 44

or real estate agents who plundered and laid claim to the female metropolis and her female citizens.

This plunder by over-development and gentrification is a recurring theme in crime novels by women writers, including myself. The reason for this, I suggest, is that we are baby boomers, brought up by parents who lived through the Depression and World War Two. For our parents the nineteen fifties represented a period of peace and prosperity and their post war expectations of stable government, social welfare, full employment and community were passed on to us. The slow destruction of their ideals threatens our expectations. Munt sees feminist crime writings' focus on the loss of working class inner-city communities as an 'indictment of 1980s gentrification enterprise, designer fads style, family life'³⁷ which effectively dismantled all the social structures that had gone before it. Cawelti,³⁸ on the other hand, believes that detective fiction has always focused on the metropolis, on rationalism, and the nature of modern delinquency, balanced somewhere between the exotic and the everyday.

I would also argue, that the way in which the city and the crimes played out on its streets are incorporated into crime texts, reflects cultural differences as well as social expectations. As Liza Cody has suggested³⁹, British crime fiction is significantly different from that of American writers because class plays a major role in British fictional discourse whereas violence, poverty and guns are more prevalent in American texts. In Australia – with neither guns nor a class system – politics, social and historical dramas which contain an element of nostalgia, prevail. Gabrielle Lord's recurring focus on crimes against children, are one striking example,

³⁷ Munt, Sally, 1994, p. 52

³⁸ Cawelti, J., *Detecting the Detective: Critical Approaches to Detective Fiction*, University of Kentucky Press, 1999, p. 44

³⁹ Cody, Liza, in Silet, C., *Mean Streets*, No. 14, Sept 1995, p. 16

expressing a longing as they do, for a time when childhood was a place of innocence and safety, protected and sexless, even if this place is a myth.

That the city remains a continuing focus of female crime writing is not surprising. It reflects the recurring theme of women reclaiming spaces for themselves. The city's corruption is exposed and a light shone into its dark spaces in Australian crime novels such as Mandy Sayer's *The Cross*, Mary Rose McColl's *Angels in the Architecture*, Marele Day's *The Life and Crimes of Harry Lavender* and Susan Geason's *Dogfish*, and my first Balmain-based novel, *Dry Dock*. In all of these novels, an attempt is made to examine and make sense of the city's underworld, both the physical and the metaphorical one, and to clean it up.

By uncovering the city's secrets in this way, by reclaiming and feminising the space, feminist crime fiction reassures the female reader that the rational detective will resolve any problems and restore order. For this reason, crime fiction has been seen by cultural historians as a rich source of information about the ideologies and anxieties of modernity.⁴⁰ Therefore, when authors like Paretsky, Grafton and Cornwell from America, Cody and McDermid from Britain, Geason, McNab and Day from Australia write about their towns and cities as though they own them, they are actually reclaiming and reinterpreting them. Their skill is not only that of '... showing the reader what lay behind the glittering city, in exposing the deceptiveness of appearances ...'⁴¹ but also of reappropriating these spaces as the 'feminine' — as theirs.

⁴⁰ Martin, R., *Mean Streets and Raging Bulls: The Legacy of Film Noir in Contemporary American Cinema*, Scare Crow Press, USA, 1997, p. 1

⁴¹ Martin, R., see note 40

I imagine my introduction to crime fiction is not vastly different from that of other readers who have 'discovered' the genre and then been overtaken by it. Once discovered, crime fiction has a lethal effect. Its popularity is insidious and readers look forward to each new novel in a series as anxiously as a drug addict looks forward to their next fix. It has been popular ever since its inception in the nineteenth century. Sherlock Holmes's most ardent fans wore mourning bands when Doyle killed off his character and crime readers like the poet, W.H. Auden made no bones about the addictive quality of the narratives. 'For me,' Auden said, 'as for many others, the reading of detective stories is an addiction like tobacco or alcohol.'⁴² For the poet, the attraction of crime fiction lay in its moral certainties and the manner in which the detective restores the state of grace in which the aesthetic and the ethical are as one.

Feminist crime fiction has enjoyed enormous popularity during the past two decades. Numerous reasons have been offered for this phenomenon. Feminist theorists and authors, such as Delys Bird and Brenda Walker,⁴³ argue that crime fiction written by women was always popular, it's just become more mainstream, more widely promoted by the publishing houses that publish and aggressively market it. Hence, women know what books are available, go to readings and serial read each new novel by their favourite authors.

American crime writer, J.M. Redman believes that this popularity is a result of women's need to '... have a hero ... (in crime fiction) women can be strong, they can be active, they can be assertive, they can be angry. I think

⁴² Auden in Allen, Dick, and Chacks, David, (eds.) *Detective Fiction: Crime and Compromise*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1974, p. 406

⁴³ Bird, D, (ed) 1993, p. 12

that's empowering.'⁴⁴ It 'has been enabled by, and is closely connected to, contemporary feminist cultural politics.'⁴⁵ Others believe crime fiction is a reflection of a late twentieth century need for resolvable riddles, a circular quest which challenges and re-orders chaos.⁴⁶

Do men and women read differently because of a need for different kinds of heroes or social commentary? In my discussions with crime readers at festivals and functions I am struck by their varying expectations of the text. Men who don't read crime fiction written by women cite their impatience with the minutiae of the character's lives as a key factor in their choice. Where female crime writers are popular with male readers (and Janet Evanovich is an example of this) men claim they are attracted to her humour rather than her character's life style, food and clothing fixations. Women readers select on the basis of a wider range of qualities – Plum's community of friends, her family, and her social and political pronouncements – are all factors in their choice of Evanovich's books. For women Plum is 'heroic' in the ways she maintains a balance between all these elements of her life.

There are also more prosaic attractions for women readers. Readers enjoy the detective's use of strategies to solve her crime, especially given that the overt use of strategic thinking and problem solving is a rarity in female fictional narratives. Caught up in the monotony of balancing work and the second shift of family, study and social life after the day's paid work is done, readers use the problem solving female detective to escape from the frustration of their routines. By the end of the novel the female detective will have responded to the clues, sorted out the villain, solved the crime. The

⁴⁴ Redman, J.M., *Sisters in Crime Newsletter*, No. 7, Summer, 1994, p. 12

⁴⁵ Coward, Rosalind and Semple, Linda, *Tracking Down the Past: Women and Detective Fiction*, in Helen Carr (ed.) *From my Guy to Sci-Fi: Genre and Women's Writing in the Post Modern World*, Pandora, London, 1998, p. 40, in Bird, (ed), 1993, p. 11

⁴⁶ Campbell, J., 1993, p. 48

reader's life, however well managed, is unlikely to so easily resolve its chaotic rituals.

The Politics of Social Commentary

A century after my grandparents met on the picket line for the Garment Workers' Union, we still have sweatshops in this great land of ours. We still have crime, homelessness, parents selling their children for a nickel bag and a host of other ills. If a master storyteller like Dickens could find his most compelling stories within that landscape, who am I to turn away from it? Sara Paretsky⁴⁷

What particularly endeared the crime novels in the box to me, was the manner in which they developed their strongly political themes. Crime fiction explores contemporary politics in ways not seen since the social realist novels of nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It invites a politicised reading of its texts through not only its political content and use of historical and social data, but also by the manner in which it locates the reader in its politics. ⁴⁸ Where else in contemporary fiction are you likely to find critical social analysis and anger with injustice as in the following piece from Gillian Slovo's, *Death by Analysis*? Slovo is no stranger to politics. The daughter of communist activists, her mother assassinated by a letter bomb, she pulls no punches in her texts:

It was 28 July 1981, the night before the wedding of Charles, heir to the throne, to Lady Diana Spencer. The people had come to celebrate but there was an air of desperation in their attempt. While unemployment rocketed, while disorder spread to the streets, while more men followed Bobby Sands in lingering deaths, while in Liverpool, the police use a Landrover to kill a boy who could never

⁴⁷ Paretsky, S. *Sisters in Crime Newsletter*, No. 7, Summer 1994, p. 4

*have got away, the English were celebrating the fact that there was one thing they could still do: organise a pageant.*⁴⁹

For someone like myself with a background in political activism, crime fiction becomes irresistible for a number of reasons. Most potent of these is the manner in which it gives voice to women's political views and their shared history. In feminist crime these politics reflect the genre's socialist-feminist genesis. These politics took form in what Stephen Knight has described as the 'newer and more polemical thriller' with feminist detectives. In Australia, this development was reflected in Day's *The Life and Crimes of Harry Lavender*, which was a conscious response to the 'bloke-iness' of Corris's Cliff Hardy. Claire McNab went even further with her feminist, separatist thrillers.⁵⁰

Decades after the feminist private eyes appeared, despite shifting styles and an increasing market for crime, their genesis is still apparent and crime fiction continues to focus on the political and the social preoccupations of women who remain the most avid readers and interpreters of its texts. It continues to politicise the *feminine* and 'brings other political issues into a location, form or genre that is accessible and appealing to women.'⁵¹ For a writer like myself, who wishes to explore all genres and styles, it is to crime fiction I'll turn whenever I want a narrative that explores social and political themes.

⁴⁸ Nyman, Jopi, 1998, p. 13

⁴⁹ Slovo, Gillian, *Death by Analysis*, The Women's Press, London, 1986, p. 148

⁵⁰ Knight, Stephen, Old Crime in New Form, Mean Streets, No. 1, October, 1990, p. 33

⁵¹ Levy, B., New Left Legacies, Marxist-Feminist Ambivalences, *Internet Journal of Social Change and Critical Inquiry*, Vol.2, Rethinking Marxism in Australia, 2000, www.uow.edu.au/arts/joscci

Crime fiction asserts its political position in a range of ways; through its plot, character, the examination of social disfunction and the interrogation of society's role in it. To 'take politics out of literature (means) locating literature firmly at the centre of comfort rather than challenge,' McLaren⁵² has claimed. The genre certainly could not be accused of squeamishness or comfort-seeking. No other contemporary literature offers such an unflinching gaze at social ills. None provides an exploration of the mind of someone turned evil or analysis of the role society plays in this fall. In the best of crime fiction, readers become part of a journey that explores both the inner and outer world of its characters, where the dark underworld of the modern metropolis is mirrored in the mind of the transgressor.

This political discourse is not unique to crime fiction, of course. As Julia Watson has maintained, the very act of taking up a pen to write is a political act, an opportunity and form of resistance, in defining women as self-conscious beings (and) acknowledging that they have been prohibited from defining themselves.⁵³ But unlike non-crime narratives, crime fiction openly and unambiguously observes and dissects contemporary political issues. Its protagonists take sides, expose, hold forth about not just the crime, but the social conditions that have formed the criminal. Hence race is examined in Clair McNab's *Set Up*:

*'Would you be happy if someone called you a Chink?' Carol Ashton demands of a colleague. 'Then don't call Sam Goolwa an Abo. To his face or anyone else. Understood?'*⁵⁴

⁵² McLaren, J., *Writing in Hope and Fear: Literature as Politics in Postwar Australia*, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 12

⁵³ Watson, Julia, *Towards an Anti-Metaphysics of Autobiography*, in Folkenflik, R., *The Culture of Autobiography: Constructions of Self-Representation*, Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 1993, p. 71

⁵⁴ McNab, Claire, *Set Up*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1999, p. 94

The British crime writer, P.D. James, sees her writing as an exploration of 'the bridges of law and order over a great chaos of both personal and psychological disorder,'⁵⁵ even though her solutions to this disorder might be conservative. In quoting James in the introduction to *Killing Women*, Delys Bird remarks on the author's ability to show, 'that while the narrative puzzle, the crime, may be solved, intellectually and elegantly, there is no solution to the rest of the mess, which remains.'⁵⁶ The 'rest of the mess' is society and all its disjunctions. These form the basis of much of the political rhetoric that underpins the genre's narratives and challenges the reader's understanding of crime and social disjunction as they read.

Crime fiction it has been claimed, is capable of political activity, which means it can no longer be regarded as always innocently and conventionally reproducing dominant mass-consumer-directed ideologies.⁵⁷ From its earliest texts it has tackled unpopular themes such as the role of the Ku Klux Klan in America, shonky employment practices and child sexual exploitation.⁵⁸ It revealed the practices of race, class, and sexual politics in contemporary society,⁵⁹ and chronicled, first hand, the direct results of economic and social disadvantage, racial discrimination, the destructive effects of corporate capitalism and economic rationalism on the powerless citizen, be they victim or criminal. Its authors 'debate politically radical issues'.⁶⁰ It reflects dominant political concerns, and because of this self-location as the site of hegemonic struggles, it is able to convey messages which are critical of dominant ideologies.⁶¹

⁵⁵ James quoted in Nicci Gerard, *Into the Mainstream*, Pandora, London, 1989, p. 125

⁵⁶ Bird, D., (ed) 1993, p. 27

⁵⁷ Bird, D., (ed) 1993, p. 12

⁵⁸ McCann, Sean, Constructing Race Williams: The Klan and the Making of Hard-Boiled Crime Fiction, *American Quarterly*, no. 49, 1997, p. 677

⁵⁹ Cranny-Francis, Anne, Gender and Genre: Feminist Rewritings of Detective Fiction, *Women's Studies International Forum*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 1988, p.69

⁶⁰ Cranny-Francis, in Bird, D., 1993, p. 30

⁶¹ Nyman, J., 1998, p. 14

Contemporary politics is a focus in crime fiction written by Australians. Rosie Scott, for example, believes crime fiction is about dysfunctionality. She argues that it is a genre that explores scepticism, irreverence, cynicism, lack of heart. It is deeply moral. Cases cannot be just let go. 'So the character proceeds, as a moral agent through terror, destruction, stasis, until harmony of a sort reasserts itself and justice is done'.⁶²

These polemical themes have been attributed to Australia's colourful criminal history, the nation's genesis in crime, spawning a recurrent interest in the subject. Historians such as Robert Hughes make much of Australia's white beginnings when the 'first settlements were penal colonies made up of soldiers and convicts; embryonic social worlds that were starkly structured by the simple dualism of gaoler and gaoled.'⁶³ The very 'act of colonising Australia was criminal,' he asserts,' and it was directed through a criminal establishment whose officers were promised land as an enticement and reward for their self-exile. Crime, with its definitive qualities of violence and corruption, guilt and punishment, with its hidden, secretive nature always threatened by ultimate discovery, historically colours and shapes our national consciousness.'⁶⁴ Whilst Hughes may have made scant reference to our female criminals, it is from this consciousness that Australia's first crime novel by a woman, *Force and Fraud* by Ellen Davitt sprang in 1863. Early crime novels such as Davitt's ensured that the themes of transgression and punishment have been some of our dominant fictional discourses ever since.

Our colonial history has given Australians an ambivalent attitude to crime. We forgive and rehabilitate our corporate raiders, pay corrupt company directors millions a year, frown on *dobbers*. Many citizens, myself

⁶² Scott, Rosie, Interview, 2000

⁶³ Hughes, Robert, in Bird, D., 1993, p. 1

⁶⁴ Bird, D., (ed) p. 2

included, see politicians as well dressed and well paid crooks. And two hundred years after white invasion, after centuries of immigration and decades of multicultural policy, whenever we display our history to the world as we did in the 2000 Olympic Games opening and closing ceremonies, the iconography of crime takes shape in the bushranger, Ned Kelly, squatters and renegade cattlemen.

It is bad enough that politicians are the biggest fiction writers around without mystery writers adding to it. Sue Grafton⁶⁵

Australians with a cynical distrust of politicians and a culture based on questioning the hegemony of its elites would find it hard to disagree. In politics lies the potential for crime. Pursuing a desire to be a politician, is, in the view of a population deeply suspicious of all politicians, an exhibition of a kind of madness. In conversation with a male colleague, Claire McNab's lesbian detective, Carol Ashton, gives voice to these concerns in her novel, *Body Guard*.

'My dear Carol, you're getting paranoid. Next you'll be telling me there's a plan to take over the Australian government...'
*She was irritated by his superior tone. 'Not take it over - gain power. What do you think drives politicians to try for office when the general public regards them as lower than someone selling used cars? It's power...'*⁶⁶

Power indeed. How else, I would argue, can one explain the ruthless commitment required to play factional or numbers games, to toady to big business, to vote, often against one's own moral or ethical beliefs, along party lines? Why do well-meaning politicians of any political persuasion fail to

⁶⁵ Grafton, Sue, in Popple, J., *Mean Streets*, No. 7, p. 42

⁶⁶ McNab, Claire, *Body Guard*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1994, p. 138

denounce the wider causes of crime such as poverty and lack of educational opportunity? Why is the law so transparently tipped in favour of the wealthy and influential and the judiciary complicit in this inequality? Why do 'good' people fail to participate more actively through social protest and the ballot box when politicians and their advisers repeatedly ignore their wishes? Politicians and activists may be idealistic when they begin their political journey, but they will be changed absolutely by the time they have completed it.

All of the political themes I have explored above demonstrate that in feminist crime writing, politics can operate on a series of levels. They include the conjunction of personal and literary where women enter a male genre and feminise it. There are also what I define as the small 'p' politics of crime fiction: the social issues and disjunction that lead to crime, and the ways in which women writers choose to address these social ills. Big 'P' politics show how party politics, social inequalities and economic policies impact on those issues, either explicitly, as in the novels of liberal, left-leaning writers such as Gerson and Scott which I explore more fully in the following sections, or implicitly, as in the novels of Patricia Cornwell whose texts err on the side of the right-wing, always supporting conservative organisations such as the National Rifle Association, law and order, but never mention politics.

Cornwell is an interesting contradiction to much of the feminist theory that surrounds women's crime fiction. Her character, Kaye Scarpetta is a Chief Medical Examiner, a forensic pathologist whose job involves the dissection of corpses but rarely the dissection of the social causes of crime. Cornwell is deeply ambivalent about violence, claiming:

No death is good by any means but the sadistic ones, where somebody physically had contact with that individual and tied them up and tortured them, those images are just unspeakable. You look at these

*people and you can't believe that somebody would do this to another person.'*⁶⁷

Her novels are psychological thrillers which feature 'one on one duels between the killer and the seeker. Her character, Scarpetta, must 'identify with and enter the mind of the killer.'⁶⁸ The author rarely spares time to reflect on the economic or political status of the victims either. They are just bodies, sometimes headless, diseased, violated and all victims of appalling violence. Scarpetta's own role is no less disjuncted. She tussles with authority. Her lovers are male authority figures. She has a difficult but tigerish relationship with her niece, Lucy, a lesbian who has also been inducted into the world of male authority in Quantico, the home of the FBI and American crime intelligence. Unlike Ruth Rendell, who strongly argues that her books are 'absolutely not about people who are mad ... they are ordinary people who are pushed over the edge,'⁶⁹ Cornwell spares no time to reflect on the nature of transgression or the social conditions that have turned people into criminals. Her killers are animals, dehumanised and in need of culling. In entering their minds, she enters the psychotic world of the contemporary Minotaur.

Contemporary readers may have different expectations of their texts. More individualistic than collective, contemporary discourse has little room for literature that many readers see as nothing more than political propaganda. But despite this, young crime writers such as Melbourne-based Caroline Shaw and Lindy Cameron continue the tradition in novels which explore political crimes, albeit through eccentric characters and often eccentric narratives. There is an element of the political bildungsroman in all of them, telling the story of the protagonists' progress from not knowing the

⁶⁷ Cornwell, P, in conversation with Stuart Coupe, *Mean Streets*, No. 7, August, 1992, p. 14

⁶⁸ Cornwell, P. see note 67

⁶⁹ Rendell, Ruth in Hodgson Moore, Sandra, *Mean Streets*, No. 11, May 1994, p. 11

truth, to understanding, from ignorance to knowledge, based on political doctrine.⁷⁰

Such writing brings with it a range of paradoxical difficulties. Barbara Goddard has claimed that feminist theory and politics, have shown women that 'strategies of reading and writing are forms of cultural resistance.'⁷¹ 'Resistance' novels such as those written by Gogol and Tolstoy in Russia, Dickens in Britain, Zola in France, which chronicled and explored contemporary social narratives, were very popular in the nineteenth century. They engendered the socialist realist novels of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which Ken Worpole has argued come out of 'a politics that addressed itself to people's felt difficulties, hopes and aspirations'⁷², and the 'angry' social commentaries of the nineteen fifties and sixties.

Scarpetta aside, feminist detective fiction remains highly moral and political. *If society can't change or be changed*, the feminist detective seems to say over and over again, *I will represent all that is utopian and in me, at least, utopian political views will prevail*. These sentiments ensure that feminist crime fiction is inevitably immersed in contemporary politics and, as such, is one of the most potent forms of literary, left-liberal feminist discourse.

⁷⁰ Suleiman, S.R., *Authoritarian Fictions: The Ideological Novel as a Literary Genre*, Columbia University Press, 1983

⁷¹ Godard, Barbara, *Sleuthing: Feminists Re-writing the Detective Novel*, *Signature: Journal of Theory and Canadian Literature*, No. 1, Summer 1989, p. 45

⁷² Worpole, K., in Munt, S., 1994, p. 81

2.

Politics and Art

If I could write like Dostoevsky, I would, you know. Dorothy L. Sayers⁷³

Crime novels may sell well but they rarely are seen as art and crime writers, according to Peter Temple, 'are fringe dwellers in Australia, hanging onto the edges of other literary forms.'⁷⁴

There are numerous reasons for crime fiction's status. Until relatively recently, populist crime writing was frowned upon by literary academics and theorists who argued that the genre failed to convey the grand narratives required for serious study. It was too concerned with the darker side of humanity: murder, robbery, drugs and sex. It was often overtly polemical, questioning and challenging social inequities by shining a light on corruption much as a pest exterminator shines a light on a rat's nest. Crime fiction's exclusion from the Academy and from serious literary analysis marginalised and limited its role in contemporary cultural life. It also reduced discussion about the substantial questions of social organisation and political direction found in many crime narratives.⁷⁵ Crime fiction's themes and the style in which it was written were questionable. Literary reviewers, disinclined to share Gramsci's analysis of popular culture as another of the

⁷³ Sayers, Dorothy, L., in *What Women Say, Mean Streets*, No. 9, July 1995, p. 20

⁷⁴ Temple, Peter, SMH

⁷⁵ Giroux, Henry, Shumway, David, Smith, Paul and Sosnoski, James, *The Need for Cultural Studies*, in Murns, J. and Rajan, G., (eds.), *Cultural studies: An Anglo-American Reader*, Longmans, New York, 1997, p. 57

fields on which battles for power were fought,⁷⁶ saw it as 'fun' recreational reading but hardly the literature on which university courses were built.⁷⁷ And so it remained, a genre categorised as being overburdened by simplistic moral values, vulgar crimes and equally vulgar women. And politics.

Crime and punishment may have been its focus, but *Crime and Punishment* it wasn't.

The problems created by writing polemically are not confined to crime writing, of course. Creative work is not supposed to be political. Become enmeshed in the world of strongly held beliefs, political ideology or polemical debate and your art will suffer. Politics and art share an inverse relationship, they are antagonistic.⁷⁸ These truisms are frequently re-iterated. Art is not to be found on the shop floor. It doesn't march in demonstrations or throw itself in front of tanks. It doesn't debate with politicians on TV current affairs programs or rail against racism. The view that art, which willingly pursues political themes, 'inevitably ends up looking foolish, strained or over-ambitious'⁷⁹ has been propounded so many times it has become difficult to argue against it. This is particularly the case in western democracies such as Australia where post war prosperity has fed the myth of the classless society, economic levelling, and an electoral stability that leaves little against which to argue.

A suspicion about polemical themes has not always deterred writers from exploring their political interests. The narratives of social realist writers such as Christina Stead, Kylie Tennant, Mina Calthorpe, Katherine Suzannah

⁷⁶ Giroux, H., 1997, p. 57

⁷⁷ This view is changing with crime writing courses on offer at a number of universities including UTS as the boundaries between literary and cultural studies continue to shift.

⁷⁸ Roth, Phillip, I Married a Communist, in Smee, S., Paint it Red, *The Australian's Review of Books*, May, 2001, p. 14

⁷⁹ Smee, S., 2001, p. 14

Pritchard, Eleanor Dark and Dorothy Hewett grew from the political upheavals of the 1930s and 40s. They belong to a time when 'battler' referred to someone who had hit hard times rather than the *loser* soubriquet it now attracts. The fallout from cataclysmic political events such as the Great Depression and World War II coloured all aspects of the writers' lives and work. For Tennant, writing about society's under-class was important because it 'cut down the Christians in the arena ... beat things back.'⁸⁰

Christina Stead remained political all her writing life, 'a leftist as they say (now). Socialist, goodness knows, has all kinds of meanings these days.'⁸¹ Even Nancy Cato, who saw herself as a 'political innocent' yet mixed with communists like Judah Waten and Frank Hardy, wrote *Noosa Story*, which, like Mandy Sayer's, *The Cross* and Susan Geason's, *Dogfish*, features a battle with developers. Cato wrote it because she 'was really horrified by the corruption and sheer barbarianism of some of the Queensland authorities.'⁸² Mena Calthorpe also had no problem with the narrative's 'corruption' by politics. When asked whether her novels suffered from their polemical interests she replied that they did, to some extent.⁸³ But she also believed that she wrote well enough to be able to write about anything, including the Labor Party's infiltration by Groupers in her novel, *The Defectors* (1969). She wrote about politics, she said, because she knew politics and she therefore wouldn't have to do a lot of research.

Realist writing lost much of its popularity in the 1960s, a trend noted by Dorothy Hewett. *Young people ...* she noted in a 1965 essay:

⁸⁰ Tennant, K., *The Battlers*, Angus and Robertson, pp. 231-232

⁸¹ Stead, Christina, in Giuffre, G., *A Writing Life: Interviews with Australian Women Writers*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1990, p. 81

⁸² Cato, N. in Giuffre, 1990, p. 163

⁸³ Calthorpe, M., in Giuffre, G., 1990, p. 31 - 32

.... who take a good stand on democracy, peace, conscription, and/or the Vietnam War, shy away from a label such as realist.

'We are not realists,' they say. 'we are writers, free to use any technique; symbolist, stream of consciousness, fantasy, realism. We are interested in Brecht's 'epic' theatre, the theatre of the Absurd, the 'Beats,' 'Instant Poetry', poetry recited to rock, blues, flamenco, or jazz, Bob Dylan and Gary Shearston ...'

In my experience the Realist does not appeal to anybody except an old-fashioned, hard-core left (working class or intellectual), and they are a dying race.⁸⁴

The trend which concerned Hewett in the sixties has continued today and many contemporary writers prefer not to expose their political alliances.

Recently, I discussed this reticence with the writer, Mandy Sayer,⁸⁵ whose crime novel, *The Cross*, is based on one of the most political events in Sydney's history: the abduction and presumed murder of the activist, Juanita Nielsen. Sayer doesn't see her novel as political, and argues that she certainly didn't set out to write polemically. For her, *The Cross* recalls her childhood lost to the area's development. In reading the novel, one senses the child, her home under threat, watchful of the political themes played out around her. With an innovative use of multiple first person narratives, the novel explores events that took place in the early nineteen seventies when Victoria Street contained some of Kings Cross's most beautiful and well-preserved Victorian terraces, home to generations of artists, workers, and people of notoriety. Then, it was laid siege to by a developer determined to demolish. In the terraces' place would rise blocks of flats that would spill down the streets' western side into Woolloomooloo below.

⁸⁴ Hewett, D. ,The Times They are a Changing, *Hecate*, Vol. 21, No. 2, 1995, pp 135-136

⁸⁵ Sayer, Mandy Interview, 2001

Before her disappearance, Nielsen managed to galvanise local residents, heritage organisations, celebrities and the Builders' Labours' Federation, the trade union that covered workers in the building industry. The ensuing battle for Victoria Street became one of the most highly publicised industrial fights Sydney had ever faced, and the union's green bans a water-shed for future strategies to preserve the city's threatened architectural heritage. The story of Victoria Street is not a happy one. Nielsen's body has never been found. Hundreds of working class and low-income families, many of them in rent control accommodation and residents of Kings Cross for generations, were forced out of their homes. Some people committed suicide, others were threatened with violence or were bashed. The New South Wales Police Force, State and Local Governments were implicated in the campaign.

Sayer is not alone in her views about the need for artists to remain apolitical. The argument was explored recently in Sebastian Smee's article, *Paint it Red*, a review of *Picasso: The Communist Years* by Gertje Utley. Smee believes that Picasso's involvement with the French Communist Party was, at best political naivety, a 'forgivable gullibility that was somehow inseparable from his genius'⁸⁶, and at worst as detrimental to paintings such as *Guernica* and *Massacre en Coreé*, as Stendahl's 'pistol-shot in the middle of a concert.'⁸⁷ These works suffered because Picasso, who had been apolitical as a young artist, overstepped the boundaries that delineate the artist from the activist in his later years when his paintings became, in Picasso's own words, 'an instrument of war for attack and defence against the enemy.'⁸⁸

Through his attack on Picasso, Smee accuses all artists who incorporate their political convictions into their art. By his definition, Goya's *The Third of*

⁸⁶ Smee, S., 2001, p. 15

⁸⁷ Stendahl in Smee, 2001, p. 14

⁸⁸ Picasso, P., in Smee, 2001, p. 15

May, David's *Death of Marat*, Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People*, are diminished by their polemical subject matter. And if you take politics to include comment on social and moral decay, Degas's *The Glass of Absinthe*, which is surely one of the most poignant statements about poverty, loneliness and drugs, is damned as well. By Smee's definition all these explorations of human suffering and aspiration are no more complex than the propaganda posters of totalitarian regimes. The great social novels of Dickens, Tolstoy and Zola, nothing more than the political whingeing of a group of pamphleteers.

It is curious, this view, that artists must remove themselves from the political forces that surround them. *That* engagement is for plumbers, schoolteachers, 'ordinary' people. While artists vote, pay taxes, work at occupations to fund their artistic pursuits and raise families, they are somehow to disengage their art from the forces that influence and shape these aspects of their lives. The view seems to reflect still deeply felt hostility to 'worthy' art, the deep-seated anti-culturalism and socialist realist dogmas propounded by Communist parties, Marxist writers and theorists until Gramsci gave them more freedom by addressing the popular.⁸⁹ Other critics are less worried, seeing the appeal of popular genres like crime resting in their ability to articulate contemporary ideological tensions.⁹⁰ But any backsliding into political texts still causes concern. To find their artistic inspiration writers must pursue something beyond politics, the novelist, Phillip Roth, suggests. That is what 'writing well' entails.⁹¹

But writing well about what?

⁸⁹ Hewett, D., *Introduction to Bobbin Up*, Virago edition, 1985, Introduction, p. x

⁹⁰ Woollacott, J., *Fictions and Ideologies: the Case of Situation Comedy*, in Bennett, T., Mercer, C., and Woollacott, J., (eds.) *Popular Culture and Social Relations*, Open University Press, Milton Keynes, 1986, p. 215

⁹¹ Roth, P., in Smee, S. 2001, p.15

There are obvious paradoxes in these arguments. Critics who dismiss home grown writing when tainted by politics tolerate political writing from countries with repressive regimes. These are most likely to be writers from South America, for example, the late Argentinian scholar, writer, politician, Pablo Neruda or Isabelle Allende who writes from exile in America. Politics are also acceptable from writers from the African states, from war torn Eastern Europe or indigenous peoples in Australia, North America or the Arctic fighting for their lands.

Sayer, too, believes that extremes of politics excuse extremes in writing. Australia, however, is not in that league. We return to the circularity of the argument: western democracies don't need political writers because we have stable, democratic government. Despite these views *The Cross* is a political novel. The voices, weaving together as they do, call forth a history played out sadly. Most of Victoria Street's older residents are now dead. The union was challenged by a more conservative faction, then subsumed in a union amalgamation. The developer, of whom Sayer attempts an even-handed portrait, is also dead. But many of the houses were saved. Like most of the inner city, Victoria Street has been gentrified. The people who live there today may even be unaware that, once, a battle was waged on their doorsteps.

And what of the outspoken Nielsen, the eccentric heiress with a diabolical hairdo, the woman who paid for her courage with her life? *The Cross* shows that whatever the author's intent, it is difficult to remain apolitical when the hero is sacrificed to the greed of a capitalist.

Not all contemporary writers are squeamish about politics. As I argue in the section that follows, Rosie Scott has no compunction about writing novels with strongly political themes. For her, politics is organic to writing, it feeds and nurtures it. The disclaimer is there, though. The stories must not

become vehicles for the novelist's political views at the expense of their art. I like this image of politics and its relationship with writing. There is something Dracula-like about it. A writer must be vigilant lest the story, a kind of literary virgin, be violated by a vampire who is always red.

Contemporary crime fiction often gives the impression of having skipped from the social realist writers of the 1940s and 50s, leaping a couple of generations on the way. Whilst the feminist movement of the seventies and eighties nurtured literary fiction's narratives by women about their emotional journeys, these narratives rarely featured women's working lives to any great degree. Exceptions to this trend, such as Madeleine St John's novel, *The Women in Black*, about women working in a city department store, seem to sit more comfortably with Dorothy Hewitt's *Bobbin Up*, Tennant's *The Honey Flow* or Florence James' and Dymphna Cusack's *Come in Spinner* than with novels like Helen Garner's *Monkey Grip* or Kate Grenville's *Lillian's Story*. Women may have been fighting for equal pay and discrimination-free workplaces when those novels about troubled relationships and internalised domestic dramas were written, but the fights were rarely played out on the novels' pages.

Crime fiction, particularly that which featured an independent and left-liberal female private eye, would change all that. In noting this development I do not wish to play down the crime genre's genesis. From its earliest beginnings, as I have noted earlier, crime writing, and hard-boiled detective fiction in particular, railed against social decadence, indicting graft, denouncing parasites, and complaining against unjust wealth and tainted power. Populist, widely read, it offered its readers a public service by critiquing the decadent society in which they lived.⁹² Early detective fiction became part of the history of modernity, emerging with the struggle for

⁹² McCann, Sean, 1976, p. 677 see note 58

social reform such as women's suffrage and family entitlements.⁹³ The feminist detective novels of the 1970s and 1980s, resonate with these earlier roots, emerging as they do at a time of crisis for the Left and for the organised women's movement.⁹⁴

Publishers, such as Peter Ayrton (Pluto Press and Serpent's Tail) believe the most 'coherent, sustained critique of contemporary society now is written in a thriller format. A lot of these books are quite savage indictments of contemporary American or English society.'⁹⁵ Crime writers also are often passionate in their defence of the political nature of their narratives. Scottish crime writer, Ian Rankin⁹⁶ has accused British writers of failing to address some of the most important political concerns of the late 20th century. It is left to crime writers (through characters such as Rankin's own Inspector Rebus) to load their pages with issues ignored by non-crime writers: corporate crime, youth unemployment, paedophilia, social and economic divisions and poverty.

In America, Sara Paretsky, never one to back away from a topical issue, continues to challenge social injustice and inequity. In her most recent novel, *Hard Time*, her private eye, V.I. Warshawski, exposes the illegal manufacturing of clothes in contravention of industrial and State laws, in America's private prisons. Paretsky has said that she avoids too much of the political in her fiction, claiming, '(I) think it's a big mistake to write ideological fiction because it's dull more than anything else.'⁹⁷ But she also has described her way of addressing social concerns in passages such as the one that follows.

⁹³ Shiach, M., in Slater, M., 1997, p. 3

⁹⁴ Munt, S., in Shiach, 1994, p. 3

⁹⁵ Ayrton, Peter, in conversation with Noel King, *The Serpent's Tale*, *Mean Streets*, No. 12, December, 1994, p. 34

⁹⁶ Rankin, Ian, speaking at the Melbourne Writer's festival, 1999

⁹⁷ Paretsky, Sara, 1994, see note 49

(For) a long time I had this idea that much of what was wrong with America, but Chicago in particular, just had to do with power relationships between large institutions and powerless individuals. Now I think that that's another oversimplification although I can see a lot of the roots of (that in) the mindless violence on the streets.⁹⁸

Despite the inherent difficulties in striking a balance between political commentary and fictional narratives, feminist crime writers continue to address social themes in their novels. What is it about crime fiction that allows these political narratives to develop with such ease? As well as the theoretical debates explored in the previous section of this dissertation, I would argue that genre crime fiction is perfectly suited to its narrative themes. It is highly stylised with clearly articulated norms. There must be a strong story line, powerful protagonists, moral resolution and a fast pace.

The development of a fast moving plot is one of the key features of the genre. Crime novels can rarely ramble through a character's inner world. They require the metropolis or an environment, such as David Guterson's San Piedro in *Snow Falling on Cedars*, which lends itself to symbolism. The plot structure requires significant *jeopardy* such as the threat of death, or the exposure of a crime with significant implications for not just the novel's key protagonist but for society as a whole. It needs to centre itself in such a way that the reader is in no doubt that, in similar circumstances, they would be in the same danger and would react to it in much the same way.

Social crimes with wide-ranging political implications are perfect for this. There is immediate reader identification. Who in Sydney, for example, isn't familiar with the city's perpetual discourse with real estate? The fight to preserve Sydney's architectural heritage, which features in so many crime

⁹⁸ Paretsky, Sarah, 1994, see note 49

novels written by women, resonates with readers familiar with their city's propensity to develop at any cost. Battles with local councils and the Land and Environment Court are regularly dissected by the popular media. The politics of development and real estate prices are ingested with dinner party or restaurant meals. Corporate crime, racism, industrial wheeler dealing and extremist politics have all been themes of Australian crime fiction during the last decade, by male as well as female writers. No other fiction has tackled these issues in any significant way, leaving crime, with its assertive narrative, its plot twists and red herrings to maintain its political crown.

Another feature of crime writing which lends itself to political discourse is the nature of the detective, particularly the private eye. These characters may be loners but they are also opinionated and articulate.

Not all critics see them as agents of radicalism. The traditional American values of honesty and tough individualism celebrated through private eyes are closely associated with populist conservative discourse in American film and text. In all of these the little (man) is provided with power and uses it to show government, the police and corporations are corrupt and inefficient. Therefore, Nyman argues, while crime novels may be influenced by liberal and oppositional ideologies, they do not necessarily support radical politics.⁹⁹ We see this fine line in Australian crime fiction as well. The meddling busy-body neighbour such as Marele Day's Mavis Levak, or the sleuth who breaks and enters illegally or dishes out a bashing when the law is powerless, smacks of a vigilanteism than is more about individual than collective power.

Female private eyes created by female crime writers are by their very definition doubly privileged. The act of creating a woman who will move through a crime novel's gendered spaces is in itself a political one, the female

⁹⁹ Nyman, J., 1998, p. 21

novelist, I would argue, asserting her right to enter and colonise a male-dominated fiction. Her detective must demonstrate a number of characteristics, each of them affirming female strength. She must be physically and emotionally strong, clever, unencumbered by traditional and burdensome relationships, funny, and able to use humour as a survival tool. She must also be familiar with male ways and, whilst challenging of them, move within male spaces to decode male ways of doing things. Other features, such as specialised knowledge about computers, medicine, the law or police may be useful, but it is the investigator's instinctive deductive knowledge, a hybrid of female intuition and rat cunning, that best defines her manner of operating.

The female detective's ability to challenge and out-wit men is critical to the ways in which she moves through the minefield of crime. She may have good relationships with male figures, often surrogate fathers, brothers and sons, but she also needs to acknowledge and be vigilant about the subversive nature of male power. This power may manifest itself in control of and access to political structures such as capital, the law and government. It also includes the power of sex.

The sexually predatory male takes a number of guises in crime fiction; he can be the friend who becomes a lover, thus subverting what has been an uncomplicated, brother/sister friendship and challenging the way they work together. He can also be one of the novel's questionable characters, so sexually attractive the detective is blinded to his criminal intent. Both create a kind of reverse Samson and Delilah affect, with the detective's objectivity and clarity undermined by male sexuality. The man, in keeping with women crime writers' appropriation of the genre's stereotypical roles, becomes an *homme fatale*, a hybrid *spider man*. In lesbian crime fiction such as that of Claire McNab, Lindy Cameron and Dorothy Porter, the *femme fatale* is reworked with a lesbian twist.

Despite Susan Geason's concerns, a detective's moral absolutism is also a key expectation of feminist fiction. In crime fiction with a left-leaning female private eye, the hero is absolutely sure that good, however tainted, must prevail. In reaching the point of the novel's denouement, she will have exposed the reader to some unpleasant social truths. Poverty and racism contribute to crime. Damaged children can become damaged, transgressing adults. Domestic violence can push women to murder. Corporate criminals destroy workers' lives. This is not to say that she won't have crises of confidence. As with most morality plays and myths it is mandatory that the detective survives a series of life threatening challenges. Feminist crime fiction also requires that these challenges include personal crises and the detective's resolution of them. Claire McNab is particularly good at this. Her lesbian detective, Carol Ashton, mulls over the difficulties of her relationship with her lovers, co-workers, her ex-husband and her child, in every novel.

That political themes defined the crime writing which emerged in the late nineteen seventies and the nineteen eighties is hardly surprising. Feminist crime fiction's response to and mirroring of the decades' social shifts was to be expected, Sally Munt has asserted, because 'feminism has been historically aligned with a class-based critique of society, which strongly emphasised the economic nature of oppression.'¹⁰⁰ Like the social realists who had preceded them, left-leaning feminist crime writers saw the political shifts of the eighties – the deregulation of financial institutions and the labour market, the spiralling costs of education, housing and health – as particularly destructive to women.

During this time, writers such as Sara Paretsky, whose grandmother had gone to the States from Eastern Europe as a poor immigrant and whose grandfather worked in the garment industry, were intent on exposing

¹⁰⁰ Munt, Sally, p. 35

corruption and social inequality in their works. In *Toxic Shock* Paretsky 'really wanted to tell the story of the pollution and the cynical corporate attitude' and in *Tunnel Vision* she wrestled with 'the concept of affordable housing ... the liberal dream.'¹⁰¹ In Margaret Thatcher's Britain, where conservatives had declared that society had ended, writers like Liza Cody were exploring urban decline and corporate corruption. Cody has eschewed the politics of both gender and class in her novels, claiming that her character, Anna Lee 'never makes feminist statements ... I don't see it as my job to tell people what to think and I'm not going to put words into anybody's mouth.'¹⁰² A point of view disputed in *Backhand* when Anna nostalgically yearns for a more caring and diverse community where 'you could put your car up on jacks without the next door neighbours raising their eyebrows.'¹⁰³

As feminists watched their hard won benefits eroded or dismantled by conservative governments they gave voice to their concerns about social disjunction in their politically determined texts.

Thus writers unmask their political views in what they write and in what they choose to leave out. Politics determine the books that are published and drive a reader's choice. Be they the ideologies of political parties, the politics of gender or of voice, all combine to create socially concerned texts which reminds us of 'our common vulnerability, our common attachment to each other through shared experience, shared memory, shared values.'¹⁰⁴ In voicing their utopian expectations in crime fiction, feminist writers integrated narratives of class and gender struggle with literary texts.

¹⁰¹ Paretsky, Sara, quoted in *Sisters in Crime Newsletter*, No. 7, Summer 1994, pp. 6-7

¹⁰² Cody, Liza, in Silet, p. 18

¹⁰³ Cody, Liza, *Backhand*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1991, p. 137

¹⁰⁴ Perlman, E., Maintain the Wrath, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13, December, 1999, p. 12

3.

Glory Days and Resistance

Anyone can write poetry, but to be an activist is far more important.

Judith Wright¹⁰⁵

In Australia, feminist crime writers have addressed social inequities in a variety of ways. Marele Day's hard-boiled private eye, Claudia Valentine, used humour to comment on social injustice as she stoically survived attempts to silence her. Claire McNab's detective, Carol Ashton, made sense of the senselessness of crime by giving voice to her frustration with political structures. Mandy Sayer, Susan Geason, Rosie Scott and Mary Rose McColl used battles for preserving the urban environment to expose the metropolis' social ills.

Prominent amongst these writers is Rosie Scott, a New Zealander now resident in Australia. Scott is unashamedly political in her writing, believing that political fiction 'can create important life-sustaining myths that provide a healthy counterbalance to the superficial, the destructive and the heartless which are always present in any society to a greater or lesser degree.'¹⁰⁶ These political views inform all her novels which have been published and enthusiastically reviewed world-wide. They sell in the tens of thousands, giving lie to the argument that political fiction is seen by the reading public as overly polemical or uninteresting.

¹⁰⁵ Wright, J., in Bonyhady, Tim, *The Fine Art of Activism*, Spectrum, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 July, 2000, p. 4

Scott's first novel, *Glory Days* (1988), was promoted as crime fiction by its publishers (Argument Verlag in Germany, Seal Press in the United States and the Women's Press in the United Kingdom). The genre label surprised Scott at the time but she later saw that the publishing industry had recognised a niche market for detective fiction. Feminists, middle-class and educated, schooled in the battles of gender and community politics of the sixties and seventies, were eager to appropriate the genre as their own. Scott admits she was never a fan of the crime fiction of the past, especially that by English writers like Agatha Christie and Dorothy M. Sayers whom she found sexist and conservative. She also worried about some aspects of crime fiction which seemed to celebrate male ways of operating, a focus Stephen Knight has claimed leads the female crime writer to becoming 'enmired in the structural masculinism of the form, to be ineluctably competitive and individualist, violent and self-displaying.'¹⁰⁷

For Scott, the dead female victim exposed to the reader's scrutinising gaze was voyeuristic and demeaning of women. And unlike Sue Grafton, who sees violent women in crime fiction as a writer's reaction to the external 'niceness' girls are forced to project, repressing all violence which becomes deadly and internalised and in need of expression,¹⁰⁸ Scott abhors the violence used against or required by some female detectives.

Sara Paretsky changed Scott's views of the form, and she discovered in Paretsky's novels, 'a woman protagonist who was a doer, an initiator and protector - something (I) didn't find in early crime novels.'¹⁰⁹ Instead of being rescued, Paretsky's woman was the rescuer. Paretsky's books were also about corporate and political crime, issues close to Scott's own heart,

¹⁰⁶ Scott, Rosie, *Come and See the Blood in the Streets*, *Island*, No. 3, p. 44

¹⁰⁷ Knight, Stephen, *A Thematic History of Australian Crime Fiction*, Melbourne University Press, 1997, p. 99

¹⁰⁸ Grafton, Sue, *What Women Say*, *Mean Streets*, No. 9, July 1993, pp. 20-21

¹⁰⁹ Scott, R., Interview, 2000

and they cast a spotlight on capitalism and unjust society. She saw Paretsky as someone who wasn't afraid to expose the destructive outcomes of capitalism and its impact on the 'little' people who are most likely to be its victims. These are issues that she has explored in all her books.

In addition to Paretsky, she cites a range of literary signposts to her work including Germaine Greer's, *The Whole Woman*, John Birmingham's, *Leviathan* and Susan Geason's detective novel, *Dogfish* which is examined in greater detail in the following section. She is passionate about the music and lyrics of the American singer, Bruce Springsteen and the novels of John Steinbeck who also influenced Springsteen's work. She reserves as her greatest influences the social realist writers of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Britain, Europe and Russia – Balzac, Zola, Tolstoy and Gorky.

Scott expects her writing to be controversial – 'because controversy makes people think.'¹¹⁰ Her text comes from her beliefs and many of the political themes in her novels 'just happen.' Like Mena Calthorpe, who wrote politically because she lived politically, Scott draws on her own experiences. Despite this, she worries that politics can be intrusive in the development of character and plot. For her, there is always a paradigm about whether it is the political issue or the sheer force of the characters that drive a story.

In her writing Scott deliberately deploys Engel's vision of a subterranean world of workers which feeds the capitalist classes but is also organic, like river silt or volcanic ash that feeds creativity. Balzac and Zola explore this in their novels, she argues, not surprisingly as 'the French have always had such a strong sense of *la boue* (mud). Aristocrats have wanted to immerse themselves in the dirt of the poorer classes because rarefied and

¹¹⁰ Scott, R., Interview, 2000

silvery, they've lost the ground, the mud, their roots: the poor provide it.'¹¹¹
In Charles Dickens she sees the power of the writer to bring about social reform. His writing 'moved people to question and change things,' she claims, 'from schools run by psychopaths to broader social issues such as financial support for the destitute.'¹¹²

Scott and I share a common contempt for contemporary Australian politics and worry about the social conservatism that is shaping the policies of both Labor and conservative parties. We enjoy writing politically. Our choices of reading matter are similar, with a passion for social realism in word, music and film narratives. But how far can an artist go in giving voice to their political concerns? What pitfalls are they likely to experience if they tackle political issues and should that be their role anyway? *Glory Days* displays all these political dilemmas. Despite its categorising as a crime novel by its publishers, it doesn't sit comfortably in the crime genre. The novel's heroine, Glory, isn't a typical feminist crime novel protagonist. She is neither a lean, mean private investigator nor a competent police detective. Nor is she a bloodied victim. In image she straddles both camps. She looks like the kind of woman who is most likely to be a victim of crime – poor, overweight, a singer who lives and moves in the dangerous world of drugs and crime. But she is also a woman of immeasurable strength.

Sally Munt sees *Glory Days* as 'a clever reconstruction of both individualism and collectivism... a study of class where 'a complex interweave of gender, race and sexuality combine to suture the characters within a vexed hierarchy of cultural capital, into which the eponymous hero is positioned as poor, fat, and female.' For Munt, the novel's protagonist, *Glory Days*, is a figure of resistance: the novel simultaneously 'indicts the hegemonic mores of late capitalism, and proffers Glory as a symbol of

¹¹¹ Scott, R., Interview, 2000

¹¹² Scott, R., Interview, 2000

strong, surviving womanhood, without falling for simple heroism.’¹¹³ Certainly, much of Glory’s strength comes from her social relationships, with her children, her friends, the young thugs who live next door, her Maori mother-in-law – but most of it comes from within herself. Within the folds of her body lies a rich stream of compassion and understanding of the human condition, and a wonderful capacity to translate the world she sees into works of art.

Glory Days opens with an act of kindness when Glory sees a young woman (Marianne) who has overdosed in the bar in which she sings. She takes her to the nearest hospital, collecting on the way a trans-sexual, Grace, who assists her with the girl. From their act of kindness springs the narrative. Grace and Glory are punished for transgressing society's indifference to the defenceless and the weak – they become the prime suspects for the crime. Munt claimed that Glory’s name was ‘perfectly ironic’ and I too found the names in the novel significant. *Marianne* is the feminine symbol of revolutionary France. *Glory*, *Grace* and *Sarah* carry with them a sense of the religious. There is a timelessness in the names that resonates with the redemptive stories of the Old Testament.

Scott resists the interpretation. She called her character *Glory*, she says, because she saw her as glorious and unconstrained by the boundaries of feminine beauty. She disagrees with Munt’s interpretation of the name, arguing that Munt, in calling the choice *ironic*, misses the point. The choice of name was a raffish one, ‘a celebration, not ironic at all.’¹¹⁴ Glory’s friends understand, and glory in, her loving nature. She’s powerful, charismatic, she speaks the language of the ‘ordinary’ people. People are attracted to her because she is fearless.

¹¹³ Munt, S., 1994, p. 74

¹¹⁴ Scott, R., Interview, 2000

As I noted earlier, beauty in crime novels is often a contributing factor to the female victim's death. Writers such as Patricia Cornwell linger over the violated female corpse, beheading her, dissecting her and exposing her most secret places. In crime fiction, female beauty attains a life of its own. Spiritual and provocative, it implicates the dead woman and makes her responsible for her own demise.

Despite this stereotype, writers continue to challenge and subvert this ideal, showing that a woman's lack of beauty is often misinterpreted as a lack of strength or inner beauty, generosity or kindness. In her novel, *Bucketnut*, for example, Britain's Liza Cody explores the complexity of beauty in a different way through the character of Eva Wylie, the Bucketnut of the story. A female wrestler, security guard and occasional sleuth, Bucketnut refuses in looks, occupation and living habits to meet any of the traditional expectations of female beauty. The novel's title comes from a scene Cody witnessed at a wrestling match. A man, infuriated with a female contestant, shouted the name at her because he couldn't think of anything ugly enough to say. 'The name, Bucketnut, means, *your face is so ugly it looks like a bucket.*'¹¹⁵

Apart from her physical strength, Bucketnut's separation from stereotypical beauty also acts as a shield that keeps her safe. The novel's first person narrative makes the reader sympathetic to the unreliable and unattractive narrator. Aware, as they follow her voice, that things will get no better for her. She will never be beautiful, intelligent or sensitive, but life will go on.¹¹⁶ Bucketnut's stoicism is a characteristic shared by *Glory Days*. Both women manage despite the difficulties thrown in their paths. There is a beauty in the way they handle this adversity, and an inner beauty, even though externally both women are far from attractive.

¹¹⁵ Cody, L., p. 22, see note 39

¹¹⁶ Cody, L., p. 22, see note 39

Beauty and spiritualism which are engendered by kindness and humanity go hand in hand with politics as far as Scott is concerned. If there is a religious interpretation to be made in *Glory Days*, she argues, it should be in a redemptive sense. The women in the novel exemplify human good – the best actions of which humans are capable. Scott provides as an example one of her favourite quotes, ‘the true revolutionary must always be motivated by love.’¹¹⁷ The women display ‘pure hearts and an awareness of other people’s suffering. This affords their voyage through life and its vagaries a spiritual dimension, something that all human beings crave.

Similarly, the name Grace given to the novel’s transsexual hero, ‘conveys a person who retains love and sensitivity even through the middle of a fire.’¹¹⁸ She survives attempts on her life, gives lip to men who take her on in pubs, challenges and is punished. Grace has seen ugliness but has still retained her sense of optimism and love – a quality that would save the world if it could. For Grace, knowledge comes the hard way, but she wears it lightly, she is uncorrupted, unsullied and has a purity of heart.

As well as the dangerous environment of smoky bars and ill-lit streets, *Glory Days* revels in feminised domestic spaces. Like the working-class, social realist writers for whom work, domestic and personal problems ... became the prominent discourse,¹¹⁹ Scott uses space which has traditionally been a symbol ‘of confinement for women socially, economically and imaginatively’¹²⁰ as a counterpoint to the external corporate and urban spaces through which Glory moves.

¹¹⁷ Che Guevara quoted by Scott at interview, 2000

¹¹⁸ Scott, R., Interview, 2000

¹¹⁹ Worpole, Ken, in Munt, S., 1994, p. 81

¹²⁰ Shiach, M., in Slater, M., p. 2

Glory's disabled daughter, Rina, who is constantly in danger from the murderous Roxy, is pivotal to the theme of love and acceptance that is central to the novel's plot.

'I don't want you to go and do painting,' whinged Rina, tugging at my skirt. At eleven she had the alert old-monkey eyes of the Down's Syndrome child, with the strange flaky skin around them, which was another mark of her race. Like John she had been brought up with certain expectations of affection, but there their backgrounds diverged sharply. Rina's only experience was city, and very seedy city at that. It was probably why she had such a passion for Bruce Springsteen, his poor white trash, working-man songs all corresponded to her own knowledge of the world.¹²¹

The child's strength was unexpected by Scott. 'To some extent,' she claims, 'Rina is a lamb in the jungle of the city. She is innocent and loves everybody and everyone loves her. It is Rina's innocence that protects and saves her. Innocence and trust are a protection and that's the key to Rina - she has a pure heart.'¹²² Rina is frightened when kidnapped by the maniacal Roxy because Roxy is so intensely insane and cruel, but Rina survives and is not too shaken by the experience. Her lack of intellect saves her from too much analysis but it is also her confidence in the love she receives from the people around her — her mother, Glory, Al, the bikies next door, that conserves her.

The strength of the maternal relationship in *Glory Days* comes as a surprise. Mothers are often absent from feminist crime fiction, dispatched through death, divorce or dislike so the female investigator is unencumbered by the constraints and ambiguities of the mother/daughter relationship.¹²³

¹²¹ Scott, Rosie, *Glory Days*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 1993, p. 34

¹²² Scott, R., Interview, 2000

¹²³ Shiach, M., in Slater, M., p. 3

Glory's tigerish motherhood contrasts sharply with the motherless state of Paretsky's Warshavski and Grafton's Milhone, the disinterested mother who makes Cornwell's Scarpetta a necessary surrogate to her niece, the battling divorced single mother that is Claudia Valentine or the relinquishing lesbian mother in Clare McNab's Carol Ashton. For Scott, motherhood is about doing the best you can do for your child, you love it and you make it secure and you teach it how to live. Glory had survived a nightmare childhood, but because she was intuitive, intelligent and creative she was able to break the cycle with her own children. Her paintings allow her to express her deepest feelings in her work. For Glory, art evokes the mother and a new way of creating, nurturing and surviving. Seeing the dying teenager, Marianne, in the bar brought back Glory's childhood nightmares, and the sense that life and death are arbitrary. Glory knows that despite her tenacity and will to survive, escape from the capriciousness of life and death is not always possible.

The female body is a dangerous place to inhabit in crime fiction. Glory Days is made safe by her indifference to society's expectations of female beauty. Her body is a haven from social stereotypes but Glory knows that others are not so fortunate. She displays her knowledge in her paintings of dead women.

I wanted the body, so still and pulpy and dead, to exist in its space with full consequence, to show once and for all how final this particular woman's death was, and how cruel – that she stayed there, dead forever, even if you turned your fickle attentions elsewhere. That the shape, the disposition, the new form death took had its own dignity. It was the feeling I had for the dead woman that gave such power to the picture'¹²⁴

¹²⁴ Scott, R., *Glory Days*, p. 39

Through Marianne and the bodies of the dead women in the paintings Scott wanted to show the pity of death. They form a contrast to the usual images received through the news media and popular culture of which crime fiction plays a part, where the victim somehow absorbs some of the guilt for the crime, a reaction that is both cruel and contemptuous. Glory has been brought up with violence, she has known it intimately, and as a result has earned the right to paint it. By painting the dead women as she does, Glory gives them a dignity in their death that class, society and politics could not.

Glory's relationship with the trans-sexual, Grace, is a complex one. Trans-sexuals, about whom feminists such as Germaine Greer are deeply suspicious¹²⁵, appear with such frequency in Australian and New Zealand popular culture they have earned the status of a regional stereotype. Examples of this iconic role are also to be found in Day's *The Last Tango of Dolores Delgado*, and Geason's *Dogfish*, in stage characters such as Barry Humphries' Dame Edna Everidge and in popular film such as *Pricilla Queen of the Desert*. All are displaying characters who provide a kind of alternative feminist view, outspoken, outrageously dressed, assertive in their right to be heard and physically violent when under threat. Their style is reminiscent of the iconic movie heroes whom they mimic in style and dress. Sexually reassigned men, they may speak with a woman's voice but it is the ghostly discourse of the movie stars of the 1950s, the tough peroxide blondes and overblown 'bad' women with good hearts who hung around the Cross, the frustrated post war wives in white gloves and hats with veils, stereotypes rejected by contemporary feminists.

Scott argues that she created a trans-sexual character because they seem fragile and endearing and inhabit a milieu of their own making - a reaction against a society that sees them as misfits who have given away their

¹²⁵ Raised in discussions with Scott and referring to Greer's views in *The Whole Woman*, in Cambridge University debates and on *ausfempolnet*, the feminist email network.

maleness and are no longer deserving of acceptance. Their self-castration means they are traitors and they are abused and punished for that. At the same time there remains an undercurrent of sexual feeling about them – men may feel an attraction that must be denied and submerged in acts of violence. She doesn't believe that Grace traverses both the male and female world. Instead, she sees Grace as patching together a world of her own. 'She makes a living from prostitution as best she can, and approaches this as any 'decent' worker approaches a job of necessity. She has a little flat. Her life is like a little boat she's built against the deluge that surrounds her.'¹²⁶ Despite their accidental meeting, Glory realises that Grace has a big heart too. By involving Grace in Marianne's case, Glory inadvertently puts Grace in danger and feels guilty for endangering the fragile structures of her life.

In concluding her novel on a triumphant note, Scott resists the limited ideology of crime writers such as Raymond Chandler, who recognised that whilst his detective, Phillip Marlowe, couldn't prevent the prostituting of children'¹²⁷ he could at least see the beauty in a jacaranda tree and savour the small victories of solving his crimes. This limitation doesn't diminish Marlowe and the detective remains a well-meaning man of honour, noble perhaps, but not for Scott. In *Glory Days* she rejects this kind of closure, 'in favour of an image of sisterhood – a tactic recurring in many left-wing feminist texts which reflect a 'utopian impulse and feminist praxis'.¹²⁸ Female solidarity emerges from the hard cracks of human existence,¹²⁹ so honour of Marlowe's kind is of little interest to her. She wants her characters to triumph or for good people to intervene to bring about change. She recognises that such an outcome will be tough because the characters in *Glory Days*, like so many in society's underclass, are:

¹²⁶ Scott, R., Interview, 2000

¹²⁷ Parker, Robert, in Reilly, John M., *Twentieth Century Crime and Mystery Writers*, London, McMillan, 1980, p. 286

¹²⁸ Munt, S. 1994, p. 81

¹²⁹ Munt, S. 1994, p. 81

... so damaged that they had no inner core left, their lives had no meaning to them other than bottling a man in the pub or smashing a woman senseless. Even the most minimal comforts were denied people like that – the small human pleasures of loving a child and looking after it, watching TV with a friend in a cosy room, being praised or wanted by someone. Child molesters, druggies, violent crims, killers, their veins were brimming over with the poisons accumulated in a lifetime of neglect, losers enmeshed in a life of cheapo violence – a quick fix in a public toilet, a crack over the head with a broken bottle.¹³⁰

I asked Scott about the novel's ending and its image of *caritas* that is reminiscent of the closing scene in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. In it she seems to be asserting that crime novels can offer redemption for a wrongdoing, even if society as a whole is unchanged. Scott maintains that the novel's ending is an intentional epiphany. 'The wound in Glory's side is not unlike that of the Roman soldier who thrusts his spear into Christ's side.'¹³¹ None of the religiosity was intended but the meeting with Roxy in the garden is certainly similar to that of Christ's in the Garden of Gethsemane. Glory feels the tender body, there to receive her (Roxy). The two women struggle against frightening forces. Glory's survival represents a resilience of the human spirit and a celebration of the wounded.

¹³⁰ Scott, R., *Glory Days*, p. 61

¹³¹ Scott, R., Interview, 2000

4.

Dogfish and the 'Politically-Correct' Male

Susan Geason's views on politics and crime writing form a sharp contrast to those of Rosie Scott. Geason believes that political conviction must be grounded in realism. Unlike Scott, she no longer accepts the 19th century utopian concept of a perfect society, seeing it as simplistic and failing to take account of human nature. No social ills are resolved by solving the crimes in her novels but she believes that whilst 'you can't stop crime ... you can make a moral statement about it' by showing how people like the characters in her novel, *Dogfish*, are kind to one another.¹³²

Geason is deeply suspicious of novels that 'preach' or set out to convey a strong political message. The reason, she asserts, that no-body tries to write political books any more is because they're dated and 'too 1950s' – and, by implication, boring. If political specifics can be used to send up the whole political process, it works, otherwise politics must be woven into the context of a good story and some sugar must be put on the pill. Unlike his determined, feminist, private eye sisters, Geason's detective, Syd Fish, experiences a kind of powerless *nausee* 'when confronted by the mindless violence of his city.

Darlinghurst was in the news again, with a teenage shop assistant being rushed to hospital with a 2.5 centimetre nail in his head. Someone had stuck up the joint and drilled the kid with a nail gun.

¹³² Geason, S., Interview, 2000

Nail-in-head boy survives, said the headline matter-of-factly. The item gave me an unpleasant feeling in the pit of my stomach. ¹³³

Fish's sentiments are markedly different from the political idealism that underscores *Glory Days*. He is, after all, a cynical, male private investigator. But there are also similarities in the ways in which both writers examine male power through their portrayal of businessmen, the police, parliament and political parties. In both *Dog Fish* and *Glory Days*, men and male institutions offer only corruption. The redemption in both works is found in acts of love and kindness. Whilst 'feminised' men like Scott's Al, Geason's, Syd or the trans-sexuals who straddle the gender divide, may act kindly, it is the women who redeem and provide salvation in both novels.

Syd's friendships with the novel's female characters and the comradeship shared between the women drives *Dogfish's* political narrative. It is the highly stylised, 'good' women – the artist, journalist, runaway, kind hairdresser and the trans-sexual with a good heart – who rise above corruption. These women play an important role in shaping the way in which Syd operates. They offer a highly moral view of the world which allows the battered detective to respond to the city's corruption with strategically placed truisms that sharply contrast his cynical view of the world with their more moral and idealistic ones. Hence in the scene that follows, Tracy's innocence about the city's violence is contrasted with Syd's pragmatism:

Tracy turned up while I was getting dressed, and hung around the bedroom door till I asked her what was wrong.

'Jeez, Sydney's a terrible place, Syd. I was walking past that little park down the road and I seen a couple of kids kicking this poofter near the toilets.' She was quite shaken.

¹³³ Geason, S., *Dogfish*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1991, p. 90

'It happens all the time. And the cops don't give a shit.'

'Why not?'

*'Because most of them are boofheads with no education and an IQ of 95. And besides, if the citizens didn't do it, they'd have to do it themselves.'*¹³⁴

Geason claims she created her male detective at a time when most feminists were redefining the genre with an array of sassy, tough females because she was 'tired of politically correct female operatives.' She couldn't see how the female detectives in feminist crime fiction could survive in the dangerous situations in which they found themselves. She also thought them 'too earnest.' For her, many American feminist crime writers had created characters in their series novels who 'didn't move along.' English private investigators and cops were often brought down by their 'authoritarian and class-ridden society.'¹³⁵

And in Australia? She believes that Australian crime writers understand and write about social issues well because they are cynical about politics and they know it is money that underpins everything. In such a situation there is recognition that whilst it is not possible to influence the deeds of politicians, or their watchdogs, the police, it is at least possible to one up them by solving a crime and having a good laugh at their expense.¹³⁶ The gender of her detective in such an environment, Geason claims, becomes a non-issue.

Geason's argument seems to fail to take account of the different ways in which men and women participate in the *political*. A shared cynicism about politics doesn't compensate for women's exclusion from the political

¹³⁴ Geason, S., *Dogfish*, p. 170

¹³⁵ Geason, S., Interview, 2000

¹³⁶ Nyman, J., 1998, p. 21

process. Feminist crime writers, I would argue, created female characters for this very reason: to expose the corruption of male-dominated institutions and to recapture or subvert the political power that had been denied to woman. In addition to this, in creating a male detective like Syd Fish, Geason has inadvertently snagged him on a feminist narrative. She admits to playing with her character's *maleness*. He is not, for example, a traditional Aussie male. 'Because he's a spy, a double agent, he's seen and done everything and is therefore unshockable. He isn't shocked by people's morals or lack of them, by their sexual practices or behaviour. He isn't threatened by gay men.'¹³⁷

Creating such a male character was not problematic for Geason who had grown up with funny men and had had boyfriends who were 'comic geniuses.' She wanted to write funny novels and felt she couldn't be funny and politically correct at the same time. In developing a male detective she felt she could capture more moral relativism in her novel.¹³⁸

Certainly, Syd Fish is honest and he is not an ideologue. He also creates a family of women around him. The journalist, Lizzie, is his wife/sister. Tracey is his daughter. Julia, represents the 'normal world.' As an artist and a woman determined to pursue her artistic goals in Italy, Julia's life forms an idyllic contrast to the anarchic world that surrounds Syd. He is attracted to and surprised by the ways in which all these women behave. He supports, for example, Julia's decision to study overseas even though it is painful to him. He is unaware that in responding to her needs he is subverted and changed by them.

Critic Stephen Knight sees Syd Fish differently from Geason. Knight claims that Syd has been too feminised by his female friends' influence. This

¹³⁷ Geason, S., Interview, 2000

¹³⁸ Geason, S., Interview, 2000

has led to a drastic reduction in Syd's masculinity. In eschewing the politically correct feminist detective, Knight asserts, Geason has created an emasculated, politically correct, male one.¹³⁹

Despite this sensitivity, Syd Fish does rotten things knowing he will cause trouble. He is a good man who fails to take responsibility for his actions – including those that lead to the death of the anti-development campaigner, Elaine Lamont. His behaviour throughout the novel seems to reflect a view that he is powerless in any attempt to change the world, and therefore must make his choices alone, regardless of their destructive outcomes.

Geason believes Syd's response to Lorraine Lamont is typical of the male response to assertive, political women. Lamont is a nuisance, a woman driven by her political ambitions and her ideology. Like most men, Syd, 'takes a transgressive woman's aggression personally. Such women have different standards from men. For Syd, there's always a sexual threat in an aggressive woman.'¹⁴⁰ He may not like Lamont but is disturbed by her death.

Geason's dispatching of Lamont raises a number of questions. If the women in the novel are a series of stereotypes – the tough journalist, the earth-mother artist, the street girls with hearts of gold, the 'bitch', why is it the latter (Lamont) who is punished? As the female writer in charge of the narrative, is Geason (as well as Fish) implicated in the death of one of the strongest and most outspoken women in the novel? And in killing Lamont, does she reinforce the moral views of non-feminist crime writers and punish the 'bad' woman?

¹³⁹ Knight Stephen, 1997, p. 103

¹⁴⁰ Geason, S., Interview, 2000

Lamont's death, Geason argues, is more closely aligned with the politics of government than those of gender.

Party politics have always interested Geason. Her own background is political. She worked in the NSW Premier's Department for 6 years and on former Premier, Neville Wran's, personal staff. In these roles, she observed the machinations of government 'as an anthropologist would observe a tribe.' The public servants, politicians, union officials, pressure groups and lobbyists she encountered provided her with a 'really good power map in (my) head.'¹⁴¹ When writing a novel, she doesn't set out to use this material – claiming it just comes out in the novel's setting and themes. Like *Marele Day*, Geason uses humour to examine, deconstruct and redefine male power. Her cynicism about the patriarchal structures of government form a key theme in *Dogfish*:

*The mayor was up on the dais sweating like a grave robber coming off the night shift, flanked by the State Minister for Social services – a Margaret Thatcher clone – a variety of nursing home officials and Denny O'Hagan. For Denny, this sort of function was an apprenticeship for his career as a Labor minister when the electorate got sick of liberal managerialism and voted for a return to voodoo economics.*¹⁴²

When Syd meets his old school chum, the sexually reassigned Paula Prince, his reaction is more about what a little bastard the boy was at school, than the artefact that is the trans-sexual, Paula.

The idea of a trans-sexual entering the aggressively male stronghold of Labor Party and trade union power is also treated with humour.

¹⁴¹ Geason, S., Interview, 2000

¹⁴² Geason, S., *Dogfish*, p. 155

... I think I know why Surrey Street was so important to Paula. She was contemplating a political career.'

'With who?'

'The Labor Party.'

*Lizzie shrieked laughing. 'I can just see it. The boyos at Sussex Street must have had convulsions just thinking about it. I can see Paula and Ray at functions at Parliament House.'*¹⁴³

As noted in my introductory chapter, the threat to the city is a predominant theme in utopian crime fiction. Like many crime novelists, Geason is angry about the destruction of the city and the ways in which developers have been allowed to 'build sub-standard boxes so people can live like battery hens.'¹⁴⁴ Profit motives, she argues, lead to corruption, and to people making a quick buck. In *Dogfish* Geason gives voice to her frustration with the political processes that allow environmental destruction:

*Manly used to advertise itself as seven miles from Sydney and a thousand miles from care. That was before kilometres. It was a sleepy seaside village then, but the developers are moving in. The council gave the go-ahead to a couple of high-rises right on the beach, and they've just refurbished the wharf. A plot to stick an enormous development in the heart of the shopping centre fell through when the developer ran out of money. He's now in jail. Maybe there is a God: maybe he used to come to Manly when he was a boy.'*¹⁴⁵

Women who challenge this plundering of the city must be silenced. The murder of Lorraine Lamont is linked by suggestion to the death of Kings Cross campaigner, Juanita Nielson. Like the Nielson character in *Mandy*

¹⁴³ Geason, S., *Dogfish*, p. 169

¹⁴⁴ Geason, S., Interview, 2000

¹⁴⁵ Geason, S., *Dogfish*, p. 139

Sayer's novel, *The Cross*, Lamont is silenced by the kinds of goons and developers who have controlled Sydney's building booms since the earliest days of the colony.

Profiteers had begun to realise the potential of Victoria Street in the seventies, and started to buy up the houses. When some of the locals, backed by left-wing unions, resisted, the developers brought in their own private armies of Kings Cross club goons, karate experts and ex-policemen. They called them security guards. Their favourite methods of eviction were arson and iron bars. The ridge is now infested with ugly apartment blocks and the cover-up is still going on. In Sydney, crime pays.¹⁴⁶

Geason sees the battle against developers as a gender-based one. She argues that open spaces – like the Botanical Gardens – and low-rise development are 'female.' The developers are males who want to penetrate and colonise those spaces. Certainly, *Dogfish* strongly suggests an anarchic male culture hell bent on violence. There is little in the novel to ameliorate this view. Even the usual circularity of crime fiction, which leads to a moral resolution of sorts, fails to eventuate.

Despite her claim of apoliticality, many of Geason's arguments about the novel fail to acknowledge how politically the narrative unfolds. Just as the politics in Sayer's *The Cross* can't be denied or dismissed, there is much more to the theme of destruction of inner urban spaces explored in *Dogfish* than male appropriation of the feminine. The development of Sydney, I would argue, has always been highly political, involving underworld figures and donations to political parties of both Labor and Conservative persuasions, violence and police corruption. It represents marauding

¹⁴⁶ Geason, S., *Dogfish*, p. 102

capitalism in its worst guise, bullying and murderous, a force indifferent to protests about heritage or calls for moderation.

In writing about this loss of interesting and historical urban spaces to gentrification and over-development, Geason asserts that 'she wants to capture the destruction of the collective past and the replacement of elegant architecture with boxes.' Like Lisa Cody, she regrets the loss of diversity and the social mix that these changes bring, finding a resultant monoculture and a population 'where everyone wears black and wants to be in the visual arts' and where people just become consumers and lose all personal agency in their lives.¹⁴⁷ Younger women may take issue with this view. Areas like Sydney's Kings Cross have always been home to artistic communities and urban subcultures including those of the black-clad young. What Geason is giving voice to, I assert, is the loss of a past which will not return and a yearning for the lost feminine in the metropolis.

Scott also displays this pathos in *Glory Days* when Glory reflects on her surroundings in an elegy to working class drinkers threatened by encroaching gentrification:

It was a typical late afternoon at this kind of crummy pub, the lassitude of smoke and stale beer and saturated carpets – the red-faced barman drinking on the sly. It was one of those working-class pubs I could never find now – most of them have been done up in salmon pink with pot plants, and filled with hordes of tidy, obediently civilised drinkers. I felt at home in a pub like this, it reminded me of the old days, dust motes in the air and 1ZB whining out the races, the smell of beer and fags in the air, and faded old beer-soaked carpets. Hardened drinkers with red bottle noses, caricatures of themselves, lighting up their smokes with trembling Korsakov fingers, already

¹⁴⁷ Geason S., Interview, 2000

*awash with their morning's booze. Their dim old brains slithering around for some suitable social nicety.*¹⁴⁸

Both writers believe the motif of gentrification which underscores feminist crime writing reflects the utopian feminist urge for inclusion and acceptance. Gentrification, they argue, always has 'a suspicion of pretence and inauthenticity about it.'¹⁴⁹ But ironically, passages such as the one from *Glory Days* quoted above also represent a romanticising of and yearning for spaces that excluded women. Entre 'to the pub's front bar with its beer soaked carpet, the horse races droning in the background, the resident drunk earbashing the long suffering bar staff was prohibited to women in most Australian capital cities and towns until the late 1960s and early 1970s.

A longing for and idealisation of places that were once out-of-bounds, adds an additional sociological importance to this yearning, I would suggest, reflecting the Kantian idea of nostalgia as a virtue and a force which propels the individual to seek knowledge. In yearning for lost spaces writers mourn *all* that is lost to them. Nostalgia for lost jobs, buildings, characters and types is as much about being 'conscious of our own mortality,'¹⁵⁰ as it is about eulogising working class pubs. It is a longing that has been identified in more contemporary discourse by the post-modernist philosopher, Baudrillard, who argues that 'a bygone object is always, in the full sense of the term, a family portrait.'¹⁵¹ The working class men and women in Geason's and Scott's pubs are like photos of a long dead family, whose

¹⁴⁸ Scott, R., *Glory Days*, p. 11

¹⁴⁹ Scott, R., Interview, 2000

¹⁵⁰ Cassirer, E., *Kant's Life and Thought*, Yale University Press, London, 1981, p. 34

¹⁵¹ Baudrillard, J., *The Revenge of the Crystal*, Pluto Press, London, 1990, p. 37

fading sepia presence reminds us all that mortality will reduce us to images as outmoded, one day, as theirs.

What writers like Scott, Geason and I (as *Dry Dock* testifies) are also mourning here, I would argue, is the extinction of class – the loss of working class spaces which once offered working men and women a communal place of their own to spin their stories, smoke and drink. We are mourning not just the gentrification of those traditional watering holes but the loss of working class jobs, of houses once affordable to people on low incomes, and the relegation of a once proud industrial history to the peripheries of our cities. It is the working people, symbolically represented in the gentrified pub, who are dying out. And in their novels, crime writers litanise and mourn the way they go.

In *Glory Days* gentrification is also a reflection on Glory and her mates – they are unattractive, uncool, they don't fit in with the 'silvery' people at the art exhibition. Art has been taken over by the wealthy so that ordinary people and the creators of art can no longer afford it. The theatre of art and capital, rich and poor is played out in an art gallery in *Dogfish* as well, where artists and their paintings are subsumed into a capitalist process of 'speculation', of buying and selling:

The gallery was full of art speculators in dinner suits with their brittle wives, critics looking cool and avoiding each other, a few of Julia's arty friends in mad outfits and clanking costume jewellery, and a variety of art fringe-dwellers getting into the wine and cheese. The owner of the gallery circulated with intent, smiling hard and trying to stir up interest. ¹⁵²

¹⁵² Geason, S., *Dogfish*, p. 171

Unlike the epiphany which closes *Glory Days*, there's a pessimism in *Dog Fish*'s ending. Nothing augers well for the city or the people who live in it. Nothing is resolved, because realistically, Geason argues, in politics nothing can be resolved.

*ICAC would be gearing up for a long, hard look at Eastern Sydney Council and Pluto foods; the shredders would be running late into the night all over the eastern suburbs. After all the publicity died down, the yuppies who bought the Surrey Street townhouses would soon forget the price that had been paid for their dream homes. Only the friends and families of Paula Prince and Lorraine Lamont would remember.*¹⁵³

And unlike *Glory*, who is transformed by forgiveness and love, *Syd Fish* accepts the political status quo. A man who likes women, his conflicts with the city and its dark forces resolved in the company of his friends, Ramona, Blush and Max. All of them reduced to a kind of comedic group, accepting their impotence against history and its political forces.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ Geason, S., *Dogfish*, p. 190

¹⁵⁴ Nyman, J., 1998, p. 22

5.

Writing Crime

I came to believe what I still believe, and that is that you can remain within the constraints of the classic detective story and be a good writer and say something true about men and women and say something about society. P.D. James¹⁵⁵

All of which brings me to myself. Eight years ago I was working for a trade union. I travelled around the country educating union members and employers about reforms in the industrial relations system. It was a tough assignment. I was verbally abused. Steamrollered by right wingers. Run out of country towns by conservatives. There were times when I felt like killing all of them. The Labor Party was in power in Canberra. The union movement had plenty of clout. I could tell you stories that would knock your socks off about meetings in Canberra restaurants and touch-and-go negotiations over beers in numerous pubs. They were heady days. John Howard was leader of the Opposition. Everybody thought that's where he'd stay. We were living in a fool's paradise.

Bill Kelty was Secretary of the ACTU. He was putting the union movement through more hoops than a circus mutt. Award restructuring. Education reform. Competency based awards. Amalgamation. Union membership was down to 31%. Kelty's reforms were going to turn that around. They didn't.

¹⁵⁵ James, P.D., *What Women Say, Mean Streets*, No. 9, July 1995, p. 21

I don't need to tell you how tough it is to be a senior woman in a male dominated organisation. Union amalgamation was under way. Left was marrying right. Shotgun. Women's policies and workplace training weren't high priorities when political assassination was going on. I did what Susan Geason did. I watched them. In amalgamation meetings. In Executive Council and National Conference. It was better than having a front row seat at a Collingwood/Carlton grand final. Who would win? The Groupers or the Left? The feminists or the blokes? The union staff or the elected representatives? I called it quits before I could find out.

I am often asked why I chose to write crime fiction. I usually answer in the following way: 'I don't just write crime,' I say. 'I write short stories, poems, non-crime novels.' I also point out that I didn't choose crime. It chose me when I was inadvertently introduced to the genre through my friend's books. I quickly recognised that crime fiction offered the means for telling a story in ways that other narrative forms couldn't.

A writer's choice of genre is often a fraught one, based as much on trial and error as anything else. Writers switch narrative style, move from first to third person, manipulate plot, change settings and atmosphere. Writing rarely offers certainties, and writers often claim they don't know where a story or character is leading them until the book is finished. We become Yeats' wives, as it were, writing automatically, channelling our characters' voices, letting ourselves be led by an artistic force with a life of its own.

The story of union corruption and urban overdevelopment in Dry Dock, I believe, could not have been told without the narrative devices of crime. It is in crime fiction that we are most likely to find socialism and feminism side-by-side and the genre offers a readily locatable entity in which to deconstruct contemporary political concerns.¹⁵⁶ Political themes require

¹⁵⁶ Levy, B., See note 51

the leavening of humour, a place that plays a metaphorical role, and characters who are the driving forces within the plot. *Dry Dock* needed to be played out in the external world, on Sydney Harbour, Cockatoo Island, and around the streets of Balmain. To understand and identify with the clannish characteristics of the novel's characters, the person telling the story required roots in the working class mystery she was unravelling. But she also needed to be part of 'new' Balmain and its cafe 'society, the kind of figure who Bronwen Levy claims 'whether amateur or professional ... can read the signs around her.'¹⁵⁷

My second crime novel, *Skin Deep*, which forms part of this dissertation was a different matter altogether. It began as a non-crime text. Originally, it was going to be a social realist novel, a post, post-modern tribute to the novels of left-wing feminist writers such as Jean Devanny, Eleanor Dark and Katherine Suzannah Pritchard, who celebrated their political and working lives in their books. That approach didn't work. In its social realist style, *Skin Deep's* political narrative, the discordant relationships between the women, and the urban setting, failed to carry the story I wanted to tell. As soon as it moved into a crime narrative it began to gel.

Why? Because crime, as I've argued previously, is an 'open' genre that most successfully gives voice to contemporary political and cultural themes. Unlike current literary fiction which Val McDermid claims, 'has gone soft while trying to please critics and academics,'¹⁵⁸ crime writing ambitiously explores the complex social and political issues non crime writers flee. In maintaining its assertive social stance, the crime novel's narrative structure also offers its author the opportunity to deconstruct stereotypical images, not

¹⁵⁷ Levy, B., See note 51

¹⁵⁸ McDermid, V., in *Dark Corridors*, Ron Miller's Interview with Val McDermid, *The Columist.com*, <http://www.thecolumist.com/miller>

only of the goodies, the police, private eyes and pathologists commonly found within a crime novel's covers, but of the baddies as well.¹⁵⁹ The devices of crime fiction engage the reader and call on their active, imaginative involvement with the novel's plot and its denouement. Place, humour, voice and political partisanship provide reader identification in more intense ways than with other genres. For women readers, familiar with the structures of political power, the crime novel brings political issues into a location known to them, through an accessible and appealing genre.

There are other stylistic issues, of course. Narratives such as those found in crime fiction do not fall easily into deconstructed, post-modern texts. Post-modernism is wary of strong political statements or displays of emotion. It is reflexive and fond of pastiche. It is scared, Damian Spruce argues, of getting shot down by a snide remark from the sidelines.¹⁶⁰ In its dismissal of the grand narrative, it rejects and ridicules, speaks softly and makes itself as small a target as possible. 'You can't argue with it,' Spruce believes, 'because it isn't saying anything and after a while people may well ask post modernist texts what authority they should have at all.'

Non-crime novels which explore the inner world of their characters are reflective by nature. They are privileged with lyricism and have time to meander slowly through days in which not a lot happens. Their settings can be anonymous or contained. The only stage needed for a protagonist's inner conflict is the confines of their own skin, or perhaps a room in a house somewhere, or a small suburban street.

¹⁵⁹ Cowie, Matthew, Representations of Crime, Criminality and the Criminal Justice Process in the Novels of John Harvey, Faculty of Law and Social Sciences, on-line journal, <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/law/TEXT>

¹⁶⁰ Spruce, Damien, Making a Song and Dance about Nothing Much at All, *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 8, 2001, p. 16

The strong female/feminist subject of crime fiction who deciphers and makes meanings, Bronwen Levy believes, is a modernist rather than a post modern entity.¹⁶¹ Novels such as Jan McKemmish's *A Gap in the Records* and Brenda Walker's *Crush*, played with these modern, post-modern demarcations, denying or challenging the author, breaking down narrative and cultural borders. *Crush*, for example, was categorised by its author and publisher as post-modern crime, presumably because it has a poetic quality, tension, uncertainty and existential angst. Yet despite these, Walker's novel is still bound by crime's conventions. It defers to hard-boiled traditions, plays with them, but, for this reader at least, is ultimately reclaimed.

The contribution of the fait divers and the detective novel has produced for the last hundred years or more an enormous mass of 'crime stories' in which delinquency appears both as very close and quite alien, a perpetual threat to everyday life, but extremely distant in its origins and motives, both everyday and exotic in the milieu in which it takes place. Foucault¹⁶²

The Melbourne I lived in when I discovered crime fiction was a city full of atmosphere, both benign and threatening. As Foucault has argued, there are numerous ways in which crime fiction creates situations which are both familiar and alien to us, stories and characters which we recognise and others which seem bizarre and impenetrable. These narratives of 'the everyday and the exotic' rely on atmospherics – the world re-drawn by the writer so it is both known and unknown, refracted like a reflection in a broken mirror.

When I worked in the union movement I caught a tram to Carlton. Not one of the new, sleek articulated numbers you see everywhere in Europe. A

¹⁶¹ Levy, B., See note 51

¹⁶² Foucault, M., *Discipline and Punish*, Vintage, New York, 1997, p. 286

real tram. W class. All varnished wood work, slatted seats, running boards and doors that closed slowly when the tram was already half-way to the next stop. I walked through the Exhibition Gardens past the Victorian fountain and the domed Exhibition Building. Down cobbled alley ways where Jewish tailors used to work. Past the Trades Hall where someone once took a pot shot at Frank Anstey. It rained a lot. The cobbles shone. The tram tracks turned into silver ribbons as they passed the old Carlton Brewery site. Lygon Street was coffee scented and Cardigan Street smelled of new clothes. At dusk, when the muttering derros were congregating outside the Hanover Centre, union officials were doing the last of the day's factional deals in the Lincoln pub.

There was plenty of atmosphere in union meetings too. The ACTU in Swanston Street was housed between a snooker parlour and a Druid Hall. Meetings were punctuated by the *clug clug* of trams outside and the tramp of students on their way to RMIT or the Burger King on the corner of Lonsdale Street. The air inside was often so tense you could reach up and touch it. Union men and women sat around a table so large they needed a runner to pass notes to one another. There were rolls of honour of the union war dead on the wall behind them. Busts of Dolan, Monk, Hawke to look over their shoulders. And ghosts, too, if you were of a superstitious bent.

Crime fiction relies on atmospherics such as these. The city, its cobbled lanes and smoky pubs are popular urban backdrops. Whilst these create archetypal images – similar dark scenes exist, I would argue, in the metropolis in Europe, the Americas, Australia and Asia despite regional and cultural differences – there is an ephemeral quality about them as well. The city is constantly reshaping and redefining itself. Its culture moves in and out of trends. Buildings are demolished. People change jobs and relationships. Social and ethnic groups come and go. A suburb can be dirt poor one year, gentrified the next.

For a crime reader there is a tacit understanding that this kind of impermanence is inherent in the text. After all, reading crime fiction, as Carol Oates¹⁶³ has said, has an effect like melting ice. It has substance and form one minute, but vanishes the next. Levy also notes this quality, claiming that whilst reading crime novels 'involves tension, excitement and satisfaction,' there is also 'a curious disappointment, the let down of an achieved (and achievable) solution. With its often too coherent conclusion, a crime novel shows that everything is potentially a sign and has meanings, no matter how apparently unconnected, and that everything leads in a unified narrative to a single solution, although sometimes the solution's singularity is questioned.'¹⁶⁴ Every effect, she claims, has an identifiable cause, so that the more complexly but exactly the ends are tied up, the better for the crime and the novel.

Crime writers find ways to challenge these limitations. Michael Dibdin's conclusion to *Blood Rain* and the appalling ending to Suzanne Moore's *In the Cut* are cases in point. Moore's hero, with whom the reader shares much through the first person narrative, meets a fate that destabilises and subverts the expected, comfortable resolution generally found in crime fiction. Her hero's death may be a more realistic outcome in the dangerous world of crime than the neat and optimistic endings usually found in the genre, but it is a terrible shock to the reader, nevertheless.

John Irwin¹⁶⁵ interrogates these views about expectation and impermanence even further in a series of questions put to crime writers and readers alike. How does one write analytical detective fiction as high art when the genre's central narrative mechanism seems to discourage the

¹⁶³ Oates, Carol, *New York Review*, No. 9, 2000, p. 11

¹⁶⁴ Levy, B., See note 51

¹⁶⁵ Irwin, John, in Cawelti, *Detecting the Detective*, University Press of Kentucky, 1999, p. 44

unlimited re-reading associated with serious writing? If the point of a detective story is the deductive solution of a mystery, how does the writer keep that solution from exhausting the reader's interest in the story? How does he or she write a work that can be re-read by people, other than those with poor memories?

The answers lie somewhere in contemporary expectations of text and genre convention, I suspect. Crime novels may rarely be re-read for the reasons Oates and Irwin articulate, but there are always follow up novels, or different ways of telling the same story. There is a belief that crime fiction is a continuing narrative, and crime writers merely tell the same story over and over again. These limitations have been recognised by writers such as Inez Baranay, and Frank Moorhouse ¹⁶⁶ who claims he thought all crime fiction had been written by the same author.

'I once had a crime reading binge in preparation for some classes,' Baranay, says. '... I found that I was becoming unable to differentiate one text from another – the clients, the victims, the greasy fast food, the beatings, the concerned friends and lonely nights began to merge into one metatext, the metatext you need to know in order to appreciate the particular qualities or merits of a single work.'¹⁶⁷ But what is disturbing in crime's conventions of repetition for readers like Moorhouse and Baranay, represents comfort and expectation for others for whom familiarity plays a necessary role in anticipation, identification and enjoyment.

I would also argue that crime fiction plays on the familiar in a range of other ways. It is both rhythmic and musical, and mythical in the way it revisits its challenges. It's the *how* of the story, the complexities of character and place that keep the reader reading, then moving on to their next crime

¹⁶⁶ Moorhouse, F., Oz Cri-Fi in the Gun, *Australian Author*, Vol. 32, No.1, May 2000, pp. 12-18

¹⁶⁷ Baranay, Inez, Oz Cri-Fi in the Gun, *Australian Author*, p. 15

text. Thus, crime readers are programmed to read new detective stories as Cawelti suggests,¹⁶⁸ through a knowledge of the genre's conventions such as false suspects, red herrings, and locked rooms, much as film audiences believe they are seeing something new in films that have their thematic origins in Homer or Shakespeare.

There are other questions about genre choice which flow from these ideas. In choosing crime as a vehicle for a strong female hero, for example, did feminist crime writers like myself,¹⁶⁹ deliberately set out to appropriate these conventions or create a female detective who is a parody of a masculine form? Marele Day has used one of the most striking examples of this. Her 'blonde in the bed scene' which opens *The Life and Crimes of Harry Lavender* has become legendary amongst crime readers for the way it twists a typical hard-boiled convention and re-genders it:

As I got out of bed I realised I wasn't the only one in it. There was a good-looking blond in there as well. I didn't recall issuing the invitation but I must have. No one gets into my room, let alone my bed, without me 'Time to go sweetheart,' I whispered into the blond's aural orifice. Not a flicker of an eyelid or a murmur. Next time I shook him.¹⁷⁰

Day's humour would not be lost on readers familiar with crime fiction's bedroom 'metatext' peopled by sexy but clueless women like Carter Brown's busty blondes and redheads.

And did women crime writers, as Cawelti has suggested, manipulate their readers and take them from serious anxiety and concern about the fate

¹⁶⁸ Cawelti, J., 1999, p. 46

¹⁶⁹ Klein, Kathleen Gregory, *The Woman Detective: Gender and Genre*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1988, p. 26

¹⁷⁰ Day, Marele, *The Life and Crimes of Harry Lavender*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1988, p. 1

of their characters towards play and the elimination of stressful feelings¹⁷¹ in different ways from those employed by male crime writers? 'I am just like you,' the female hero of crime fiction says to her female reader, 'but estranged and different as well.' This duality allows the reader to escape by vicariously experiencing danger on the one hand, to retreat to a shared, domestic safety on the other. Certainly, the ways in which women crime writers give agency to the domestic lives of their female detectives seems to affirm this 'sharing' intent.

Feminist crime writing also dwells on the ways women detectives dress, on their houses, musical tastes, and leisure pursuits, Morag Shiach believes, 'to enable the reader to construct a sense of shared identity through style.' The ways in which women crime writers use popular culture to defer to and create their own community reduces 'the threat of anonymity ... by the staging of the marks of a collective sense of urban style.'¹⁷² When the dystopic crime has been resolved, the reader is offered comfort in Scarpetta's Italian cooking, in Brannigan's supportive relationship, and Nicola Sharpe's friends. Whilst feminists may argue that these domestic relationships are hardly liberating, they are certainly emotionally sustaining, and activities with which most women could identify. There is also empowerment in their shared political convictions about labour issues, the environment and feminism.

*Social realism valued the experience of ordinary men and women, particularly workers, above the forms of a traditional order.*¹⁷³

Just as Dry Dock started to form in my head, my father died. He'd been a coal miner in Yorkshire who'd come to Australia after the war for a better

¹⁷¹ Cawelti, J., *Mystery and Romance*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1976, p. 198

¹⁷² Shiach, M., in Slater, M., 1997, p. 2

¹⁷³ McLaren, J., 1996, p. 1

life. He'd worked in hard jobs because they paid better. The kind of jobs that put you in touch with asbestos. He'd never smoked but he died of lung cancer - asbestos related. *Dry Dock* became a keened memory of men and women like him. Kind, funny, hard working, solidly Labor with no turning. My father was clever, well-read, and deeply committed to social justice, the kind of unionist that Pritchard, Tennant and Hewitt wrote about and who prevailed in the labour force before economic rationalism and globalisation changed the ways in which we work. In *Dry Dock*. Nicola Sharpe has a father, Jack, exactly like him, a third generation Balmain working class character who was a sheet metal worker on Cockatoo Island all his working life. Whilst Jack Sharpe is a tribute to my own father, he also celebrates the working class men and women who lived and worked in Sydney's gentrifying inner suburbs.

As well as drawing on their own history and relationships, in ways such as the one I've noted above, writers draw on their psychological roots. Scottish crime writing is different, according to Val McDermid,¹⁷⁴ because it has its origins in the dark and Calvinistic Scottish psyche, leavened with Scottish black humour. Self-deprecation and ironical humour colour the writing of Australian crime writers, male and female alike. Corris's Cliff Hardy, Geason's Syd Fish, and Day's Claudia Valentine are wise cracking examples of this. The well-told joke and the eccentric turn-of-phrase are the Australian equivalent of the hand held palm up. Defusing hostility, laughing at one's self, comments insulting only if the recipient of the humour is so thin-skinned they misunderstand the joke, are manifestations of the national psyche. Humour provides the men of Australian crime fiction with an out before they pull a punch or a gun. For the women it defuses and de-sexes potentially dangerous interactions, allowing them safe passage from threat.

¹⁷⁴ McDermid, Val, see note 156

Other cultural factors are at play in these elements, I suspect. It is a feminist tradition for a female writer to create female heroes who challenge and subvert male power. We may use aspects of ourselves when we create lippy and assertive characters, but we also draw on a long narrative tradition of similar feisty women who have inhabited the pages of our novels since the earliest days of the Colony. In participating in this stereotype, does female detectives' refusal to emulate the role of the typical male detective, function for female readers as a creative space of resistance and critique, a point of departure from masculinist text?¹⁷⁵

Sue Grafton believes women write crime and create feisty characters because they want to show that women are competent.¹⁷⁶ Female detectives are certainly that. They have backgrounds in activism and their professional training includes law, social work, academia, the police force, journalism - all of them what Levy calls 'meaning-making or interpretative professions requiring knowledge, subjectivity and skill.'¹⁷⁷ Claire McNab's, Sybil, girlfriend to her detective, Carol Ashton, displays the kind of background most feminists would recognise:

*As a teacher, Sybil had become involved in the provision of free basic English classes for migrant women, a group in society often exploited by clothing manufacturers as a cheap, non-unionised source of piecework labour.*¹⁷⁸

All feminist writing is a point of departure, a redefining and reclaiming, a statement of competency. Certainly, the popularity of feminist

¹⁷⁵ Barnes, L., in Walton and Jones, *Detective Agency: Women Rewriting the Hard-boiled Tradition*, University of California Press, 1999, p. 36

¹⁷⁶ Grafton, Sue, *Mean Streets*, No. 9, July 1993, p. 22

¹⁷⁷ Levy, B., See note 51

¹⁷⁸ McNab, C. *Cop Out*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1991, p. 28

crime fiction speaks something of this, and many female crime writers are aware of, and write to, readers who expect this resistance from their texts.

As I noted in Chapter One, mystery writing has a long history that stretches back to myths and fairy tales.¹⁷⁹ Social realist writers in Australia sought their inspiration in the heroic 'image of an Australian tradition of mateship, of standing together against the exploitation of tyrants.'¹⁸⁰ Women's crime fiction has its genesis in the strong narrative traditions of folk ballads and stories passed down through generations and common to the cultural memory of women throughout the world.¹⁸¹ In Australia, these narratives tell of feisty drover's wives and bushranger's sisters, of bandits, bag women and refractory girls around whose lives myths and legends have been spun and which act as progenitors to the tough women who appear in crime.

Crime writing is by its very nature a circular and resolving narrative. Depending on their writing methods and styles, crime writers may plot the story, clue by clue, in advance. They may know the novel's resolution long before they have determined the complexities of its plot, or created characters who may be pivotal to the novel's pace. Crime fiction often has an organic quality about it that has a lot to do with the 'rhythms' writers develop as they write. The best crime fiction makes much of these, creating a text that is musically rich. Given this, it is no accident that music, songs and the musical preferences of so many detectives find their way into a crime novel's pages and add a kind of sound track to the action.

Women may write crime because they just want to make sense of urban crimes, redefine their neighbourhoods, or play around with a sassy female

¹⁷⁹ Campbell, J., 1993, p. 49

¹⁸⁰ McLaren, J., 1996, p. 4

¹⁸¹ Ludlow, C., 1994, p. 44

character whose personality and style are quite unlike their own. Feminist crime fiction often takes the side of its victims, so female crime writers may give voice to felt-grievances about the way society treats the less fortunate. This role can function as a form of social protest and reform, and may even be rewarded, giving crime writers the same status as social workers. This was seen when British crime writer, Ruth Rendell's commitment to the creation of a better and more equal society was recognised with her elevation to the House of Lords, where she now sits as a working peer.¹⁸²

Autobiographical writing, whilst not unique to crime writing, is often used by women writers with a background in activism. For those who explore the impact of poverty, sex discrimination and social transgression, crime fiction is the genre that eagerly offers itself to an exposition of women's lives. Women may also write crime because someone has told them that crime fiction sells better than other books. None of the questions raised by feminist crime narratives is easily resolved, I would argue, because women write crime for a wide range of reasons, often unknowing about or unrelated to the history of the genre. And for writers such as myself, all of the reasons I have explored above may apply.

Whilst crime fiction is imagined, it must also contain the writer's truth. 'The act of telling a story places author and reader in a particular relation to the people and events within the story,' McLaren believes.¹⁸³ The author has a responsibility to ensure that the story is true to its origins, whether in documentation, in memory, or in the imagined truth of character and circumstance. They must question not only the techniques they use, but the 'truth' on which the story rests.

¹⁸² McDermid, V. Val McDermid on Ruth Rendell, *Essays on Major Crime Writers, Kings and Queens of Crime*, <http://www.twbooks.co.uk/cwa/mcdermidonrendell.html>

¹⁸³ McLaren, J., 1996, p. 207

As well as its enabling aspects, crime fiction is a genre that has traditionally presented a number of constraints to its writers, men and women alike. It is plot driven and the plot can become tyrannical in its demands. All other conventions must defer to it, repeatedly measuring themselves against the adage, that if the text doesn't move the plot along, it doesn't belong within it. Crime also requires a strong narrative which tricks or befuddles the reader, but not too much, lest they lose interest. Readers, schooled in the genre's conventions expect a mystery in which they can play a part. Crime fiction is highly stylised and codified. It requires complexity. It appeals to cultural historians, academics, and theorists but it is also populist, addressing itself to people from all kinds of backgrounds, making it one of the most 'democratic' of literatures. It needs a strong voice, moral resolution, pace and humour. Balancing all of these is not an easy task. Of all the writing I have done, these genre expectations make crime writing the most difficult. Its constraints can make a writer feel they are writing inside a cage.

What could a newly retired union worker do in a rapidly deregulating labour market? Turn political plotting into the plot of a novel, of course. But where to begin the story, and how far to go when using 'true life' material. How best to structure a novel which explored working class characters in Sydney's inner west? The novels in the box had shown me that crime fiction was strongly political and prepared to tackle the themes that had interested me since I was a teenager: capitalism and corporate crime, social dysfunction, party politics and work, feminism. In crime novels, I discovered, you could take your reader through a series of mystifying puzzles, through locations and environments so strongly drawn they became characters in their own right. And most importantly, crime fiction took pot shots at moralising conservatives who saw crime as an individual's malaise rather than society's.

Crime fiction declared it was all right to take sides. Like Chandler's and Hammett's heroes who had preceded them, feminists had created female investigators who wore their political hearts on their sleeves and weren't afraid to write about the kinds of political dirty dealings non crime writers seemed to avoid. The more I read of them, the more I realised I wanted to be a political crime writer too. Partisan. Not afraid to call a spade a Sam Spade. Prepared to say what's good and what's bad. For example, greedy capitalists and urban developers were bad. People on low incomes struggling to stay afloat were good. Working class men and women like my father were good. The factional heavy weights I'd watched with so much interest in my union job, right-wing, ruthless and ambitious, were bad. It was easy sorting the sheep from the goats.

Except, of course, life isn't that black and white.

As I wrote *Dry Dock* I came to like my 'good' victim, Kevin O'Leary less and less. His 'bad' son, Tom, who was similar to many of the ambitious, educated young men I met in the union movement, became more sympathetic. Alf Sigley, a kind of union Mafia Don, became quite fascinating. Selina Bower, the wealthy young stockbroker with a house in Louisa Road is sad rather than bad. And Nicola's family, her friends, her community in the pubs and shops of Balmain became a wider chorus of flawed good souls from whom she gleaned ideas and support.

One of crime fiction's central features is the way it sheds light on certain aspects of society or culture. Crime disrupts the social fabric, so the detective must use their unique skills to bind it together again. In the process, the detective reveals things that might otherwise remain hidden. This process of exposing, disrupting and redefining is highly political. Unlike other fiction where the author can remain at arm's length from the society in which they and their characters live, a crime writer actively observes and

challenges the social and political establishment. To do this, they need to be partisan, to share their character's zeal for exposure, even if the character is absolutely different from them in other ways.

My political background provided ample opportunities for me to do this, as did my involvement with local protests about the overdevelopment of housing in Balmain. But this background also led to the need to interrogate the consequences of my convictions. Anticipating reader resistance to novels that preach or push a particular political message was the first of these. Whilst writers may deliberately create characters sympathetic to their readers, a detective with strongly held views may alienate those readers who don't share similar political beliefs. A polarised readership may limit opportunities for publication and cause publishers to suggest an alternate publishing house that specialises in polemical publications. As Stephen Knight has pointed out, 'the British publisher, Pluto, largely failed with its series of radical thrillers in the 1980s, not just because the market was either yuppie, feminist or obsessed with Ellis Peters's Brother Cadfael, but basically because the novels were too overtly political.'¹⁸⁴

Writers, however ideologically driven, can be very pragmatic when it comes to choices limiting publication.

The former editor of Pluto, Peter Ayrton, offers a different slant on Knight's argument. His decision to publish political crime fiction, he argued, was based on his belief that:

a whole generation of political activists weren't reading political theory any more but were moving towards fiction, and wanted fiction

¹⁸⁴ Knight, Stephen, What Kind of Ghoul am I? Genre and Sub Genre, in Day, M., (ed) *How to Write Crime*, 1996, p.16

that related to their experiences, their political frustrations, disappointments or whatever... (I) think it represents a collapse or fragmentation of any cohesive radical culture. It doesn't mean that radicals no longer exist ... The only left-wing press from the late 60's, early 70's in France, Germany and Italy that have survived, have all converted from publishing theory to all publishing fiction: 70-80% of their list is now fiction.¹⁸⁵

Ayrton's arguments could still apply today. Anecdotal comments about readers' choice of crime novels have suggested to me that readers want stories with contemporary political settings, where social and economic themes are openly examined.¹⁸⁶ Regardless of these interests, there is still a strong view amongst writers and publishers that partisan views may diminish the novel's plot and narrative. In a fiction which relies on good versus evil demarcations and moral resolution, this may lead to reduced opportunities for the writer to explore ambiguity. All the writers I spoke to in developing the arguments in this thesis believed that political writing was fraught with danger. It had the potential to become boring or overly didactic in ways that other fiction didn't, thus reducing itself to a kind of lifeless pamphleteering.

This view seems to be as much a reflection of our times as it is about artistic constraint. The popularity of 'political' novels such as those by J.B.Priestly, George Orwell and Lettice Cooper in England, Gorky in Russia, Heinrich Boll and Gunther Grass in Germany, and the Australian social

¹⁸⁵ Ayrton, P., see note 95

¹⁸⁶ In the process of researching this dissertation I spoke to hundreds of men and women at writers festivals, book launches and events about their reading patterns. While tastes varied, the majority enjoyed explorations of current political themes and regretted that these were largely available in American crime fiction rather than our own - although Shane Maloney's novels were cited as good, humorous examples of political crime.

realist writers I mentioned earlier, demonstrate that the twentieth century has produced acclaimed and popular writers whose political novels captured the loyalty of the readership of their day. That the political themes explored by those writers are now most likely to be found in crime fiction is perhaps not surprising. Less portentous, more humorous, with direct references to popular culture and contemporary events, crime novels offer their readers a mirror in which to view their political worlds, and their own roles within them.

I had started to write about Sydney while I was living in Melbourne. I was missing the place and Melbourne's soggy atmospherics had started to pall. I wanted long, hot days on Bondi beach, the Sydney Harbour Bridge, Oxford Street and a Chinatown that looked and smelled like Hong Kong. I needed streets full of superficial people who didn't give a continental about wearing thongs to the shops. I wanted my home suburb, Balmain, and its industrial past.

In my first novel, *Dry Dock*, I wanted to tell a story with a rollicking political plot about waterfront and trade union crime in Balmain. Ironically, the Balmain I write about in the novel is all but gone and the area's industrial past has been subsumed in multi-million dollar waterfront developments or harbour-side parks. 'If the suburb were a rainforest with an endangered species within it,' I joke with my students, 'we would protest about the loss.' But these are working people who leave the area because they can no longer afford to live there, and when they go their modest homes are replaced with structures so large it seems the developer is intent on wiping out any hint of the place's social footprint. Idealistic and romantic? Certainly. *Dry Dock* is about nostalgia and memory, the collective voice of a community, that of the local people with whom I spoke while researching the novel.

And my own. What better way to use my personal experiences, and with them, my views about how factional politics can undermine a union's effectiveness, than in a story about Cockatoo Island, its closure and the loss of thousands of jobs. My despair about the suburb's gentrification formed the novel's anti-development sub plot.

There are contradictions in my stance, I realise. In exploring the impact of gentrification on the area, I must explore and expose my own role in it. Nicola Sharpe and I share an awkward position within the neighbourhood. We are the children of the working class yet we are educated, middle-class, affluent. We participate in and celebrate the fruits of the area's gentrification, the cafés and restaurants, the bookshops and parks. We are pleased that the area has been greened with trees and that native birds are abundant in them, ignoring the fact that pollution has diminished specifically because the chemical works, timber yards and factories that created it have closed down. Nicola's Dad, Jack, may live in a modest semi-detached house in Short Street, but the house which Nicola inherited from her aunt bears all the trappings of a *Home Beautiful* magazine: polished floorboards, Persian rugs, books and paintings. Nicola may be her father's daughter, but she no longer lives as he does.

*My name is Kinsey Milhone. I'm a private investigator, licensed by the state of California. I'm 32 years old, twice divorced, no kids. The day before yesterday I killed someone and the fact weighs heavily on my mind. Sue Grafton*¹⁸⁷

Sue Grafton opened the first of her *alphabet* thrillers with the above paragraph, leaving the reader in no doubt that here was a woman who, whilst like them in some ways, was very unlike them in others. Whether a reader of Grafton has kids or has killed someone hardly seems to matter.

¹⁸⁷ Grafton, Sue, *A is for Alibi*, Pan, London, 1982, p. 1

Kinsey Millhone is a woman, tough because she has survived a divorce or a killing, that is enough.

The story in *Dry Dock* also needed to be told in the first person voice, the favoured voice of private eye novels,¹⁸⁸ and with authority and agency. The first person voice is not without its problems. Gary Disher noted the weaknesses and limitations in the first person point of view, arguing that a reader can't know what other characters are thinking or doing off stage except through what the main character infers or later learns.

But the first person point of view is also that through which a writer most commonly narrates – and redefines – themselves,¹⁸⁹ particularly in the ways in which a character's age, class, education, gender and personality colour their perceptions. First person narratives are particularly potent when the voice is that of a woman, moving through hostile and unwelcoming places. For these reasons, the stories of political corruption in *Dry Dock* and in the second novel, *Skin Deep*, are told through the voice of my character, the private investigator, Nicola Sharpe.

Biography is a further element in crime fiction worthy of analysis, creating, as it does a kind of feminist relativism in relation to ourselves and the world. In choosing to write crime fiction, do writers knowingly develop an authentic feminist tradition within the detective story as a way of making biography of our own lives¹⁹⁰ as Sally Munt has suggested? Or do we play out our homicidal fantasies as Sue Grafton did when she began to write crime after thinking of ways to murder her ex-husband?¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁸ Disher, Gary, *Plot and Structure*, in Day, M. 1996, p. 61

¹⁸⁹ Barnes in Walton and Jones, 1999, p. 35

¹⁹⁰ Munt, S., 1994, p. 34

¹⁹¹ Grafton, Sue, in Popple, Jeff, *Mean Streets*, No. 7, p. 42

Theorists such as Barnes have argued that it is no accident that an increased interest in crime writing, particularly those novels written in the first person, was concurrent with the rise in interest in biographical texts. Biography readers have an insatiable fascination with their subject and voraciously scrutinise the biographical text for insights into the subject's private and public life. Hence, Grafton's Milhorne flags in her novel's first few pages, that she is similar to a significant percentage of the adult female population of California. That she has killed someone is almost incidental, but her moral ambivalence to the act seems credible and a position with which a reader who would never kill, would sympathise.

As they read, a biography reader identifies with the subject's troubles. Rags to riches lives show how the poor can triumph. Disastrous relationships show fame and wealth do little to protect against misplaced love. Triumph after rejection or artistic struggle can convince those with artistic aspirations that success may come to them with hard work and more than a soupçon of luck.

The first person narrative in crime fiction works in a similar way. The novels written by women, with a strong female first person narrative, and predominantly read by women, are often seen as biographical in ways the writer hadn't intended. This *autobiographical* categorising is most likely to occur when women readers are seeking strong heroes or a subject with whom they can identify. The feminist thriller which offers itself as a potent discourse of self-sufficiency and protective force, is ideal for this. It is as much concerned about the defence of the female self as it is with preventing the hero from being beaten or shot.¹⁹²

Writers of any genre may experience the disbelief a reader will express when told the novel they've read was made up. It is particularly unnerving

¹⁹² Knight, Stephen, 1980, p. 5

for a crime writer to be begged for more information and insights into a murder, as happened in my case, which is absolutely fictitious. I am regularly asked how many years my father worked on Cockatoo Island, which house in Short Street is his, how long my grandmother ran the shop in Rowntree Street, and most alarmingly, which of the Island workers was implicated in Kevin O'Leary's death. Somehow in using 'real' history, writers unwittingly distort it and construct a world in which readers feel they can participate, albeit through fictionalised representations. This process, Mark Woolley maintains, means the real is no longer real:

*It no longer exists, everything is hyper-real simulation. The crime is created by the newspapers, the medical profession, by 'casualty', the war by journalists, the family by fly-on-the-wall documentaries.*¹⁹³

The first person voice also has unintentional political ramifications. Barnes believes, for example, that autobiographical narration in the crime genre may make less politically engaged readers aware of issues such as race, gender, and power.¹⁹⁴ The narrator takes the reader into areas of the city where they would not normally venture, Kings Cross in Sydney, for example, or Harlem in New York. They may visit clubs or heroin injecting rooms, use public transport for the first time or visit a corporate boardroom. This process turns a crime novel into a polemical text, even if this hadn't been the author's intention. When the narrator speaks to the reader as 'I', Barnes claims, 'the reader identifies with the narrator and accepts the limitations of information that the typically chronological progression of the first-person imposes on the structure of the book. They follow the narrator into new places, the physical and the moral, they observe and are affected by what they see.

¹⁹³ Woolley, M., Beyond Simulation: Production and the Nostalgia Industry, SSPP. net, Vol. 2, No. 1, September, 1999

¹⁹⁴ Barnes, in Walton and Jones, 1999, p. 35

Glenn Most ¹⁹⁵ also draws parallels between the rise of the detective novel and that of modern biography, claiming that in containing biographical sub texts, crime fiction blurs the divisions between what is real and what is imagined. Because the first person is authoritative, knowing, worldly, the reader presumes truth in the manner that the detective presents herself to them. As a result of this reader identification, the writer is also seduced into increasing the amount of biographical detail in their novels. Readers want more and more of the detective's personal life with each successive volume. Just as in 'real life', a series of crime novels may require the beginning and ending of relationships, drifting friendships, different clothing and hair styles. Characters will be required to age – albeit more slowly than would happen in the real world.¹⁹⁶ As in autobiography, the effect of the private eye novel is predicated on this complex relationship of identification, analogy, and even contradiction among author, fictional character, and reader.¹⁹⁷

These factors certainly had an impact on the way my character, Nicola Sharpe, developed. Whilst many of Nicola's qualities do not belong to me – I am not six feet tall, for example, and as much as I'd like to, I certainly don't look like the lead singer in the *Eurythmics*, Annie Lennox. I don't jog or have a law degree – but many of her other characteristics do. Like me, for example, Nicola has a self-deprecating sense of humour, is a good mate to

¹⁹⁵ Most, in Walton and Jones, 1999, p. 34

¹⁹⁶ Cowie, M., see note 159

¹⁹⁷ Barnes, in Walton and Jones, 1999, p. 34

her friends, loves to eat and drink, is keen on literature and music. I provided her with my father. I have also given her my unpredictable Peugeot 504 and my house. In short, I created her from parts of myself that were artistically useful, or from parts I would like to have possessed. Most importantly, for me, I gave her my leftist political allegiances and experience. In providing her with all of these, I quite deliberately decided to use my own biographical material, partly because, as Mena Calthorpe found, it saved a lot of time on research.

I chose the name Nicola Sharpe because the combination of Nic and Sharpe implied knives, sharpness, a razor wit. Danger too, both projected and received. In *Dry Dock*, Nicola takes offence when a male character diminishes her name to *Nickie*, knowing instinctively that this is meant as a put down, a diminution of her strength. Levy¹⁹⁸ believes the manner in which female crime writers frequently use 'cross-gender' names such as my Nicola/Nic, or Paretsky's Victoria/Vic, give agency to female characters. The names allow the female detective to reinhabit and exploit the masculine position, a gesture which plays with reader expectations and creates pleasure by revising both genre and gender codes.

This re-gendering of name is not isolated to crime's fictional characters. Authors also subvert their own names, making them androgynous or playing gender jokes. As Levy has pointed out, Nicci French is the female-male, wife-husband team of Nicci Gerrard and Sean French, a role created presumably to enjoy the gender de-stabilising aspects of their signatures.¹⁹⁹

Apart from the gender implications of her name, Nicola Sharpe carries a strong sense of moral right. She takes on cases that appeal to her political and moral convictions, although it may be thematically interesting some

¹⁹⁸ Levy, B., see note 51

¹⁹⁹ Levy, B., see note 51

time, to give her a case with which she is morally ill-at-ease. Her crusading characteristics set her apart from her friends and colleagues. Her height, striking looks, the way she straddles old and new Balmain are, I would argue, vital to the novels' mythical development.

Detective myths need heroes, as Matthew Cowie has claimed, because the apocalyptic image of the city requires a response of heroic if not messianic proportions. Ordinary human justice will be inadequate, so an agent of natural justice is required. Therefore, a detective's character and dramatic role, have special importance.²⁰⁰

Nicola's movements around Balmain speak of this. Both her background and her upward mobility have provided her with the advantage of knowing both Kevin O'Leary's working class world and Selina Bower's wealthy one. She works in ways which challenge the law, breaking into Clarrie Mildon's flat, for example - but as a trained lawyer, is part of the law and the judicial system.

Nicola's ability to move through the social strata in a privileged way is also a feature of *Skin Deep*. In that novel, Nicola has been commissioned to 'mind' Ella Davies, the grand-daughter of the retired Labor politician, Marge Davies and the daughter of a wealthy and well-known artist, Jane Davies. Ella has become active in student protests surrounding the rise of a far-right wing party headed by the odious Len Smith. A woman has been murdered and another has disappeared. Jane is worried that her daughter's attendance at street protests will put her in danger.

Nicola's class knowledge displays itself in the ways in which she enters Marge's home with its political trophies. She knows the world Marge has inhabited because she has worked in it, after all, and her father's working

²⁰⁰ Cowie, Matthew, see note 159

class and trade union affiliations have provided her with her own political cleavages. As an agent of moral justice, she must also look beyond the trappings of Marge's political life and interrogate it. She uses her probing lawyer's subjectivity and her street-smart instincts to determine that Marge is hiding something.

After taking in Marge's room she:

glanced down at a little note pad on the table next to me. The words Four Corners, 11 May had been scribbled on it in black ink. There was something else but it was indecipherable. I felt Marge's eyes on me again. I looked up. Smiled. She didn't smile back.

Michaela pointed to one of the photos on the wall. 'Where was that taken?'

Marge's eyes stayed on me for a moment before she turned to the photo that Michaela had indicated. When she replied her voice had a suspicious edge to it.

'In 1949 I went to Paris with a Labor Party delegation. The politician beside me is the French statesman, Andre Malraux. The little girl is Jane.'

I turned to the photo as well. Jane was tiny amongst all the legs.

Later Nicola will ask Jane for her version of the encounter with the French politician.

I looked across Black Wattle Bay to where cars were racing across the Anzac Bridge. 'I saw a childhood photo of you at Marge's place. You were in France, at a railway station, I think.'

She smiled. 'With Malraux? God, Marge is particularly proud of that one. I can't say I feel the same way. I just remember standing with my back to a railing, wishing to God they'd all hurry up.

Someone had given me one of those Madeleine books. Madeline and

the Gypsies, I think it was. I was at the height of the crowd's knees. I looked up but all I could see was the steam from the train and cigarette smoke flying up to the arched glass roof of the station. The photo you saw was on the cover of L'Express the next day.

'Delegation Australienne (et petite enfant) attend Malraux.'

'Why did you come back to Australia? Your life in France sounds idyllic.'

'It was.'

She watched me like a hawk when I picked up one of the balls. She'd painted it a rich, powdery green with a glaze of brown speckles. It looked like something that had been dug up from deep down in the earth.

Thus politics and crime become linked.

Crime fiction must contain sign posts such as these. Everything a writer introduces, unless it's a deliberately obfuscating clue, and those, as Lawrence Treat has claimed, should be used sparingly,²⁰¹ must have some significance to the crime or the perpetrator's motivations.

My initial development of *Skin Deep* was to be a non-crime novel about three generations of women. The scene in Paris I have just quoted was to emphasise the emotional gulf that had existed between the two older women since Jane was a child. Through a child's eye view of the post-war politics played out in a Parisian railway station, the reader was to gain a sense of the artist that Jane would one day become.

In crime fiction a scene like this needs to carry far more weight. Whilst it must show the tensions between the women and the different ways in which they view the world, it must also relate directly to the crime the

²⁰¹ Treat, L., in Coupe, S. *The Reader's Point of View*, Day, M. (ed), 1996, p. 174

detective is investigating. In this case, Jane's later decision to go to art school in France, her French in-laws, France as the country of Ella's birth and the home of her grandparents and father are all significant clues in the plot. The links between these must become more complex as the novel progresses, particularly in the role they play in the crime's resolution. In a non-crime novel, I would argue, these factors could be used to tell me something about Jane's inner world. In crime, they need to be linked directly to the outer world of her criminal intent.

As a Francophile it was easy to chose France as a sister country to Australia. The places in Provence in which Ella spent her childhood and went to school are towns in which I have lived. France also made an interesting contrast to the urban spaces of Balmain, Glebe and Annandale through which Nicola prowls. Most importantly, I have always been interested in the ways in which contemporary French politics seem to mirror our own. There has always been a strong far- right element in France, particularly in the south and in the regions most affected by rural deregulation and global agricultural markets. This has been demonstrated in regional elections in Provence and Languedoc where Jean-Marie Le Pen won almost 40% of the vote in some local government areas.

In *Skin Deep*, the art critic, Damien Routley, reminds Nicola of these political similarities at the opening night of Jane's art exhibition:

'It's all a bit too idyllic for me,' (Damien) said testily. 'One in three people in Provence voted for Jean-Marie Le Pen at the last French elections. Jane Davies doesn't capture that nasty little fact, does she?'
I raised my eyebrows and looked at him sceptically.
'You live in a glass house, don't you?' I said. 'Things aren't much different here.'

To form government, the Australian Conservative Party had formed an alliance with Len Smith's Forum, a bunch of white supremacists who held the balance of power in the House of Representatives as well as the Senate. Smith's Forum was determined to put their stamp on the new government's policy direction. The political landscape had been dominated ever since by hard-line conservatives who were into payback – brutal payback.

The man moved even closer and whispered in a conspiratorial way. 'Sure, but we aren't all gawking at tricked up canvases of sheep and wheat farms are we?'

Like France, Australia harbours far-right elements. The rise of Pauline Hanson's *One Nation Party* is testament to that. Most of the political slogans and clichés used by Le Pen's and Hanson's supporters are the same. Racism against Asian migrants and indigenous Australians is directly mirrored in hostility to North Africans and *etrangers* in France. Both political parties have a charismatic leader with a 'common' touch. There is a great deal of breast beating in both countries about what the rise in support for rightist politics means and how to deal with them. There have been angry protests and divisiveness.

As writers such as Geason and Scott have argued, crime fiction requires that political and moral themes, however earnestly addressed by the author, carry humour with them to sweeten the political message. In *Skin Deep* Nicola's father and his Balmain/Cockatoo Island mates are in no doubt about the serious nature of Len Smith's support at the polls. Conveying the seriousness of their concerns throughout *Skin Deep's* narrative required humour, but also a sense that despite their comic, Greek chorus role, they are men and women with political integrity. In one of the few countries in the world with compulsory voting, Nicola's Dad and his mates display a respect for the privilege that active participation in the political process represents.

Crime readers use crime fiction, I believe, as a means of exploring and understanding their society. They identify with the detective and may sympathise with the offender. In crime fiction, justice, ultimately, will be done, and the moral and political universe restored to something resembling utopia, albeit with all the limitations that contemporary society brings. Feminist readers and writers of crime may consciously or unconsciously seek this in their texts. Given that, crime fiction remains one of the most potent literary forms of contemporary political discourse.

It may be more fun to hang these issues on the frame of a crime narrative with a wise cracking female detective, but it also allows a wider reader engagement with the issues, and a sense for me, of speaking to the reader, like to like.

Fiction which aims to edify, to represent 'real' political situations or explore moral and political concerns is not just 'artful lying' but artful truth-telling²⁰² as well. The author invents, but they also tell the truth. The reader, recognising politicians, places, political themes which have a direct impact on their daily lives moves in and out of this truth knowing as they read the political sub-text, that much of what holds their interest relates directly to the novel's political themes, the mix of fiction and politics.

To end this dissertation with a quote from Grace Paley seems appropriate. *The slightest story ought to contain the facts of money and blood in order to be interesting to adults.*²⁰³ Crime fiction certainly has plenty of both those elements. As Paley suggests it is 'the facts' of these that need to be

²⁰² McFall, L., *Inventing the Truth: Fiction as Moral Philosophy*, *The Henry James Review*, Vol. 18, No. 3, 1997, p. 219

²⁰³ Paley, Grace, in Leonard, J. *Amazing Grace*, *The Nation*, 11 May, 1998, p.41

explored. Feminist crime fiction addresses the facts of the gender, party and social politics that determine women's lives.

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Interviews

This dissertation also draws on my discussions/interviews with writers including Mandy Sayer, Rosie Scott, Susan Geason, Marele Day and Lindy Cameron. I also spoke with members and office holders of Sisters in Crime, Australia. I discussed the thesis with numerous female and male crime readers at book launches, festivals and events and their comments are referred to anecdotally in the text.

Skin Deep

PROLOGUE

I look at my watch. He's late. I hear the distant chug of the ferry as it nears Goat Island. It turns towards Darling Street Wharf. At night, from this part of Balmain, Sydney looks like a sex worker squatting to piss over a drain. Big and brassy, her lights slash across the water like lipstick across a face. Take me or leave me could be the city's motto - or something more crude.

I pull my coat around my shoulders. The air is always nippy on Easter nights. It catches you at dusk when the sun takes the warmth with it deep down into the west. Trees do a slow, tantalising striptease and their fallen leaves are burned in backyard pyres until the air is regretful and wounded with smoke. Sounds travel further. You hear more secrets. And more lies. At Easter someone is always crucified.

The ferry rounds the point. It's *Friendship* tonight. Chubby and bustling with ropes to chuck at the wharf. The people waiting with me push forward, laughing in anticipation of a night in town. I move too. If he doesn't show up I'll take in a movie, walk around to the Opera House and look back at Balmain from the other side of the harbour. And beyond Balmain, towards the sleeping suburbs and the Showground all packed up.

I hear his running footsteps. Don't turn around. Feel his hand in the small of my back guiding me towards the ferry. Turn. His face is flushed in the ferry's light and I feel myself falling over and over again.

At Easter someone is always crucified.

~ One ~

It began with a kiss on the hottest February night in fifteen years. A woman got off a 433 bus at the stop near the Monkey Bar. She had thick black hair, a gap between her two front teeth, turquoise eyes the colour of the sea. She was carrying a briefcase and a string bag full of fruit. People in Darling Street had plenty on their minds - the heat, their drinks, how much interest they were paying on their Christmas credit card bills. A federal election had just been called so there was an abundance of political debate as well.

A witness on the bus watched as the woman rummaged in her bag and pulled out her keys. She turned when a man called her name. 'Cara!' The woman's hair had fallen across her face. She pulled it away from her eyes impatiently and waited while the man walked up. Her expression was remote. She didn't smile. When the man was standing right in front of her, she stood on her toes and kissed him on the lips, softly, her palm resting against his lapel.

When the bus drove on towards the Darling Street Wharf, the witness craned his neck to catch one last look. The sky behind the woman was just beginning to darken, but she was visible, still poised on her toes like a dancer by Degas. The image stayed with him through the hot, sleepless night - the woman on her toes, the man accepting the kiss as though it was a gift that he deserved.

The woman was never seen alive again. Her name was Cara Lane. She was thirty years old like me. She worked in the Commonwealth Attorney General's Department. She had an eight-year-old daughter, Hannah, and a two-year-old son called Ben. According to the next door neighbour who'd been keeping an eye on the kids, Cara Lane rang on her mobile phone at a quarter to eight to say she was almost home. Hannah didn't alert the neighbour when her mother failed to arrive. She waited till ten o'clock, put her little brother to bed, then fell asleep watching TV. No cool change roared through during the night and the next morning was a stinker too. People got up grumpy from no sleep. Showered but were sweating before they'd towelled themselves dry. Got ready for work and walked down to the ferry in a daze. Hannah Lane fed her brother then took him to school with her. The teachers called the police.

Detective Bill Litton told me the facts of the case at the Town Hall Hotel four weeks later. It was hot that night too and the under-arms of Bill's shirt were wet with perspiration. He looked with ill-concealed envy at the singlet top and shorts I was wearing but I knew it was more than the heat that was making him sweat.

The Police aren't supposed to talk to the public about their investigations but Bill needed to share the story. We've been friends since we were in 3A together at Birchgrove Primary. Even back then, Bill was big and tough, not someone you'd take on in a fight, but sensitive - the kind of person who looked like a rampaging bull but was all mush underneath. I'd seen him upset by cases in the past but never like he was with Cara Lane's. His voice was hoarse. His hand shook and caused his beer to slosh around in its glass. He seemed particularly upset about interviewing Hannah Lane in the schoolroom where he'd studied as a kid. School had only been back a week and the classroom had the smell of a new term about it: neat books, texta colours and chinks still whole and hardly used. The girl's eyes were

frightened and uncomprehending as she sat at one of the little wooden desks where Bill and I had sat, in front of the same blackboard where our teacher had drawn maps.

The kids' father was living in the United States - Carolina or Georgia, the girl thought. The grandparents were dead, so the next door neighbour continued to take care of them while the Department of Community Services tried to contact some relatives.

'The bastard didn't wait for her body to be discovered,' Bill said, staring at his middie as though it contained a secret.

He didn't need to say any more. The killer's actions had been well documented by a frenzied media. He'd disguised his voice with a synthesiser of some sort and rung a talk-back radio program. When the police followed the caller's instructions, they found Cara Lane's body under a pile of rubbish in Gladstone Park.

There are murderers who need people to admire their work. They arrange the body. Dot possessions around it just like a Bower bird decorates his love nest with blue pegs, blue jewellery, blue plastic bags. Cara Lane's naked body had been covered with leaves and flowers. Her hands were folded across her breasts. There was no sign of struggle. No indication of how or where she'd died. Her decomposition should have been hastened by the hot, humid weather, but she lay there, perfectly still and white, surrounded by sweet-smelling February flowers: mandevilla, roses, gardenias, heliotrope, stephanotis. They spilled from her mouth and wove their tendrils through her long, black hair and down her naked body.

'Whoever killed her kept her body cool for days then brought her to Gladstone Park and arranged her like that,' Bill said.

'Not the kind of thing you'd expect to happen in one of the busiest spots in Balmain,' I replied.

He passed me a crime scene photograph and watched my reaction closely as I scrutinised it. Cara Lane's skin had the powdery, blue white tinge of the newly dead. Her hair could have just been brushed. Her lips were icy white, eyes closed tight. The flowers that adorned her had been piled more deeply around her lower body, giving the corpse a coy, virginal quality. He asked me whether I thought it was odd that the first cops at the scene had turned away from the sight of her.

'No,' I said, not taking my eyes off the photo. 'Most people would.'

He stared down at a cigarette burn on the edge of the table. 'She looked so beautiful, Nicola. Like an angel, I swear to God. There wasn't a mark on her.'

'What caused her death?' I glanced up from the photo when he didn't answer. His eyes were round like saucers and fixed on the wall behind me. I asked the question again but he just shook his head. 'Odd?'

'Yeah,' he replied, eventually. 'The whole case is odd.'

Bill was no art aficionado, but the arrangement of the murder scene hadn't been lost on him. He'd been investigating photographic studios, especially those that promised to spice up a woman's sex life by making her over and posing her naked on a silk sheet or a fake tiger skin rug. He'd interviewed local artists and artists' models too.

When we'd finished our drinks we walked back along Darling Street to the Police Station, arguing as we went. If Cara Lane's killer was an artist he'd left behind some pretty obvious clues.

'What about a florist?' I asked.

'A hairdresser?' Bill countered.

'An art teacher?'

'Someone in advertising?'

'An undertaker?'

The possibilities seemed endless.

'And what about keeping the body cold?' I said. 'The killer would have needed access to a very large freezer or something similar. Maybe a butcher's cold storage van? And what if he didn't kill her on the night? Could he have locked her up and kept her alive somewhere beforehand?'

'No, Nic,' he said. 'That's one thing the pathologist is absolutely sure about. Cara Lane died at about nine o'clock on the night she disappeared.'

When he gave a little, nervous cough I realised I'd never seen him look so tense. His face was beetroot red and criss-crossed by broken veins. He'd put on weight. He was starting to look like he needed to take some stress leave.

'You haven't told me what the man looked like,' I said.

'Which man?'

'The man who kissed her, of course.'

We'd reached the cop shop doors and he paused before answering. 'He was ordinary. Tall. Why else would a woman of above average height need

to stand on her toes?' Then he squeezed my arm, turned and closed the door behind him.

Ordinary, I thought as I walked home down Rowntree Street. They always are. Just like you and me. As ordinary as a woman on her way home from work, worried about her kids.

~ Two ~

My name is Nicola Sharpe. I'm six feet tall. Sixty seven kilos. Unmarried and with no intention of changing my status quo. I like to wear my hair very short. Friends say I look like Annie Lennox when the Eurythmics were at the top of the charts and Annie's hair was blonde. I run around Birchgrove Oval to keep fit but I'm also partial to a beer at the Dry Dock pub with my dad, Jack, a retired sheet metal worker from Cockatoo Island Dockyard. If you asked me to list my interests I'd say travel, great music, food and wine. I drive a rusty Peugeot 504 so I'd also include a passion for charismatic cars. Once, I'd have included men on the list but I look after my heart these days.

I used to be a lawyer in the New South Wales public service. I'm a private detective now. I live in Balmain and work from home. My most recent case was with Mirage Catering. Food tampering. It happens a lot more often than people realise. I suppose you could say that business has been booming. I have the media to thank for that. Law and order have become sexy politics and there's constant talk about paedophiles and home invasions. Crimes, like the murder of Cara Lane, make the community feel vulnerable, so I also mind people who need someone to watch over them. That's why the artist Jane Davies and her daughter, Ella, became clients in late March. Well... that's what I like to think.

I met Jane Davies on one of those Saturdays that drive people to superlatives. Sydney was in the throes of an Indian summer that seemed to stretch on and on: blue skies, playful breezes, hot sunny days that tempted like a randy lover calling from the bedroom. The police had no further leads

on Cara Lane, the new government was going feral in Canberra but it was too beautiful a day to worry about murder or politics, so I went for a run instead.

At twelve I drove over to Glebe. I'd arranged to meet my friend, Michaela Loumides, at the opening of an exhibition. Jane Davies, eminent Australian artist, darling of the social set, an old girl from Fort Street High, the school I'd attended, was showing her recent paintings. Michaela was parking her car in Glebe Point Road when I drove up. As usual, she was looking great, her black hair sleek and loose on her shoulders. I joined her and kissed her on the cheek.

'Hi,' I said. 'I thought I was running late.' I complimented her on her outfit and she smiled so wide, her face looked as though it would crack in half.

She took in the dress I was wearing, a black linen number with tiny buttons that marched across my shoulders like electricity towers across the landscape. 'You look gorgeous yourself and you're right on time, which makes a nice change,' she said.

I'd spent a lot more time with Michaela since our friend Bridget Schmidt had found a locum for her legal practice and headed off to Europe. We're quite a trio, Bridget, Michaela and I. We've been friends since school and our comradeship shows no sign of waning. From terrorising the mistresses at Fort Street, we'd gone on to Sydney University together - Bridget and me to study Arts/Law, Michaela medicine. We live within co-ee of one another in Balmain and spend as much of our spare time together as we can. Bridget and I have grown cynical as we've aged but Michaela's never wavered from the politics she embraced in her first year at high school. She

works as a doctor and divides her time between the Workers' Health Centre in the city and a friend's surgery in Balmain.

Most people voiced their despair about the minority Conservative government that had been returned to Canberra a few weeks earlier over a cafe latte or glass of Chardonnay. Not Michaela. She organised protests, set up street stalls and got people to sign petitions. When she started to show the signs of burn out, Bridget tried to persuade her to go on holidays too. Michaela confessed to me that she wasn't up to the kind of holiday Bridget had in mind. Drinking Pernod in a Provençal cafe 'surrounded by a huddle of adoring men might be Bridget's idea of fun. It wasn't hers.

Michaela walked into the gallery ahead of me, her heels clicking like machine gun fire along the gallery's wooden floors. With a satisfied sigh, she glanced around the walls. 'This looks promising.' I followed her to the desk to buy a catalogue.

The Glebe Gallery has breathtaking views over Black Wattle Bay so the art on display has to be pretty good to capture your interest. The paintings in Jane Davies' exhibition certainly did that. They glowed with ochre, crimson and blue against the gallery's stark white walls. *Images, a Provençal retrospective* was graffitied across a wall in giant letters.

'Oh, look at that,' Michaela said, touching my arm. She pointed to a Provençal farm house that was surrounded by cypress trees and red poppies - millions of them. So many, in fact, it was impossible to see the dry earth underneath but you could imagine it, clay coloured and baked hard like the sloping walls and roof of the house. Heat radiated off the roof tiles into a cloudless blue sky. I could almost hear the drone of cicadas and feel the sun that had warmed the artist as she painted. Over by the gate, there was a cluster of purple flowers that could have been irises. A woman with a raised

hand shaded her eyes from the sun, or the artist's gaze. I leaned towards the tiny number stuck to the wall. 'Number nineteen,' I said softly.

Michaela turned the pages of her catalogue. 'Mas, St Rémy-De-Provence, 1974.' She walked over to a waiter and picked up two glasses of champagne.

Jane Davies' paintings were full of impossibly romantic scenes: a shuttered apartment overlooking the Mediterranean, slender, sun tanned women in espadrilles, the sun setting over lime-washed hillside towns. They made me want to sell up my house and business in Balmain and head to France. I shook my head and Michaela put one of the glasses back. She smiled at me apologetically when a man beckoned to her from across the room and went over to join him.

While she gave the man all her attention, I gave the paintings mine. It was hard to define what made them so special. Perhaps it was the way their subjects seemed to resent the artist's probing eye - all had the look of people captured against their will. I stopped in front of painting number twenty, Claude and Ella, Les Baux, 1980. A handsome man with a little girl on his lap, sat at the foot of a limestone hill.

As alumni of Fort Street High School, Bridget, Michaela and I had followed Jane Davies' career with interest. Jane was one of the school's most famous old girls. She'd gone on to study at East Sydney Technical College. Then she'd won a painting scholarship to Paris in the early nineteen seventies and had been held up ever after by our art teacher, Miss Grant, as an example of what could be achieved with hard work and imagination. Like the rest of Grant's pupils, I wasn't self-deluded. As the Parramatta Road traffic rumbled past outside the school's gates, I'd sketched second rate

portraits of my classmates and fantasised I was in Paris too, racing off a Frenchman in a Montmartre studio.

Jane came back to Australia permanently in the early nineteen nineties, triumphant after winning the Archibald Prize with a portrait of her mother, Marge. A retired politician, Marge had once held the federal inner city seat that incorporated the local area; Annandale, Balmain and Glebe.

The exhibition had attracted a large crowd. The A list had turned up and I recognised actors, artists, society barristers, and a well known model turned novelist. I was examining a painting of Nice when I heard footsteps behind me. I didn't bother to turn around. Whoever had walked over seemed to be mesmerised by the painting too. I caught a whiff of expensive after-shave. The man was standing so close behind me I could feel his breath on the back of my neck.

'Hello. How are you tonight?' he said softly. 'Don't you think Raoul Dufy painted the scene much better?'

I turned to face a thin man who was dressed in the kind of grunge that costs a fortune in Paddington boutiques. His shoes and his shaved head added an incongruous touch to his outfit. They were both so shiny they reflected the halogen down lights that illuminated Jane's work.

'It's all a bit too idyllic for me,' he said testily. 'One in three people in Provence voted for Jean-Marie Le Pen at the last French elections. Jane Davies doesn't capture that nasty little fact, does she?'

I raised my eyebrows and looked at him sceptically. 'You live in a glass house, don't you?' I said. 'Things aren't much different here.'

To form government, the Australian Conservative Party had formed an alliance with Len Smith's Forum, a bunch of white supremacists who held the balance of power in the House of Representatives as well as the Senate. Smith's Forum was determined to put their stamp on the new government's policy direction and the political landscape had been dominated ever since by hard-line conservatives who were into payback - brutal payback.

The man moved even closer and whispered in a conspiratorial way. 'Sure, but we aren't all gawking at tricked up canvases of sheep and wheat farms are we?' His eyes travelled from my hair to my tight black dress. His pupils were contracted to pin pricks. It looked as though he'd been enjoying more than the gallery's champagne. He tilted back his head and drained his glass. 'My name is Ian Routley, by the way,' he said slowly. 'And you are?'

'Nicola Sharpe,' I said, extending my hand and shaking his.

I recognised the man's name straight away. Ian Routley was well known in the Sydney media. He wrote art reviews for *The Herald* and was a regular on TV and radio arts programs. Lots of Sydney's arts glitterati had been stung by him. He pointed across the room to a huge canvas of a nude reclining on a wildly patterned rug. 'That's the best painting in the collection. A self-portrait Jane did when she first arrived over there. Lovely, isn't it?'

Before I could answer, Ian turned to watch a tall, thin woman walk into the room. A crowd formed around her and she dipped her head as the gallery owner made some introductions. The woman was wearing black like most of us. What made her outfit striking was the way she carried it. She was at least six feet tall and had a back as straight as a yacht's mast. I must have been staring because she turned towards me as though she'd felt my eyes on her. Tall women often feel strangely comfortable together. She took in my

height which matched her own and nodded in a conspiratorial kind of way. She frowned when she saw Ian Routley and turned back to her fans.

'That's Jane Davies for you,' Ian said. 'She doesn't smile much, scowls mostly. Likes to draw attention to herself by being unapproachable. I reviewed some of her work in the Herald last month. Said it was good, but patchy. I could have said worse.' He followed me over to the newly vacated space in front of the nude. 'Wonderful form,' he said. 'And the textures. Look at how she's painted her hair.' He lowered his voice and whispered. '*Beauty is the gateway to the divine*. Now who said that? A Renaissance philosopher, I think. It could apply to this.'

I had to agree with him. Jane's long white limbs were stretched out on a woollen rug. A glass of red wine stood beside her foot. The sun penetrated the slats of a pair of teal blue shutters and slashed across her buttocks. Her hair spread under her naked body like a silken doona and seemed to beg you to pick it up and let it slide, strand by strand, through your fingers. I leaned forward to take a closer look at the label on the wall beside it. Self-Portrait, 1974. From the artist's own collection. Not for sale. The painting presented such an image of youth and abandonment, I could understand why Jane Davies would never want to part with it. In the bottom right hand corner of the canvas she'd painted what looked like a tiny sheaf of wheat.

Ian pointed to the symbol, an odd look on his face. 'She's used this as part of her signature. Other artists have done the same thing. Domas had his Japanese mark. Bevington does a little black gate. Mira Mi.'

'Wrong again, Ian,' a woman's voice said softly. 'It's not like them at all....' I straightened up and met Jane Davies' eyes. '...Actually, I'm very attached to this painting. All the ideas flowed so quickly and so well. It gave me an artistic high.'

Ian cleared his throat. He extended his hand. Jane Davies didn't bother to shake it. He stared sullenly at her for a moment before turning to go. 'Nice to have met you, Nicola,' he muttered. With a last, sideways glance at Jane, he walked over to a group of people by the door.

Jane narrowed her eyes and watched him walk away, then she turned back to me. 'Are you an artist too, Ms.....?' she asked.

'Sharpe. Nicola Sharpe. No, I'm not. I did a couple of Fine Arts subjects when I was at university and I make a bee-line for art galleries whenever I'm travelling.' I looked across the room to where a couple of women were air-kissing a greeting and lowered my voice. 'I'm a private investigator.'

'Really?' Jane said, moving closer. 'How interesting. I've never met one of those before. How do your clients find you?'

'Word of mouth. I'm also in the Yellow Pages. Occasionally the Police refer people to me, especially if it's to do with surveillance.'

'And people like me?' she asked with a disconcerting gaze that seemed to probe the back of my brain.

I reached into my wallet. 'I have a card.'

She took it from me and started to ask a question but seemed to think better of it. She turned and gave the nude a long appraising stare, then asked me if I'd seen the portrait of her mother, Marge. 'Pity,' she said when I shook my head, 'this is very good, but Marge's portrait is better. I'm very proud of it. Not because it won the Archibald, but because it really captures her. Have

you ever seen Bronzino's painting of Eleanora of Toledo? It's in the Uffizi gallery in Florence.'

I nodded. 'Yeah, I know it. It's on the cover of an art book I've got at home.'

'Well, that's what inspired my portrait of Marge. I'll never forget the words of one of the Uffizi's guides as he ushered my friends and me around the gallery: *Bronzino's portrait captures the Medici's covert and unyielding pride*. Isn't that precious? He could have been describing Marge.'

Jane employed her disarming habit of staring into my eyes as she spoke. It was making me feel as though she could see something deep inside my head. That perhaps there was nothing there at all, nothing, except an endless white canvas. 'Oh, here's Ella now,' she said with a glance towards the door. 'Nice to have met you, Ms Sharpe.' With a quick dip of her head, she strode away.

I took another look at the nude. It was striking in the way nude studies often are. The whiteness of Jane's skin contrasted sharply with the reds and blues of the rug. The look on her face was playful and seductive as though she had a lover – off canvas – but still within reach. As I looked at it, I couldn't help wondering how Jane had managed to paint a self-portrait spread out on a rug like that. Most of the self-portraits I'd seen had been painted in front of a mirror. Some artists used photographs. Bill Litton had said he'd interviewed local artists and their models about Cara Lane's murder – I presumed that included Jane. Bill should come to the exhibition. It might give him some ideas about the ways in which artists pose their subjects.

Michaela was still on the other side of the room, jotting something in her filofax. She touched her friend on the arm. He called, *ciao cara*, after her as she strolled back to me. She was looking pleased with herself. 'Cute,' I said, noting her flushed cheeks. 'Who's he?'

'Renato Scarpi,' she grinned. 'He has contacts in the Leichhardt business community. They're going to raise some money to help with protests about the government. I'm having dinner with him tonight to plan some strategies. What were you talking to Jane Davies about?'

'We talked about this painting,' I said towards the nude, 'and the portrait she painted of her mother. She's stunning looking, isn't she? Her kid is beautiful as well. Oh look, Marge Davies is with her.'

A white-haired woman had joined Jane and Ella. She kissed her daughter, then touched her granddaughter gently on the cheek. The women made a fascinating tableau and I felt a lump rise to my throat. Mothers and daughters had been invading my thoughts ever since Cara Lane's murder. I'd lost my mother when I was fourteen. As a result, I always felt sad when I saw other women enjoying their mother's company. And I couldn't stop thinking about the shocked and abandoned Hannah Lane in the classroom with Bill Litton. I was suddenly thirsty. 'Grab me drink, will you, Michaela?' I said, when I spotted a waiter with a tray of champagne.

'Marge Davies has always been one of my heroes,' she said passing me a glass. 'If I get a chance, I'll have a word with her. She might be interested in joining our protest group. It needs all the high profile people it can get.'

Across the room Ian Routley and his friends seemed riveted by a huge painting of Mont Ventoux. Ian moved his arms in a slow arcing gesture. The look on his face was not appreciative and the other guests seemed to hang on

his every word. I noticed Jane Davies cast him a tight-lipped glance. 'I don't think you're going to get a chance to recruit Marge to your cause tonight,' I said. 'Why don't you just ring her up?'

Michaela nodded and said she would. She cast a longing look at the paintings as we finished our drinks. 'I wonder if Jane would donate one of these if Marge got involved with our protest group? We would raise a fortune if we auctioned it.'

We were saying our good-byes in the street when I heard someone call my name. Jane Davies beckoned to me from the gallery's doorway. There was something imperious in the gesture and Michaela raised her eyebrows. 'Looks like she means business. I've got to dash.' She kissed me on the cheek. 'I'll call you tomorrow.'

Michaela was right. Jane's face bore all the hallmarks of a woman who wasn't used to being kept waiting. 'Sorry,' she said impatiently when I walked up. She glanced behind her at the gallery crowd. 'I didn't mean to intrude between you and your friend. Can I have a quick word in my studio?'

When I nodded, she led me down a flight of stairs and along a wooden walkway, then she opened a door onto a room that seemed to hang over the harbour. 'This is lovely,' I said, glancing around. Canvasses were stacked higgledy-piggledy against the walls and bottles of paraffin, turpentine and tubes of paint were lined up along bench tops and shelves. It looked as though Jane was preparing for another exhibition. Her new work was nothing like that in the gallery upstairs. The terracotta, ochre and blue in those paintings had been replaced with white, black and grey and the paint had been applied in deep furrows with what could have been a trowel.

'You obviously enjoy painting,' I said.

'Yes,' she smiled. 'I was never cut out for a political life like my mother, I'm afraid. I wouldn't have inflicted that on Ella. What does your mother do, Nicola? Surely, she doesn't approve of your occupation?'

The gallery crowd above us was becoming noisier now they'd made inroads into the champagne. 'She's dead,' I said. 'But she worked for years as a nurse at the Kids' Hospital that used to be in Camperdown.'

'I'm sorry to hear that,' she said, running her fingers down the crease in her trousers. 'How old were you when she died?'

'Fourteen.'

'Fourteen...!' she repeated slowly, '...it's a very vulnerable age. How did you manage?'

I shrugged. 'My father and I are very close. People in Balmain really pull together in a crisis. That helped a lot.'

Footsteps were loud on the wooden floor above us. Someone laughed shrilly. 'I can only spare a minute,' Jane said, picking up that morning's paper. She flicked through some pages and pointed to a headline. *Why Len Smith Must Go*, by Ella Davies. A photo of Ella accompanied the article. I bet it had hooked more readers than any headline about Len Smith ever would.

'Another one of these attacks is coming out in *The Herald* next week. Ella started all this nonsense about a month ago when she joined a political group. They call themselves Refraction.'

'Refraction? What kind of group is it?'

'God only knows. Their sole aim in life seems to be attacking Len Smith. A young woman member has just gone missing too.'

'Really?' I haven't seen anything in the media about a disappearance,' I said, handing the paper back. 'But I can understand why you're worried, especially after Cara Lane's murder.'

'Exactly, and at nineteen, Ella's far too young and inexperienced to look after herself. I was wondering if you could watch her and make sure that she isn't damaged.'

'Damaged,' I repeated, surprised.

'Yes, damaged.'

I let the word hang in the air for a few seconds before replying. 'Are you talking twenty-four-hour surveillance? That will be time consuming and expensive. Where does Ella live?'

'Glebe. She has a flat in University Hall.'

'I may need to pull someone else in on the job. I have a colleague, Rickie Kenna. I use him on surveillance and cases where technology is required. He's very reliable. I presume Ella will know what I'm doing?'

She smiled a smile so icy it just needed a dash of gin. 'Of course. If you agree to the work, I'll tell her as soon as I've finished here.'

'How will she feel about it?'

'She'll be fine,' she said over her shoulder. 'Leave that side of it to me. I'll ring you as soon as I've had a chance to talk to her.' She paused at the top of the stairs and shook my hand. 'Thank you, Nicola, for all your help.' The gallery crowd had swallowed her up before I could reply.

Ian Routley was standing at the gallery door smoking a cigarette when I went outside. His outfit looked even more grungy and was peppered with ash. 'Off home?' he said, flicking his cigarette butt towards the building and brushing some ash off his shirt. 'I didn't realise you knew Jane Davies so well. I'd have been a bit more discreet about her paintings if I'd known she was a friend.'

When I didn't answer he turned and wandered back inside. His movements seemed languorous until he reached the door. He opened it and the noise of the gallery crowd bubbled out. He brushed at his clothes with quick, anxious gestures, straightened his back and stepped into the throng.

Something about Jane Davies made Ian Routley nervous. From where he'd been standing he'd had a perfect view into Jane's studio and he'd seen what had transpired between Jane and me. And if all the butts on the ground were his, he'd smoked quite a few cigarettes while he'd watched.

~ Three ~

My fridge was bare and I was sick of eating take away food on the run so I wandered up to Darling Street when I got home from the gallery and did some shopping. The strip was crowded with people enjoying the sunshine and all the shops and cafés were doing a roaring trade. People drinking at the pubs spilled raggie-taggle onto the street holding cold beers to their lips, their movements slow like some old out-of-sinc film.

The Balmain Police were still trying to jog people's memories about Cara Lane so her photo was displayed in shop windows and on all the street's telegraph poles. A shop mannequin dressed in a similar outfit to the one Cara had been wearing on the night she was murdered had been placed at the bus stop outside the Monkey Bar just as it had every weekend since her death. The mannequin was attracting a lot of attention. It stood, hands coyly at its side, in a dark blue dress. Its head was crowned with a long, black wig. Like all the other pedestrians, I skirted the dummy slowly. It didn't do Cara justice. Its plastic face did nothing to replicate the bloom of her skin, her bright blue eyes, intelligent forehead, the fullness of her lips. The breeze rustled the wig momentarily, moving the hair from side to side and giving the impression that the dummy was alive.

I listened to a couple of women talking about her as I lined up for a baguette in Victoire. They were looking at her poster on the shop's wall and complaining that it had been six weeks since she was killed and the police still hadn't found the killer. Cara's poster seemed incongruous amongst the croissants and bread. She was smiling. She had a little freckle on her throat. It

made me feel strangely proprietorial. In other circumstances I might have been just like her. A steady job in the city. Married. Kids. Divorced.

I poked around the market after that and picked up a couple of second hand paperbacks. As I was leaving I noticed a *for sale* sign on the front of the block of flats in Darling Street where Cara Lane had lived. I presumed the flat for sale was hers. Her estate would have been wound up by then, the kids living with their father. Cara certainly had lived close to the shops and market. There was a bus stop outside her front door and a children's playground just across the road in the park. Her flat was a stone's throw from Balmain Primary. It seemed odd that Cara's daughter had walked down to Birchgrove Road every day when the other school was so close.

According to Bill Litton, Cara Lane wasn't a local. She'd moved to Balmain from Dubbo with her husband when she landed her job with the Attorney General's Department in the city. Bill hadn't said what kind of work she'd done and I'd got the impression it was all a bit hush-hush. Before that, she'd worked in the Dubbo Commonwealth Employment Service while her husband farmed organic fruit and vegetables. The marriage broke down not long after they'd arrived in Balmain.

'Good job the husband was in America,' Bill Litton had said. 'He would have been a prime suspect.'

When I'd asked why, Bill said the divorce had been acrimonious. The husband wanted his share of the flat's equity. The Family Law Court said it was to stay with Cara until the youngest kid turned eighteen. 'Fair enough,' I'd argued. 'What did her husband think she should do? Pay increasingly high rents for the rest of her days? Worry incessantly about feeding and clothing her kids?'

Bill had agreed. 'You and I might think like that, Nic, but her husband didn't. He threatened to bankrupt her with legal action. Then he changed his mind for some reason. Went as quiet as a lamb. He headed overseas and left her to fend for herself. I still don't know how she managed on the money she got paid.'

'And has he ever been back to Australia?'

'No. Passport checks, FBI investigation, have all been done. He's clean.'

People were still milling around Cara when I walked her way again.

My father, Jack, and his mate, Ernie, were amongst them, chatting to an old man. I thought about pretending I hadn't seen them, but Dad has eyes like an eagle. He was brandishing that morning's paper as though it was a weapon and pointing at the headline, *Trade Sanctions Threatened over Human Rights Shift*. He grinned when he saw me. 'Hello Nicola. You look nice, love. Not often we see you in a frock.'

'Thanks,' I said, pecking him on the cheek.

'You remember Nigel Goodyear, don't you?' he said, turning to the man. 'He was one of the foremen on Cockatoo. We were just talking about what that mob are doing in Canberra. Disgusting isn't it?'

'How are you, Nicola?' Nigel said. 'Long time no see. Jeez, you've grown since the last time I saw you. You were only this high at the union picnic.' He lowered his hand to his waist. 'How tall are you now?'

'Six foot,' Dad said, before I could answer.

Half the old men walking around Balmain had worked for Cockatoo Island Dockyard at some time or another. Dad had spent his working life there so knowing all his co-workers was a matter of pride with him. But the Goodyears were well known for more than their Island connection. Nigel's brother, Angus, was one of Sydney's leading Queen's Counsels whose stock in trade was the arts community. Angus looked after the legal affairs of the country's most famous actors and artists. I'd seen him earlier in the day at Jane Davies' exhibition so she was probably in his stable too. Angus Goodyear had done some guest lecturing when I was an Arts/Law student at Sydney University. He had a ready wit. Good looks. He was friends with politicians, horse trainers and socialites. Students who liked their men rich and well aged had the hots for him.

Nigel Goodyear still lived in the house in Phillip Street where the brothers grew up. Angus had moved into a mansion on the North Shore but he was always being quoted saying he'd never lost his passion for Balmain. 'I hope you're being careful,' Nigel said, pointing towards the mannequin. 'Terrible, about that young woman, isn't it? Two kiddies as well. My granddaughter, Kimberley, was in the same class as the little girl.'

I cast a quick sideways glance at Dad when Nigel mentioned his granddaughter. Just as I'd suspected, Dad's face had taken on the alert quality a dog gets when someone says *walk* and rattles a lead. He knows not to ask me about boy friends, marriage, kids, but he never gives up hope of taking a grand-kid of his own to a Balmain home game. I'm an only child so all the responsibility for Sharpe progeny rests with me. I generally ignore Dad's hints, but it was impossible not to hear his long, loud sigh. He patted Nigel on the shoulder when he'd recovered from his grandchild reverie and said he'd see him shortly at the Dry Dock pub. 'We'd better rattle our dags, Ernie. You coming with us, Nic?' he asked.

I thought about it for a second. I had some domestic chores to put in order. There was the washing I had to do at home. The housework and gardening. That was enough to convince me I needed a drink. 'I'll have a quick one,' I said, falling in behind him.

I noticed Dad was limping as we walked down Curtis Road. His arthritis had been occupying his joints like a conquering army for the previous twelve months. He'd switched from long afternoon walks to strolling between his place in Short Street, Ernie's in Cameron Street, the Dry Dock and the corner shop in Rowntree Street. I'd tried to convince him and Ernie to take up aquaerobics in the heated waters of Leichhardt pool but the look of scorn on Dad's face deterred me from making the suggestion more than once.

Posters of Cara Lane had been taped to the street's telegraph poles. I took a closer look at what I thought was another photo of her but it was a young Asian-Australian woman with a serious, heart-shaped face. Her hair was long and dark, the fringe just kissing the top of her eyes. *Have you seen Lee Han? She lives in Rozelle. She disappeared on her way home from the Federal Equity Bureau's stand at the Royal Easter Show. Her family and work colleagues are very concerned. If you know anything about her, please contact the Balmain Police.* I presumed she was the young woman Jane Davies had mentioned.

The warm weather had made people thirsty and the Dry Dock was packed. I bought Dad and Ernie a schooner of Reschs each and a middie of lemonade for myself. We joined Nigel Goodyear in the front bar. A radio was droning a race at Randwick. Ernie cheered on one of the horses while Dad and Nigel reminisced about Cockatoo Island. Then they got onto politics. Nigel was of the view that Len Smith wouldn't last. Dad's opinion differed. 'That's what people always say,' he said, angrily, 'and that's why dictators get away with murder. You have to fight the bastards. They've always been

in the country. Now they've got smart, they make themselves look mainstream.'

I listened for a while then drained my glass. Len Smith had been called Mr Wedge, the politician of division. It wasn't hard to see why. People were pitted against one another all across the country: rich against poor, employed against unemployed, city people versus those in the country. The sun had drawn people into the park over the road and it beckoned me outside too. I stood up and said goodbye. I took another quick look at Lee Han's poster as I crossed the road. But just like Cara Lane's, her face told me nothing.

~ Four ~

When I'd unpacked the shopping and tidied the house I took a glass of wine up to the balcony. I was still out there an hour later, thinking about Jane Davies' Provençal landscapes: the fields occupied by millions of red poppies, the air above them strident with bees, the roses growing out of hard, dry squares of soil and embracing an entire house with their branches. I took a deep, satisfied sigh as I watched the activities out on the harbour. The setting sun seemed to be admiring its reflection in the windows of the city's skyscrapers and water taxis scuttled across Snail's Bay like nervous water hens. When the phone rang I was inclined to stay where I was and let the answering machine cut in but I thought better of it.

'I hope I'm not disturbing you,' Jane Davies said. 'I've spoken to Ella. She's in agreement.'

'When do you want me to meet her?'

'Is ten tomorrow morning at all possible? I realise it's a Sunday, but...'

'Tomorrow's fine. Where?' I asked, surprised at how quickly Jane had acted.

'She'll be at Badde Manors cafe in Glebe.'

I told Jane I'd be there and hung up. A new case always made me feel excited so I topped up my glass to celebrate. I stayed on the balcony till the

disco ferries were out in force, sailing towards Hunter's Hill then back again. Like the new government in Canberra, they seemed to be caught in a time warp of their own. I heard snatches of ABBA, the Bee Gees, Gary Glitter. The flashing disco lights unsettled the sea gulls that nest on the deep-water moorings. Whenever the ships passed them, the gulls rose with blood curdling screams before settling down again.

By eight I was feeling like some company so I called Noni Jacobson. She's a twenty-eight year old official in the biggest clerical union in the country. She always knows who's screwing who in the industry and not just metaphorically. Noni has contacts in every government organisation in the country. She's also a party animal who loves nothing better than a night in a mosh pit. I hadn't expected her to be at home on a Saturday night. She was, but not for long. 'I was just heading off to the Three Weeds,' she said. 'There's a great band playing tonight. Want to come?'

I hadn't been to the Weeds, more formally known as The Rose, Shamrock and Thistle pub, since Bridget headed overseas. A dance sounded like a great idea. The band Noni was so keen on hearing was called Grammar. The name was bad, but the band was good. They were half way through a song called *Bamboozled* when I arrived. Ironic and jazzy, with a beat that had you dancing before you could stop yourself.

'Why Grammar?' I shouted into Noni's ear. The music was loud and she didn't hear me. She pulled a lock of her hair to one side and I repeated the question.

'The lead singer is an English teacher. Aren't they great?' she shouted, swinging her hips.

For a new band, Grammar had already developed a big following. The pub was packed with people dressed in black. A lot of the male fans had adopted the lead singer's haircut, the pudding bowl style the Beatles wore when they first became famous. Grammar did a cover of the La's, *There She Goes*, to warm up the crowd, then the Stranglers *Skin Deep*. They pushed their sweating faces towards the microphone as they sang, their voices atonal and sinister.

Ooh, ooh, ooh, ooh,

Better watch out for the skin deep,

Ooh, ooh, ooh, ooh

Better watch out for the skin deep.

The lyrics sent a shiver through my spine.

'I love that song,' Noni said, 'but I haven't got a clue what it's about.'

'It's about how dangerous beauty can be - it's deceptive because it's only skin deep. That's how I interpret it anyway.'

'Yeah? I've always said you and I are pretty deadly, Nic. Hey, get a look at John Travolta over there.'

The band had launched into one of their own compositions. Dancers were throwing their bodies into the music. Most of them were young and dressed in tight jeans and little tops that showed off wash-board stomachs and pierced navels. The women looked great too. One dancer, who was older than the others was into a full John Travolta *Saturday Night Fever* routine. His hips rotated and he raised his arms above his head unselfconsciously. He seemed to be dancing on his own. Anything to do with John Travolta caught my interest. Men who looked or danced like him were no exception. I laughed as the guy did a little spin that sent his pony tail flying. When he

caught me watching he wiggled his hips in a seductive way and beckoned me over. I declined.

Noni was perspiring, fanning her neck. 'I think you've won a heart, Nic, but he needs to update his hair.'

'You want a drink?' I shouted.

She nodded. 'G and T.'

I pushed my way to the bar and ordered. A TV was showing a news update and Len Smith was being interviewed. The John Travolta double was still throwing his arms around amongst the dancers. I laughed. I hadn't seen anything as funny since Dad and Ernie sang *Love me Tender* at the Balmain Leagues Club's karaoke night.

The man saw me laughing, beckoned again then looked up at the TV set. He smiled and his right arm flew above his head.

'Six dollars.' I passed the publican the money, my eyes still on the dancer. There was no mistaking it. He was giving Len Smith a nazi salute. The music stopped abruptly and the crowd clapped and cheered. Then the lead singer announced the end of the set. His voice came over the mike, hoarse and raw like no English teacher I'd ever had at school. I picked up the drinks and wandered back to Noni. She was leaning up against the wall. Sweat had stained the underarms of her tee shirt and her hair was stuck to her forehead.

'Phew,' she said. She put the cold drink against her temple. 'I'm as hot as hell.' She lifted the sliver of lemon out of the glass and gave it a suck. 'God, look at Len Smith, will you. The unions have been trying to get

something on him but every journalist I know keeps saying he's squeaky clean. Watch my drink, will you? I need to go to the loo.'

I leaned my back against the space of wall she'd vacated. The crowd had thinned and most people were outside the pub's open doors, cooling off, smoking, sitting in the gutter with drinks between their feet. The band was out there too but the Saturday Night Fever dancer was no-where to be seen. I closed my eyes for a moment. I was tired. I heard a faint scream, opened my eyes and looked around. I hadn't imagined it. The people outside were looking towards Victoria Road. Craning their necks. Asking what was going on.

Noni walked slowly across the room. 'What's up?' she said, picking up her glass. She'd wet the front of her tee shirt when she'd washed her face. The look was fetching. A couple of men thought so too.

'I don't know. Someone outside screamed.'

The publican walked out into the street and spoke to the band. He came back inside and picked up the phone. With a tilt of her head, Noni finished her drink. 'I'll get another one of these. You too?'

It was almost midnight. My eyes felt heavy and dry, as though they were full of sand. 'What time are you heading off?'

'After one more set.'

'Yeah, why not? Make mine vodka this time. With fresh orange juice, no ice.'

When she joined the scrum at the bar, I walked outside. The band was still smoking in a huddle by the door. They were watching some people talking to a young woman with long black hair who was leaning against a mean-looking Arctic blue WRX with a huge rear spoiler and gold alloy wheels. The woman's face was white and strained. She had her arms wrapped around her chest as tight as a suit of chain mail.

'What happened?' I asked the lead singer.

He stubbed out his cigarette with the toe of his shoe and inclined his head towards the woman at the car. 'Someone jumped her. Ran off when she screamed.'

'Yeah? Just near here?'

One of the guitarists pointed. 'See that tree?'

A bottle-brush was tilted across the footpath about fifty metres away. Even in the dark you could see the spiky red flowers drooping over the path like a wasted erection. I walked up to it, just as a police car came into view. Behind the bottle-brush was a white semi detached house with a picket fence. People were watching from the verandah - and the verandahs of every other house in the street. The ground underneath my feet was covered in shredded red flowers. I bent down and picked up a couple of shattered blooms.

The pub had emptied by the time I walked back to it. The young woman was sitting in the police car and talking animatedly to a police officer. Bill Litton was interviewing a couple of youths and writing in his notebook.

'She looks like Cara Lane,' Noni said when I rejoined her. She nodded towards the car as she passed me my drink.

'Yeah, she does. Her hair is certainly the same.'

We stood, silently observing the woman for a moment, then Noni tilted her glass and drained it. 'I'm off. I just heard someone say the band's not playing again tonight. Pity. They were good.'

I emptied my glass too and left it beside hers. Bill was talking to a couple of the woman's friends. Pointing towards the tree. The vodka had made my ears ring. It always did.

The WRX the young woman had been leaning against pulled away from the kerb with a roar. Noni looked at it with loving eyes. 'Hot stuff, eh?' she said. 'They need octane boosters, but who cares.' She'd pulled on her jacket and was looking for her keys. 'Do you think the attacker was someone from in here?'

'I don't know,' I said. 'I hope not. We could have been dancing beside him if it was.'

~ Five ~

That night I had a strange dream. I was dancing to the Eurythmics' *Thorn in my Side* in a dance hall that could have come straight out of a Toulouse Lautrec poster. Women were performing the can-can while monocled men looked on. A male dancer with a ponytail did the splits so enthusiastically that most of the men in the room winced and inadvertently cradled their groins with their hands. I started to move across the dance floor. The pony-tailed dancer saw me, beckoned. This is dangerous, I thought but kept moving. The music stopped. With a roll of drums a figure stepped onto the stage. Ian Routley. The footlights lit his face from below, contorting and miss-shaping it so grotesquely I turned to the woman beside me and asked if he was the devil.

She lifted up her long black hair and began to fan her neck. 'It depends on whether he's after you or me.'

Ian Routley looked straight into my eyes. 'She isn't art,' he shouted, 'and the punishment for bad art is death.'

I woke up with a start and looked at the time. Three o'clock. I'd been called all sorts of things in the line of duty but bad art was a new one. I tried to go back to sleep but Ian Routley's face kept leering at me from somewhere behind my eyes. I fell into a deep asleep eventually - so deep I slept in. By the time I arrived in Glebe Point Road I was running fifteen minutes late and all the parking spaces outside the cafe were full. There was a gap fifty metres up the street, so I nudged the Peugeot 504 into it, narrowly missing the bull bar of a four-wheel drive.

I hoped Ella wasn't the impatient type who took off after a short wait. She wasn't. I saw her as soon as I opened the cafe door. Casually contrived, exotic, she gave the impression that she'd spent most of her life shopping in Galleries Lafayette and the trendy boutiques of the French Riviera. She looked me up and down as well. In a second she'd scrutinised my clothes, my height, my hair, my boots. My jeans were black stove-pipe Versaces that a former client, Selina Bower, had picked up in Bali. My top was tight and black and cost nineteen bucks at Sussan. Ella could have been her mother, sizing me up for a portrait but I sensed she had other things on her mind. She stood up slowly and extended her hand. 'Nice to meet you,' she said, a hint of French in her voice. There was a pencil thin line of cappuccino froth on her upper lip. It made her look like one of the moustached portraits I'd seen of the author, Vita Sackville West.

'Likewise,' I said sitting down.

'My mother is over-reacting as usual,' she said with a wave to the woman behind the counter. 'What are you having?' I ordered a long macchiato and Ella told the woman to make it two.

As we waited for our coffees I asked her what she thought about being kept under twenty-four hour surveillance. I expected some protest but she just raised the palm of her hand in a kind of Gallic shrug.

'Jane's totally paranoid about anything to do with politics. But what can you do? I put it down to her relationship with Marge. Still, I suppose Lee's gone missing and there was that murder in Balmain six weeks ago.'

Ella was responding better than I'd expected and I told her so. She also seemed to have relaxed a bit. I reached into my bag and pulled out a notebook and pen. 'Do you mind if we talk about Lee Han?'

She glanced around the cafe and leaned forward. 'She worked for the Federal Equity Bureau,' she said warily. 'She was at university with me. Part-time, though. Journalism. Social Sciences. She joined Refraction after she copped some racial abuse on her way to work.'

'And you?'

'Refraction is mostly made up of people who are angry with the government in Canberra. Lee recruited a lot of students, including me. But non-students can join it too.'

'Do you know her parents? I can't imagine they're taking this well?'

'I've never met them. But Lee thought they were cool. They run a business in Thomas Street in Chinatown. Lee is an only child.'

'Like you,' I said, '...and me. When did you see her last?'

'At the Easter Show on Friday.'

'The night she disappeared?'

'Yeah. She left at nine. I'd met her the night before as well. We did some graffiti beside the railway tracks at Lewisham.'

'Have you told the cops this?'

'Of course,' she said. 'The police asked all her friends where Lee had been hanging out. I told them what we'd been doing. I explained that she was too sensible not to look out for trains. I was given a lecture about vandalism for my trouble.'

'And do you have any theories about what might have happened to her?'

'Not really. My gut instinct tells me she's fine.'

The light from the window was showcasing Ella's profile. High cheekbones, a long, elegant nose with a mole to the right of it. Like a lot of people who are young and privileged she had an air about her that was studiously nonchalant. It was a bit too nonchalant for my liking. If Michaela or Bridget had gone missing I'd have been beside myself with worry. Combing the streets. Chasing leads. Hounding the police, day in, day out for news.

'I know my mother means well, but I don't want or need a body guard,' she smiled. 'Has she told you the family history yet?'

I shook my head and she smiled indulgently.

'Lucky you. If you heard it, you'd understand why Jane is so' She looked around the cafe as though the word she wanted was hiding under a chair or behind the cappuccino machine, '....so hysterical,' she said at last, tapping her forefinger against her temple.

I tried to get her to expand but she wouldn't. 'Did you go to school here?' I asked.

She shook her head. 'Provence, near where my parents were living at the time. We came back to Sydney five years ago.' She looked down at her wrist where she sported an elegant, gold Patek Phillipe watch. 'Shit! I've got a Refraction meeting at the university and I'm already five minutes late. Any chance of a lift?'

'Meeting on a Sunday morning? You're keen.' I put a five-dollar note on the table, picked up my bag and told her I'd go to the meeting too. 'On the way we can work out how to best manage this. I certainly don't want to cramp your style.' I pushed one of my cards across the table to her. 'We need to talk about protocols. I'll be with you most of the time but I'll also use my off-sider, Rickie Kenna. He's okay. You won't notice he's around. This has my mobile and home phone numbers on it. You can ring me any time. Night or day, it doesn't matter. It's best if you don't tell your friends I'm keeping an eye on you.'

She slipped the card into her bag then followed me up Glebe Point Road. When we reached my car she picked at the scabs of rust on the 504's side panels while I struggled with the lock on the passenger door. 'Lots of students drive these cars. They're cool,' she said.

I felt like telling her just how cool they are on winter mornings when the only de-mister is an open window. The car started on the first go. I hadn't the heart to slag it after that.

The university was so close it was hardly worth the drive. I parked beside the Brewery in one of the lanes that smells of hops and yeast. Ella seemed impatient. She'd checked the time while we waited for the traffic lights on the corner of Glebe Point Road to change. Looked around as though she was watching out for someone. She checked the time again as we crossed Parramatta Road and hurried towards the university's Bon Marche building. She keyed an entry code into a box on the wall and the door opened onto a foyer that was covered with warning notices about Lee Han. She fixed her eyes on the floor and scuffed at the carpet with the toe of her shoe as though she was deliberately avoiding looking at them. I touched her lightly on the shoulder and asked what was wrong. She flinched as though she was expecting to be hit.

'Sorry,' I said. 'I didn't mean to give you a fright.'

'Just don't touch me, all right?' she said in a voice that was as edgy as a cliff. She was no longer the confident young woman she'd been in Badde Manors. Her body seemed to have slumped and curled in on itself. Maybe her past hadn't been beer and skittles after all. She maintained her silence in the lift. We stopped on the fifth floor and I followed her into one of the tutorial rooms. As she walked towards her seat she recovered her old demeanor and by the time I had sat down beside her she was confidently greeting the people in the room.

I took a quick look around. About twenty people were seated in student seats with fold down arms. A man in a red tee shirt and blue jeans

was giving a report about the group's tactics at the Easter Show. When he'd finished, he gestured towards me.

'We have a few new people with us today. Perhaps they'd like to introduce themselves.' He fixed me with an expectant look.

I stood up. 'My name is Nicola Sharpe,' I said. 'I'm with Ella. I'm interested in what Refraction is doing and want to help.' A bit like Alcoholics Anonymous, I thought to myself. When I sat down again, the speaker turned towards a man who was slouching in a seat by the door. He had been watching me closely as I spoke. I got a shock when I turned and took a closer look at him. The classroom's neon light wasn't as flattering as the smoky darkness of The Weeds but it was clearly the dancer I'd seen there. He was in his mid thirties. Slightly built but well proportioned and with an upper body that said he worked out. His thick black hair was pulled back into the ponytail he'd flourished so unselfconsciously the previous night.

'I'm Daniel Conrad,' he said without getting up. He pronounced his first name slowly. Dan - i - el, the French way.

The chairperson waited for him to say something else but Daniel Conrad didn't respond to the cue. 'Okay then,' he said when the silence began to drag. 'Welcome to Refraction. I'm Peter Watson. Perhaps it's time to go round the room and introduce ourselves to you.'

It was definitely very AA. Daniel Conrad seemed to be as uncomfortable as I was. He slouched further down in his seat as the introductions began. By the time they were finished he was almost horizontal. I couldn't help grinning at him. He met my gaze and smiled back.

Introductions over, Peter Watson returned to the papers on the desk in front of him. 'Right,' he said. 'We need to work out where we go from here. The Easter Show runs for another eight days. That should give us plenty of time to make Len Smith's life uncomfortable.'

I checked out Daniel Conrad while they organised the schedule for the Easter Show. He seemed mesmerised by the carpet. I sighed when Ella opted for the evening shift from six until the Show's close. Eight nights at the Easter Show wouldn't leave much time for a social life. Then Daniel put up his hand again. 'I'll do the night shift too,' he said.

Ella had stood up and was gathering her things. 'Cool. We'll expect you tonight. Outside the Show's Arts and Crafts pavilion.'

The group dispersed and she joined some women heading to the library. Peter Watson stayed back to sort through his papers. He called a 'see you tonight,' as we left the room.

Daniel travelled down in the lift with me and followed me out into the street. 'Well, that went better than I expected,' he said.

'Yeah,' I replied. 'It was good.'

'What did you say you do for a living?' he asked.

'I'm a lawyer,' I said. 'I think you could say I've made your acquaintance before.'

A frown creased his forehead. 'Yeah, I've seen you somewhere too.'

'A girlfriend and I went to the Three Weeds last night. Grammar was playing. She's a big fan. We were very taken with your dance routine.' I watched as a blush crept up his face. 'We were having a great time until that woman was attacked.'

'I heard about it from my friend,' he said slowly. 'I'd left by then.'

'I didn't realise you were there with someone. Was she dancing too?'

'He was dancing with a woman he picked up at the bar. Look, I've got half an hour to kill. Do you want to grab a coffee or some lunch?'

I shook my head and told him I had to get home. The lights had changed. I dashed across Parramatta Road and left him standing at the street corner. 'Offer again at the Easter Show tonight,' I called over my shoulder.

~ Seven ~

A dark green Commodore sat on my tail all the way from the university. I ignored it and thought about Daniel Conrad. He seemed a bit too old to be involved in student politics. I suppose he thought the same thing about me. By the time I was on the Anzac Bridge the car's driver was seriously tailgating me. I looked down at my speedo. The Peugeot was ten kilometres over the speed limit. I've been booked twice for speeding on the bridge and I wasn't prepared to make it a trifecta. I eased my foot off the accelerator and watched the speedo move down. The car behind me was staying close. I touched the brakes. That made the driver move back. He changed lanes and overtook me. I lost sight of him as he tore through the lights at Victoria Road.

I stopped at Omnivore for brunch when I got back to Darling Street and chose a table by the cafe's window so I could watch the people in the street. I ordered some eggs on toast and a cafe latte and watched the passing parade as I waited for the food to arrive. Cara Lane's mannequin was in the street again. It was like something out of a horror movie, staring across the street at people enjoying themselves as though it was waiting for revenge. It was sounding more and more like that would be a long time coming. There were still no new clues about Cara's murder. For all the evidence he'd left behind, her killer might well have been a ghost. No face to remember. No hair or skin traces at the scene of crime. No footprints on the ground around her body. No fingerprints.

The witness on the bus was the aspect to Cara's death that troubled me the most. She had been beautiful and people like that always attract

attention. But the man she'd met, that she'd kissed, hadn't been noted at all. Why not? He was tall. I'd hit six feet before my sixteenth birthday so I knew how tall people stand out in a crowd. There must have been something about him, other than his height, that had struck the witness as odd or interesting. I looked closely at the clothes of the men that passed, the way they parted their hair. Checked whether, like my next door neighbour, Andrew, they wore designer gym shoes or like my father, they favoured leather brogues. How they talked on their mobile phones or walked their dogs. There was something interesting about every one of them, even if it was just their ordinariness.

As I ate, I thought about my meeting with Ella. I was feeling a mixture of interest and apprehension about taking on the case. I could understand Jane's concern about her daughter: a woman murdered and another disappeared must be every parent's nightmare. Even so, there was something odd about the situation. Despite her co-operation so far, a young woman like Ella wouldn't be easy to mind. She'd be even less so if she resented her mother's intrusion into her life. At nineteen I'd been independent too. I'd stretched my father's patience when I'd arrived home at four in the morning smelling of cheap wine. Locked myself in my room for hours on end with the stereo blaring Leonard Cohen or Tom Waits. Studied all night then disappeared on long solitary walks around Balmain without telling him when I'd be back.

As far as I was concerned, what Jane Davies defined as rebellion went with a teenager's territory. Ella's life would be fragmented into a score of activities: study, politics, parties, shopping. She probably had a love interest who took up some of her time. Having me trailing around after her wouldn't be much fun. Jane Davies seemed to be a woman who liked to get her own way. Even so, I couldn't see a kid like Ella doing her mother's bidding with

good grace, and that meant I was going to be the person who'd wear most of her discontent.

I admired Ella Davies' political convictions but the Refraction meeting had reinforced my view that I never would be a joiner. Membership led to people expecting things of you. Things I wasn't prepared to give. Michaela was always trying to get me to go to some political function or another. I admired her stamina, her absolute belief in what she was doing. I just wasn't any good at absolutes. From what Bill Litton had said, Cara Lane had been of like mind. She was a loner and seemed to live only for her kids. Her life sounded dull, self-sacrificing. I could think of nothing worse than spending all my spare time with people under the age of ten. A baby sitter would have given her an hour or two of respite but Cara hadn't bothered to avail herself of the service for nights on the town. I couldn't imagine her sitting in a bar with girlfriends, drinking Margueritas as Bridget, Michaela and I were inclined to do. But there must have been colleagues and acquaintances who'd suggested going to a movie sometimes and there must have been times when she'd broken with habit and gone with them.

I rang the Balmain cops to see if Bill was on duty. 'Hi,' I said when he picked up his phone. 'I'm in Omnivore. Come down and have a coffee with me. I see Cara Lane's mannequin is in the street again. Had much of a response?'

Bill's voice sounded strained. 'I'm flat out. I can't talk now, Nicola,' he said in an undertone. 'We're interviewing someone.'

'Any connection with Lee Han?'

'Don't know yet.'

'I saw you at the Weeds last night interviewing the woman that was attacked. It's getting dangerous around here.'

'Yeah,' he sighed.

'The girl at the Weeds looked like Cara Lane, especially in the colour and length of her hair.'

Bill cleared his throat. 'It had entered my mind, Nic. But thanks anyway.'

~ Eight ~

When I'd finished another coffee, I walked down to my car. The day had started out hot and sunny but it was beginning to turn. Storm clouds had gathered over the city and the drinkers on the balcony at The London were heading inside.

An *open for inspection* sign had been set up on the footpath outside Cara Lane's place. My heart gave a little jump. I knew better than not to follow my heart's dictates – well, when it came to work, anyway. The property wasn't attracting much attention and the real estate agent stood in the doorway of the empty flat, bored. She brightened up when she saw me, wrote down my name and address, then left me to poke around.

Cara Lane's flat comprised a tiny kitchen that opened into a combined lounge and dining room with a balcony that overlooked a liquid amber tree. There were two bedrooms off the hall. The bathroom was tiled in pale green and had a shower over the bath. I was surprised that the place was still furnished but presumed it was a marketing decision. Without the furniture it would have been featureless and uninviting. The main bedroom was crowded with a queen-sized bed. A landscape covered most of the wall above it. The thick swirls of colour on the canvas were similar to those Jane Davies used to add depth and texture to her paintings.

Unlike Jane's, this painting was distinctly Australian. White-trunked gum trees towered over a field of wheat. Crows hung in the air like shreds of black silk. Despite the breadth of the landscape there was something claustrophobic about the scene. It gave the impression that the artist had

painted it with no sound to disturb them but the swishing of the wheat sheaves and the mournful call of the birds. I leaned over the bed to see if it had been signed but there was nothing to indicate who the artist was. I sniffed. The canvas still smelled of paint. I touched it lightly almost expecting it to be wet. It wasn't, but the oily smell seemed to indicate that it was a recent work. With a quick glance towards the agent, I lifted the painting off the wall. The timber frame was light and scored with dozens of drill marks. The artist's name wasn't on the back.

When I'd re-hung the picture I opened the door of the built-in wardrobe. It was empty. A rolled up piece of paper had been brushed into the corner with tiny balls of wool from the carpet and a couple of Bobby pins. I reached down, picked up, and smoothed the paper. It was part of an election flier for Len Smith's Forum and pretty crude stuff. *Do we want an Asianised Australia? No! Then vote Len Smith.* I pushed it into my pocket, walked back to the agent and asked for one of the contracts of sale.

'Anything specific I can help you with?' she asked. She was standing with her back to the window, her face in darkness.

I said 'no thanks' and looked past her to the balcony and beyond that to the sky outside. The weather had turned too grey and threatening for anyone to stay in Gladstone Park. The empty swings in the kid's playground moved slowly backwards and forwards as though an invisible hand had been giving them a push. Cara Lane had been abducted within sight of her home, knowing that her kids were waiting in this spot, worried about her.

The agent picked up her keys and I followed her down the building's uncarpeted stairs. Our footsteps rang hollowly all the way up the stairwell. For a moment I saw Hannah Lane alone in the flat, ears pricked up like a

cat's for the sound of her mother's tread on the stairs, not knowing then that she'd never hear it again.

I had a look at the flat's contract of sale when I got home. There was nothing unusual about it. A sixty day settlement. Ten percent deposit. The vendor's name was Gerry Hopkins. Cara's ex-husband, I presumed. He gave his address as Charles Street, Collingwood, an inner city suburb of Melbourne. Bill Litton had said that Cara's husband lived in the USA. Perhaps he'd moved back to Australia to take custody of the kids. I gave Bill Litton another call and told him I'd inspected the flat.

'What did you think?' he asked, with the impatience of a worker who's about to go off duty.

'Nice,' I said. 'But I can't say it told me much about the woman. You wouldn't happen to know who painted that big landscape in her bedroom would you?'

'No. Should I? She had lots of pictures on the walls.'

'Posters and reproductions. The landscape was original. And newly painted judging by the smell of oil and paraffin around it.'

'I'll check,' he said, then as an afterthought, '...you know, I liked the flat. I had a sense that Cara and her kids were happy there.'

'Me too,' I said. 'Places get a feel about them, don't they?'

'I tell you what though, there has to be more to the way she lived than meets the eye.'

'Oh, come on,' I said. 'Don't tell me you think she had a dark, secret life.'

'I'm not saying that, Nicola, but you know the statistics as well as I do. The likelihood is that she knew her killer. It's just a case of finding out the names of all her friends.'

'You must be well and truly down that track by now.'

Bill sounded tired. 'Yeah, we are and there aren't any. She never went anywhere unless it was with her kids.'

'But the man in the street? You don't kiss a complete stranger on the lips.'

He sighed a loud, frustrated sigh. 'No, you don't.'

'I presume your forensic team did a thorough sweep of the flat, but I found something that might interest you anyway.' I pulled the slip of paper I'd found out of my pocket and put it on the table beside the contract. 'There was part of a crumpled up flier for Len Smith's Forum in Cara Lane's wardrobe. There's no date on it but I remember some of Smith's people handing fliers out at Balmain market in early February. They copped an earful from the market goers and had packed up and disappeared by early afternoon.'

'I remember,' he said. 'We got a phone call to keep an eye on them. Apart from a bit of verbal abuse, they were fine. We didn't find any Len Smith fliers when we searched the place. Could belong to anyone. Maybe a potential buyer dropped it.'

I told him I'd been contacted by Jane Davies to keep an eye on her daughter's political activities.

'Aah,' he said slowly. 'We interviewed her and some of the other Glebe artists about Cara Lane's murder a few weeks ago.'

'And?'

'And nothing. The murder investigation is going nowhere. All we know is that the modus operandi doesn't fit with any previous murders. Keep me posted on Ella Davies, won't you? We talked to her and the rest of her mob about Lee Han too. Something wasn't quite right about that kid. What did my old granny used to say? *She's carrying some extra fabric in her seams.*'

~ Nine ~

Bill was too keen to get home to bother expanding on his Granny's saying, but I took it to imply that he thought Ella was keeping something to herself. I knew just what he meant. I'd only met her once, but she seemed full of contradictions to me. Happy and confident one minute, anxious the next. Maybe her political activities were getting to her. Len Smith was enough to make anybody moody. I'd seen plenty about him in the media in the lead up to the election and he'd hardly been off the front page of the dailies since the minority government came to power. He was arrogant and infuriating. And an enigma.

As far as looks went he was pretty ordinary. Five eight, five nine, slim build. His morning jog had been covered by journalists who must have regretted every cigarette they'd ever smoked as they puffed along behind him. Smith still had most of his hair and, for all I knew all his own teeth, which he flashed whenever a photo opportunity presented itself. He had been given the Attorney General's portfolio as a reward for his alliance with the Conservative Party. He'd already announced a review of human rights and equal opportunity legislation. It was scapegoat time.

If I was going to mind Ella I wanted to know more about the politician who was taking up her time. So I checked Smith's web site. It was well-designed and looked like an expensive job with lots of colour photos. It also had links to far Right organisations in other countries - England, France, Switzerland, Austria - where neo Nazi parties were gaining popular support and planning to challenge in municipal and national elections.

Smith's background was interesting. He'd left high school at fifteen. Twenty years later he was a successful businessman. Then, inexplicably, he sold his business and went back to school. He entered university as a mature age student, did a law degree, and found a job as a solicitor in Balcon, a small country town eighty kilometres east of Gilgandra. He got himself elected to the shire council, then onto the board of the local electricity supplier. He joined Rotary and the Masons, donated money to the Salvation Army and the Catholic Church. A few years later, he won an Order of Australia for his work with disabled kids. As he participated in more and more community activities, his political views became increasingly Right wing. Then he established Len Smith's Forum and ran candidates in the federal election. The rest, as they say in the movies, was history.

I read through the information one more time. Like a lot of voters, I'd seen Smith as a bit of a joke. His pronouncements about Asian migration during the election campaign had been so xenophobic and over the top that I'd presumed they'd lose him votes. Satirists and stand up comics had lampooned him. Protesters had dogged him. Elder statesmen and women had urged people to vote against him. My father had been adamant that Len Smith's popularity was dangerously under-estimated. He was right.

The shock election result had left me feeling pretty gloomy on election night. I'd tried switching channels but I kept getting pulled back to the election as a waking sleeper is hauled back into a bad dream. Len Smith's eyes had been more than triumphant when he was interviewed in the Tally Room. They were mean and milky-blue like a sky that had just erupted into a storm. A camera flashed off screen and for a moment I could see the intricate patterns in his irises as though they were the bare branches of an autumn tree. He'd stared coldly ahead while a Tally Room journalist asked him why he had mustered so much support in rural and outer suburban electorates. He smiled as he answered. 'My support has always been underestimated.

Now you have the proof. And mark my words, you and every one else in the media will rue the day you ever made fun of us.'

Since then, Len's spin-doctors had done a lot of work on his image. In all his web site photos he presented as groomed, avuncular. He was a family man with five smiling kids. They couldn't do much about his eyes, though. They reminded me of a movie poster that had scared the hell out of me as a kid. *Beware the eyes that paralyse*, the poster had said. Len Smith's eyes looked like they could turn anything to stone.

~ Ten ~

I was making a pot of coffee when Michaela rang. 'You've been engaged for ages,' she said. When I told her I'd been doing some internet research on Len Smith she muttered something in Greek that didn't require translation. 'Can you come with me to meet Marge Davies this afternoon?

'That was quick.'

'No point in wasting any time. I'm sorry to impose on you with such short notice, but I'm a bit awed. Marge is one of my heroes. I feel like a schoolgirl again.'

By the time I arrived at Michaela's house in Ennis Street, my heart was thumping from too much caffeine. Michaela seemed pretty tense as well. She was looking more pre-occupied than I'd seen her look before. She didn't say anything as we drove down Darling Street so I left her to her thoughts. I turned onto Victoria Road, wound the window down and took a deep breath. The air was pungent with car fumes and the distant whiff of the Fish Markets. The weather was hot again but there was a distinct nip in the air, as though it was cautioning us about the shorter, colder days ahead. Autumn always pulls the scabs off my childhood memories and leaves raw wounds in their place. My mother, when she was young, healthy and full of fun. My father and his mates confidently building ships for the Navy as though the jobs would always be there. Optimistic to the end, they were swept aside like autumn leaves when Cockatoo Island closed.

Michaela reached into her bag, folded down the visor and checked her appearance in the visor's mirror. She applied some lipstick in a slow, thoughtful way. 'Still nervous?' I asked but she just smiled and shook her head. I flicked on the blinker and turned right into Johnston Street. A dark green Commodore like the one I'd seen on the Anzac Bridge was two cars behind us. I watched it in the rear view mirror. It was indicating a right turn too.

Michaela must have sensed my tension. She leaned forward and looked into the passenger-door rear vision mirror. 'What's up?' she asked.

'Nothing,' I said, my eyes still on the car. Just like me, it was turning left into Annandale Street.

'Here's Marge's place,' she said, towards a semi-detached house. I pulled up and watched as the Commodore drove past. Its lone male driver didn't spare us a glance.

Marge Davies opened the door on the first ring of the bell, and gestured for us to come in. Michaela winked at me as we followed her down the hall. 'This is my friend, Nicola Sharpe. We won't keep you too long, Ms Davies,' she said in her best doctor's voice.

Marge's lounge room was testimony to her years in parliament. The walls were covered with framed photographs and plaques much as you'd expect a successful athlete's to be. She'd hung Jane's famous portrait over the fireplace. One look at it and I knew what Jane had been talking about. I hadn't seen the exhibition when it had won the Archibald Prize but it wasn't hard to understand why the judges loved it. It was one of those portraits that commanded you to look at it. Marge stared straight at the artist with an expression on her face that was not unlike one you'd see on a bird of prey

that was about to dive for the kill. Her hands were arranged in her lap with the fingers of one pinching the fabric of her skirt. Like me, Michaela seemed dumbstruck by the painting.

Marge stood behind us with her hands on her hips. 'It's good, isn't it?' she asked.

'Brilliant,' I replied, aware that my voice had come out in an excited little puff. 'She really captures you well.'

Marge gave a deep chuckle of satisfaction. 'I haven't always liked my daughter's paintings but I do like that.' She settled into a wing-backed armchair and told us to sit down too.

Michaela passed her some papers and waited while Marge gave them a quick glance. 'Our protest group has wide community support,' she said. 'Business, unions, schools and universities as well as the churches.' She pointed to a photo of Ella Davies with a group of friends. 'I read an article by your granddaughter in *The Herald* yesterday,' she said. 'I was very impressed.'

Marge beamed at her. 'Ella's wonderful, isn't she? I wish I'd been as clever when I was her age. She's so mature. She's always been a lot more worldly than other girls. And she's wasted no time in getting involved in all the protests against Len Smith.'

While she spoke I studied the photo carefully. One of the young women in the photo with Ella Davies was Lee Han. The teenagers were at Centennial Park and a lake stretched out behind them. They had their arms around one another's shoulders. Laughing, heads thrown back. Ella was wearing a little woollen cap with a tassel on the top, jeans, Doc Martens. Lee

was dressed more conservatively in a navy blue shirt and trousers. She'd lifted her free hand to the bottom of her throat and seemed to be pointing to the little dragon she wore round her neck on a chain.

The room was suddenly silent. Marge Davies had followed my gaze. She leaned towards me. 'I don't know much about you.'

'I'm a private investigator.'

She reached for the packet of cigarettes that was lying on the little side table beside her chair and watched me closely as she flicked one out of the pack and raised it to her lips. 'Come to spy on us have you?' she said with a dry laugh. She turned back to Michaela before I could reply. 'When is this meeting I'm going to address?'

'Midday next Saturday at the Lilyfield Community Centre.'

Marge drew back on her cigarette and nodded her silent assent. I could hear a TV next door and a dog barking somewhere in the street. I glanced down at a little note pad on the table next to me. The words *Four Corners, 11 May* had been scribbled on it in black ink. I felt Marge's eyes on me again. I looked up. Smiled. She didn't smile back.

Michaela pointed to one of the photos on the wall. 'Where was that taken?'

Marge's eyes stayed on me for a moment before she turned to the photo that Michaela had indicated. When she replied her voice had a suspicious edge to it. 'In 1949 I went to Paris with a Labor Party delegation. The politician beside me is the French statesman, Andre Malraux. The little girl is Jane.'

Marge looked at her watch and stood up. 'I don't know that we need to spend any more time discussing this. I'll be at the meeting. Call me a few days beforehand to brief me, won't you?' She stubbed out her cigarette with its long finger of ash then shook our hands. 'I'll read your fliers tomorrow. I have some things on the hall table for you. Remind me to tell you some secrets about Len Smith the next time we meet.' She handed Michaela a book - *Marge Davies: My Life in Politics* - and a video. Then without another word she closed the door behind us.

Michaela was silent on the drive back to Balmain as well. That suited me fine. I kept my eyes peeled for the green Commodore but it didn't reappear. The meeting with Marge had taken less than an hour. Her behaviour had seemed inexplicable. She was cautious, distrustful. Watching me every time I glanced around the room. I'd seen enough guilty people to know when they were hiding something. Behind her elder stateswoman exterior, Marge Davies was determined to keep something to herself. And that, I said to myself, seems to be a Davies' family trait.

~ Eleven ~

After I'd dropped Michaela off I drove over to Dad's place in Short Street. I could hear voices as I opened his front door. Ernie was visiting and he and Dad were out in the kitchen, poring over the form guide for the Autumn Carnival. I bent over and kissed Dad on the top of his head. He asked me what I'd been up to.

'Gee, she was a character,' he said with gusto when I told him I'd met Marge Davies. 'She was a great local member, wasn't she, Ern? Came over to Cockatoo Island a few times. Got the boys revved up over some issue or another. How old would she be now? Late seventies? Your mother always reckoned we needed more women like her.'

I wanted to ask Dad what else my mother had admired about Marge but I knew he'd get self-conscious in front of Ernie. He and Ernie might have been best mates for over fifty years but there were some things I knew they avoided discussing. Mum's death was one of them. I filled the kettle and watched as they circled their bets for the first race. Dad had taken the Easter Show Guide from the paper and set it to one side. 'Are you going to the Show this year?' I asked.

'Ernie and me are thinking of going tomorrow. Why?'

'I'll be doing some work out there. I could give you both a lift.'

Dad scribbled something beside a horse's name. 'The Show won't be the same out in the sticks will it, Ernie? It's lost all its character.'

Similar sentiments had already been expressed by Sydney-siders who had wanted the Show to stay at its traditional site in Moore Park. The old Showground had already been turned into a film studio so there wasn't much chance of that. As a result of the Showground's move, bus rides up Flinders Street with excited kids or searching for the car in the pitch dark of Moore Park were no longer part of the Show experience. Sightings of kewpie dolls on sticks bobbing their way onto the Balmain ferry had become as rare as a Balmain team in the rugby league grand final.

'Jeez, Nic used to get worked up about the Show for weeks ahead,' Dad said to Ernie. 'Saved her pocket money. Took bottles back to the milk bar for the deposit. Talked non stop about the show bags she was going to buy.'

He looked at his watch, got up and switched on the little colour TV he keeps on top of the kitchen cupboards. They settled back in their chairs as the five o'clock news opened with a story about the Show. There were the usual shots of ferris wheels and merry-go-rounds. Kids ate fairy floss and patted cows. Then Len Smith's face filled the screen. Behind him, a crowd huddled in an awed group. 'I came to the Easter Show to meet my constituents,' he said. 'Real Australians. Battlers like these people. I'll come every day and listen to them. Where are all the other politicians? They still aren't listening are they? They learned nothing from the federal election results.'

The crowd murmured its agreement and surged towards him as he bent to slide into the passenger seat of his car.

Dad swore under his breath. 'He's a nasty piece of work, that's for sure. Those economic rationalists buggered things up. Privatised everything they

could. Cut government services. No wonder people feel they aren't really getting a fair go any more. So they vote for a mob that's not that much different from old Adolf's. I tell you what though, our shop stewards on the Island would have set them straight. That kind of thinking doesn't get challenged nearly enough these days.'

Ernie stirred two spoonfuls of sugar into his tea, then let his teaspoon clatter onto the table. 'Ever heard this song, Nic?' He began to sing:

*You've got to be taught to be afraid
Of people whose eyes are oddly made,
Of people whose skin is a different shade.
You've got to be carefully taught.
You've got to be taught before it's too late,
Before you are six or seven or eight,
To hate all the people your relatives hate.
You've got to be carefully taught. Know what that's from?*

I shook my head. 'Bertholt Brecht?' As usual, Ernie had been singing off key.

'No. *South Pacific*. Remember Jack? We went to see it at the State Theatre with a group from the social club. I won a box of Winning Post chocolates. You know music don't you, Nic?' He reached up and ran his fingers through what was left of his hair and started to sing, off key, again. 'I'm going to wash that man right out of my hair. I'm going to wash that man right out of my hair.'

My mobile phone rang before I could tell him I preferred Midnight Oil.

'There's been a change of plan. We're meeting tonight,' Ella Davies said breathlessly. 'Some of us are going to Chinatown before we leave for the

Show. Can you meet us there?' She gave me the address and time. 'Wear running shoes,' she said.

'Why?'

'Rough surfaces. You may need to do a bit of sprinting,' she said with a laugh as she rang off.

~ Twelve ~

Chinatown was buzzing and the restaurants and pubs were full. Ella had named a cafe 'near Railway Square. As I approached it I could see some of the Refraction team through the window, eating toasted sandwiches, drinking coffee and talking animatedly amongst themselves. Daniel Conrad was with them, looking suave in a tight black tee shirt and jeans. He raised his coffee cup in a kind of salute as I walked in.

'You look very nice,' I said as I sat down beside him. I watched with fascination as a blush stained his face.

He inclined his head towards the ladies toilet when I asked where Ella was. A moment later, the door opened and Ella came out wearing denim dungarees. She smiled when she saw me. 'Hello Nicola. Most of the team has already gone to the Show. We won't be long.'

Daniel's thighs felt warm against mine. Hard, like he spent some of his gym time on a stationary bike. I got the feeling he was as aware of my thighs as I was of his. His face reddened again and he stood up abruptly. 'Looks like we're off,' he said. 'I'll see you out there.'

Ella seemed in no hurry to leave. 'Ready?' I asked, finishing my coffee. 'I take it we'll be going in my car?'

She slung a canvas bag across her chest. 'No Show for us tonight,' she said. 'We'll be doing some train spotting.'

She walked into the street as I paid my bill. The pedestrian lights had turned green and she crossed Railway Square. I followed her up the steep concourse that leads to Central Station's country terminal. The booking hall was crowded with passengers buying magazines and cups of weak railway coffee to see them through their journeys. 'What are you planning?'

'Come on. No need for a ticket,' she said, ignoring me and walking towards a silver double-decker commuter train. She pushed hard at the turnstile and it opened before her like the Red Sea before Moses. She headed straight for the front of the train. Most of the carriages were full of passengers reading books or sleeping with their heads tilted uncomfortably towards their neighbours. Ella walked purposefully along the platform past the empty driver's cabin. She looked across to where the driver was talking to the guard. 'Brilliant,' she said in an undertone. 'Come on.'

Ahead of us, the silver tracks reflected the neon signs in Railway Square and curved towards Redfern. I glanced back over my shoulder. The signal for the Newcastle train was red but plenty of other trains were on the move. When she was well clear of the platform, Ella began to run. I raced along behind her, my ears straining for the sound of movement. Suburban trains were slowing as they neared Central. Once or twice I heard a soft toot indicating that a train would soon shoot out from the platforms we'd just left and travel towards Redfern.

'Hurry up,' she shouted over her back. 'That train leaves in three minutes time.' She pointed to a soot-encrusted wall on our right. 'We need to be over there by then.' With a crab-like move she crossed the remaining tracks. We were near Cleveland Street when I heard a thundering behind me. 'Quick!' She had reached a little arched alcove in the wall. She huddled down and I squeezed in beside her.

My knees were touching my chin. I kept my hands gripped tightly around my legs and away from the rubbish that was scattered around us. The place smelled like an old man's dunny. As the train passed, I could see the passengers still reading their papers, sleeping, staring out of the window. The train slashed squares of light onto the track as it passed. I looked down at my feet, pulled them closer to my body. The light picked up something lying amongst the greasy blue metal. I probed until my fingers had closed round a fine chain.

Ella sensed my movement. 'What's up?' she shouted.

I shook my head and put the chain in my pocket.

When the train had gone, Ella stood up, pulled a couple of cans of spray paint out of her backpack and handed one to me.

I shook my head. 'I'll keep watch,' I said.

She measured the wall with her eye and began to write L..e..n S..m...i..t...h. Then she drew a swastika.

'Oi!' A couple of men were heading towards us from Redfern station.

Ella dropped the can and started to run. 'The train driver must have seen us,' she shouted over her shoulder. 'Come on! The railway police will be waiting at Central Station, for sure. There's a hole in the fence near Devonshire Street. With luck, they won't have closed it up.'

The men were getting closer. Ella slipped off her backpack as she ran. She darted towards a hole in the fence, pushed her backpack through, then followed it.

'You're kidding,' I shouted. The hole seemed tiny but I was already part of the way through. I heaved myself onto my feet and followed Ella up Chalmer's Street. She slowed down as soon as we reached Elizabeth, took a quick look around then walked nonchalantly into the Strawberry Hills Hotel. My clothes were torn and I smelled as though I'd been sleeping rough but a jazz band was playing and the hotel's patrons were too absorbed with the music to notice us. The young woman working behind the bar knew Ella. She passed her a Lemon Ruski in a long glass. I ordered a beer and downed it in a few gulps.

'Most of the Refraction team won't go onto the railway tracks. They reckon only mad people do things like that,' Ella laughed, taking a sip of her drink and wiping her lips with the back of her hand. She gave me an appraising look and there was admiration in it. 'I sometimes play the clarinet here with an all-girl band called The Minxes. You should come and hear us one night. We're good.'

I watched her wave to friends. Mad, I thought. I'd obviously passed the test she'd set for me but she hadn't counted on my discovery. The necklace I'd picked up on the railway tracks felt warm against my breast. 'I'd love to,' I said, and ordered another beer.

~ Thirteen ~

The necklace was the first thing I saw when I woke up the next morning. I held it towards the light and watched as a little gold dragon spun on the end of a fine gold chain. It was beautifully crafted, expensive. I let it slide from hand to hand as I walked downstairs. It was the same necklace Lee Han had been wearing in the photo at Marge Davies' place. I put it on my desk and started to work.

Mirage Foods needed all my attention. I'd fallen behind with my final report, so I spent a couple of hours reviewing surveillance tapes. I stopped working only when my eyes were too sore to continue. By then I'd described how I'd caught a disgruntled employee contaminating biscuit dough with broken glass. The company would hand the surveillance video to the police and charges would be laid. The report was the final hurdle between payment and me.

Mirage Foods wasn't the only thing that was exercising my mind. The note about *Four Corners* on Marge Davies' writing pad had become as irritating as a pebble in my shoe. Marge had seemed far more watchful of me reading the note than the matter warranted. I wanted to know why so I rang the ABC to ask what *Four Corners* had planned for Monday, 11 May. The operator put me through to one of the program's producers. She told me that no information about the program scheduled for that date was being released to the public. No amount of probing could get her to say anymore. Frustrated, I called Noni Jacobson as soon as I'd hung up. If anyone could find out about the program schedule, it was her.

'How's it going, Nic?' she asked as soon as she picked up. 'Pity our dance was cut short the other night. Let's do it again soon.'

'I'd love to. You'll never guess who I've met.'

'Try me.'

'The dancer at the pub.'

'The ponytail?' she laughed. 'God, you have to admire a man so unselfconscious he's prepared to dance like that in a public place. He certainly perved on you all night.'

He's not too unselfconscious, I thought, remembering the way he'd blushed. 'Your trade union covers the ABC, doesn't it?'

'Yeah, some of it. We have a division that includes the ABC's clerical staff.'

Got any good ABC contacts who could let me know about a TV program? I rang myself earlier but I got the bum's rush. And while you're checking your files, can you also see whether Lee Han and Cara Lane were members of your union? They were both government workers.'

'I'll give it a try. The union delegate at the ABC is a terrific bloke. He owes me, anyway. I predicted the federal election results but he wasn't having it. Said Australians weren't that conservative. Oh, they're dreamers and optimists at the ABC.'

~ Fourteen ~

Rickie Kenna had spent the night watching Ella. Not that there was much to see. She'd gone inside when I'd dropped her at University Hall and hadn't been back outside till she'd joined some friends for breakfast at Badde Manors. When he'd finished reporting I told him how she'd exhausted herself on the railway tracks with me.

'She sounds like a real live wire,' he chortled. 'Anyone who can get you within inches of speeding rattler must have a very commanding manner.'

'I found Lee Han's necklace beside the tracks in a spot where she and Ella go grafitti-ing. I haven't shown it to Ella yet. She's being cagey and I want to know why. Have you seen anyone who looks like Lee hanging around?'

'It's a bit hard to know who's going in and out of the building. But that's not to say she wasn't there.' He lowered his voice to a whisper. 'I'm in the Fisher library. Someone just told me off for talking on my mobile. Want to know what our charge is been reading? *The Crisis in Western Capitalism*, by Joeley McNeish.'

Sports Illustrated was more to Rickie's taste. 'Great opportunity for you to widen your reading matter. I'm taking Dad to the Show this afternoon and meeting Ella out there.'

As I talked, I ran my fingers through my hair just as Ernie had done in his South Pacific song routine of the previous night. My hair was unruly and

longer than I like. I prefer it cut and bleached so it looks as though I spend my time on a beach and not hunched up over a computer inside. When Rickie rang off, I called Locks to make an appointment. They had a cancellation and could fit me in at ten thirty.

Something that had been niggling at the back of my mind gave me a jolt as I was driving up to Darling Street to keep the appointment. Bill Litton had said that the witness on the bus had noticed how Cara Lane's long hair had swished around her bottom. But in the photo Bill had shown me, Cara's hair had been shorter, or so it had seemed.

I parked illegally outside the police station, dashed inside and asked if Bill Litton was about. 'Can I have another look at the crime scene photo of Cara Lane?' I asked as soon as he'd led me into his office.

He closed the door, pulled a file out of his drawer and passed a photo across his desk. 'Why? What's up?' he said.

'Her hair.' I let my finger trace down the photograph. 'It looks as though it's been cut.'

Bill came over, stood behind me and looked down at the photo too. 'Her hair came to about here,' he said. He put his hand close to his nipple, then lowered it a bit.

'Not here?' I touched his waist.

Bill shook his head. 'It was long, but not as long as that.'

'Then someone had cut it.'

'What makes you think that?'

'Because you told me the witness noticed how long it was. Even if a woman was leaning backwards, her hair would have to be longer than this to swish around her bum.'

He looked at the photo again thoughtfully. 'I'll do some checking. Oh, by the way, that painting you liked in Cara Lane's flat? It was done by some bloke called Luke Redmond.'

'Never heard of him,' I said, disappointed. The artist's painting style was so similar to Jane Davies' I'd been hoping he'd say that the landscape was one of hers.

'I took another look at it this morning,' he said. 'Not bad. There was no receipt for it in Cara Lane's papers. Could have been a gift.'

'I've been thinking a lot about Cara Lane. Michaela's got an Italian friend. He called her *cara* the other day. Cara - dear. Carissima - darling. Maybe the man Cara Lane met in the street was saying it as a greeting and not her name at all. Maybe he was Italian?'

Bill looked sceptical. 'Give us a break. It was her name, for Christ's sake. Of course someone would say Cara. Like I'd call my wife, Sam.'

'I've heard you call her sweetie, Sammie, Samantha.'

'Yeah, sure. I call her lots of other things too. But the man in the street called Cara Lane *cara* because Cara was her name.'

When I arrived at Locks my regular hairdresser, Suzie, was attending to a woman with her head swathed in plastic wrap. 'I won't be a minute,' she said, turning towards me. 'Go and sit at one of the basins.' She tilted her head towards the back room where the shampoos and other paraphernalia were stored.

She glanced appraisingly at my unruly mop as she came in a few minutes later. 'Very short and blonde again?'

She knew I liked to relax when I got my hair done, so she worked silently, her fingers moving along my scalp and down the back of my neck. 'You're very tense,' she said in a worried voice. 'Work getting to you? The inner city doesn't feel safe anymore, does it? Poor Cara Lane. I feel nervous every time I walk past Gladstone Park.'

'Was she a client here?'

'Yeah, she was. God, she had gorgeous hair.'

'When was the last time you saw her?'

She lifted her fingers off my scalp again and thought for a moment. 'She came in for a colour and condition a week or so before she was killed. It was a Saturday and she wanted her hair to look fabulous because she was going out that night.'

'Can you remember the date?'

'It was February. Boiling hot. I can check the book if you want.'

She wrapped a towel around my head and I followed her to the reception desk and waited as she turned the appointment book's pages. 'Here it is. Saturday, 18 February. I remember Cara had her little boy with her. He played with a toy cat while he waited. I couldn't help thinking how well-behaved he was.'

I did a mental calculation as she talked. Cara Lane had been killed on the following Wednesday. 'Did she say anything about where she was going that night? A place, a person's name? Say what was so special about the date?'

She closed the book and glanced around the salon before replying. 'She said she hoped this guy was the one.'

'The one?'

'Yeah. Like Mr Wonderful. A lover for life.'

'Your words or hers?'

'Mine,' she said ruefully. 'But you know what I mean. Cara Lane was usually quiet and didn't talk about herself. I was surprised that she opened up as much as she did. She seemed to be really looking forward to going out.'

'Did she get much cut off her hair?' I asked, carefully.

'Cut? No way. A blue-black colour to highlight her natural tones. A beeswax and honey treatment. A blow dry. That was it.'

'No cut,' I said again slowly.

Suzie looked out towards the roundabout. Her face had taken on the meditative quality she often got when she was concentrating on her job. 'She had the nicest hair of any of our clients,' she said. 'She could have been a model for one of the hair-care companies. She tipped me \$30 because her hair looked so fabulous.'

'Have you told the cops any of this? They had her mannequin out in the street on the weekend to jog people's memories.'

When she said she'd been meaning to, I gave her Bill's name and number. I couldn't imagine Cara Lane cutting her own hair or going to another hairdresser. That meant she'd had about ten inches cut off at some time during the four days between her appointment at the hairdressers and her death. If she hadn't trimmed it herself, which seemed unlikely, someone had done it on the night she died or in the days before her body was dumped.

Suzie went back to work on my hair. By the time I emerged from the salon two hours later it was very short and streaked with blonde. I'd tipped her ten dollars, which seemed like a reasonable amount. Cara Lane's thirty bucks seemed excessive, especially for someone on a tight budget. Cara may have felt the length of her hair required a bigger tip. Then again, her generosity might have been the act of a woman caught up in the heady days of a new romance.

I admired my hair in a shop window. It was golden in the sunlight and seemed to accentuate my height. I could understand why Cara Lane took such pride in hers. There was something olde worlde and romantic about hair that long. But few busy women could be bothered with the upkeep of waist length hair. They had it bobbed or cropped like mine.

I stopped at Bray's Bookshop. I'd been thinking about paintings ever since Jane's exhibition but it wasn't just her scenes of Provence that had sharpened my interest in art. The crime scene photos of Cara's body had me thinking about all the paintings of women I'd seen in books or art galleries: the chocolate-box beautiful women of the Pre-Raphaelites, the patterned, floral backgrounds in a Gustav Klimt. I searched along the shelves, found a book about the Renaissance and turned to the Botticellis. The artist had used the same woman as a model, over and over again, as the Virgin Mary, as Venus, until the roles seemed to become interchangeable. I flicked to a colour plate of Spring and peered at the three Graces and Chloris, the flowers spilling down her body. Most of the women in the paintings had long hair, braided or woven into intricate knots and buns in keeping with the times, or coiled in chignons and secured with ribbon. In some of the paintings the hair was left alone to fall like a sheet of water down the women's backs.

~ Fifteen ~

Dad was fussing in the bathroom, making sure he had enough Brylcreem on his head to thwart even the most wayward of his hairs when I arrived to take him to the Show. I sat in the sun and read *The Herald* while I waited. It was full of Show photos of cute kids with even cuter lambs. A Tasmanian man with muscles like sides of beef was triumphant after a victory in the wood chopping. Protests against Len Smith were getting larger and angrier. While Ella and I had been on the railway tracks the previous night, the Police had been called to escort him out of the Show. Punches had been thrown and a couple of people were arrested. The crowd's response hadn't fazed the politician. He was quoted saying he intended going back to the Show that night and every following one.

When Dad was ready, we collected Ernie in Cameron Street. He and Dad talked politics, football and horse racing all the way up Victoria Road and over the Meadowbank Bridge. They'd been following Cara Lane's death and Lee Han's disappearance in the papers as well and had their own grim theories about what had happened to them.

'I hope Lee Han hasn't met the same fate as that lass in Balmain,' Dad said.

'No,' Ernie argued. 'She's probably a runaway. It's nearly always the quiet ones that go like that. The hell raisers let off steam and make sure their families know they're getting out. The quiet ones just disappear. I couldn't get away from my family fast enough.'

'I'd never have called you quiet, Ernie,' I said with a grin. 'I know people are saying Lee Han has bolted but I don't agree. She's an only child and she doesn't sound like the kind of person who would let her family suffer unnecessarily. And she'd have to be aware that after Cara Lane's murder, everyone would be presuming the worst.'

'And?' Dad said.

I shook my head. 'And nothing. I'm not on her case.'

Once we were inside the Showground's turnstiles I left Dad and Ernie to their own devices. Like a lot of inner city men who've spent all their lives within coo-ee of the GPO, Dad and Ernie are absolutely fascinated by country life. They mooch around the cowsheds and the stables. Stare at country people in squatter's hats and elastic-sided boots. Stand mesmerised watching farm hands scrub down bulls and plait horses' manes. They come back to Balmain smelling of roll your own and hay and spend hours over their Reschs in the Dry Dock saying they can't understand how anyone could bear to live in the bush.

I watched them walk off to look at displays of bottled fruit and intricately iced cakes, then I went in search of my own memories.

There weren't any. Maybe it was me, but standing just inside the new Show ground's gates and looking at the buildings didn't evoke a thing. Not the sweep of the old Show ground's concourse or the meat hall with its butchers making sausages for an enraptured crowd, the person selling maps of all the exhibits and renting out creaky prams. There didn't even seem to be any kids trying to convince their parents that they wouldn't complain about carrying their show bags around all day if they bought them straight away. The afternoon sun didn't do much for the concrete surrounds either. The

Show always looks better at night when the kewpie dolls on sticks look like Ginger Rogers in net and spangles and the sideshows are flashing lights. The clowns with their mouths wide open and begging for balls - well, the clowns always look like clowns. At night you can forget the piles of cow shit. The city/ country divide. The moonlight licks the animal pavilions and softens the screams from the rides and all the side-show spruikers look like Tom Cruise or Richard Gere on a bad day.

I spent an hour watching the show jumping then headed into the Hall of Commerce. Plastered to the door of the ladies toilet, Lee Han smiled out from under her fringe. I read the poster again then wandered around the government exhibits. The Federal Equity Bureau had a stand next to the building's exit and a couple of women were handing out information packages to school kids.

'Can I help you with anything?' one of the women asked when I stopped to watch. She was short with cropped, red hair. Her manner was tired and there were dark circles under her eyes.

'Did Lee Han work here?'

Fear spread across the woman's face like a tide sweeps up a beach. Silently, she began to tidy some papers. Then another group of school kids arrived and she went to attend to them. I read a brochure about workplace harassment in the hope that she might come over to answer my question, but she remained at her post, passing sample bags and fielding the children's questions.

I left when it was clear she wasn't coming back. I bought a kewpie doll on a stick for the little girl who lives three doors away. I felt foolish carrying it through the crowd. Then I caught sight of Dad and Ernie. They were

sitting on one of the hay bales that had been strategically placed around the food outlets as a form of makeshift seating. Meat pies, chips and styro-foam cups of tea sat on a bale in front of them. Ernie was wearing a lop-sided velvet hat that made him look like a court jester. Thankfully, Dad hadn't followed suit.

Ernie had his pie half way to his lips. 'Struth, I'm hungry enough to eat the seat out of a wicker chair,' he said as he took a bite. He wanted to buy some show bags for his grand kids before we left, so I waited outside while he and Dad wandered the show bag hall agonising about their choices. I was contemplating the paradox of parents turning into children when I heard raised voices and saw a crowd gathering. I went over to take a look.

Len Smith was surrounded by TV cameras. I'd never seen the politician in the flesh before. He was taller than I'd expected, paler too in the lights that illuminated the scene. He was taking part in a re-run of the item I'd witnessed on the previous night's news and doing another of his meet-the-battlers routines. Just as on the previous occasion, an admiring crowd had gathered to hear him speak. 'Thank you for stopping to listen,' he said with a smile towards them.

Some protesters had gathered too. The crowd edged forward as journalists shouted questions about his policies. Len answered one last query about the need for more money for the bush, then some of the TV crews turned off their lights and began to pack up. Suddenly, there was a rumble from above his head. The crowd instinctively took a step backwards. Someone shouted *Hey, look at that!* and pointed towards the sky just as a heavy white tarpaulin slid down the wall. *Fascists are not wanted here, it read. Australians - stand up for democracy.*

I estimated the wall to be over three metres tall and the banner covered most of it. There was a murmur of surprise, then anger from Len Smith's fans in the crowd. With a gleeful whoop and a YES! two women danced a jig on the wall above the crowd's heads. Len Smith's security guards rushed forward. Seeing the men move, the women scrambled to get down. The lights from the TV cameras picked them out against the sky.

'Shit!' I said as Ella Davies jumped onto a mattress that was held in place by a group of cheering friends. It took a moment before I recognised the second woman. She was the nervous red head from the Federal Equity Bureau's stall. Safely down, security guards in pursuit, the women disappeared into the Show ground crowd.

'Impressive,' a voice said beside me. Daniel Conrad had been watching the protest too. 'The protest ... and your hair.' He gave my cut an appreciative look.

His hair was tied back in its trade mark pony-tail. 'Yours doesn't look too bad either,' I said, and was gratified to see him blush. 'Ella's a gutsy woman. There's no way I'd protest about Len Smith in a partisan crowd like this.'

'No? You seem like the kind of woman who'd give anything a shot.'

His voice was mocking, and I felt my hackles rising. Dad and Ernie were walking towards us from the show bag pavilion so I bit back my retort.

'What's going on?' Dad asked.

I pointed to Len Smith. 'Protesters.'

Dad looked from me to Daniel. He reached out his hand. 'I'm Jack, Nicola's father. This is Ernie.' Daniel shook their hands but didn't offer his own name. We stood looking across to where Len Smith, a martyred expression on his face, was talking animatedly to his minders. His supporters seemed as outraged as he was. Dad made a disgusted noise in his throat and for one horrible moment I thought he was about to spit. 'Let's get out of here,' he said.

I told Daniel I'd see him shortly and walked Dad and Ernie to the gate. Ernie had bought enough Show bags to keep his grandkids in sweets for a couple of months. Dad looked tired and I wished I wasn't working and could drive him home but it was nearly six thirty and the remainder of Refraction would shortly be arriving.

I had just kissed Dad and Ernie goodnight when Ella Davies flew up. 'Change of plans, Nic,' she puffed before I could ask her about the protest. 'Can we get out of here? Now?'

'What about Refraction? Aren't we meeting them?' I asked. She ignored me and started to bully me along. She seemed distracted when I introduced Dad and Ernie and glanced behind her a couple of times.

'I'll take these guys home first, if it's okay with you,' I said.

'Fine,' she replied with another impatient look over her shoulder.

I glanced back too. Daniel Conrad had followed us into the car park and watched as we drove away.

'Drop us at the Dry Dock, love, if you don't mind,' Ernie said when we got back to Balmain. I parked outside the pub and went around to the passenger door to help Dad out but he wasn't having any of it. Ernie was more agile so he went on ahead to secure some stools in the front bar. It was crowded with people watching the footage of Ella Davies and her friend on the TV news. I could hear Ernie telling the woman behind the bar that he'd seen the protest live. He came back to the table with two middies and a packet of crisps, looking pretty pleased with himself.

'A friend of yours is she?' Dad asked with a tip of his head towards Ella in the car outside.

'She's Marge Davies' granddaughter.'

'Right,' he said slowly, as if Marge explained everything. 'Well, she's as gutsy as her grandmother, that's all I can say. Fancy getting away with that stunt. I've got a lot of time for people like her.' He took a sip of his beer. 'Prepared to have a go. We need more like her. Now when Norm Anglesey and Garry Dolan took on the Island's management'

I left him and Ernie to their reminiscences. Ella was asleep and looked so peaceful I didn't have the heart to wake her. She dozed all the way home and seemed to be sleep-walking when she got out in Glebe. I watched as she crossed the road and stopped at the cafe below her building. Some young women at one of the tables were encouraging her to join them. She sat down and glanced across to where I was parked. I waved, then did a *U* turn. The

women leaned their heads together across the table, talking, laughing, but Ella stayed aloof, her eyes still on my car.

The closest parking I could get was in the Broadway Centre. I walked back to Glebe Point Road and stood in the shadows beside a computer shop. From there I had a clear view of Ella in the cafe with her friends. A waiter hovered as they calculated their bills, then they stood up to go. Given that she'd been so tired, I expected Ella to go up to her flat, but as soon as her friends left she sat down again and signalled to the waiter. She took out her mobile phone. Her demeanor changed as she talked. She was suddenly alert, talking loudly. I was too far away to hear what she was saying but the people at the next table turned to stare.

I wasn't having a comfortable vigil. A couple of drunks got over-friendly. Someone else wanted directions to a restaurant. A car slowed and the driver checked me out. Suddenly Ella was on the move - not upstairs to her flat but towards Parramatta Road. She walked quickly, oblivious to the crowds that surged out of the Broadway Centre and Hoyts cinemas. She stopped on the corner of City Road and looked around as though she was reassuring herself that I was still there. The lights were against her but she saw a break in the traffic and sprinted towards Cleveland Street. I watched her turn into a lane beside the Landsdowne pub. Cursed as the traffic thickened, then sped up. By the time I'd crossed the road she'd gone.

I walked down the lane she'd taken. Away from the Broadway traffic the area was quiet. A couple of Tom cats were bawling at one another in the backyard of a terrace. I stopped and listened. Heard footsteps running towards Shepherd Street. I started to run too. Ella was up ahead. She glanced back, but kept on running, her footsteps echoing off the backs of dunny walls. I turned the corner and followed, hugging the shadows. Ella had disappeared.

I could see the blue light flashing before I turned into the next street. Two police cars were parked at an angle outside a building that was covered with hoardings. A small crowd had gathered to watch. Ella wasn't amongst them. I looked up at the building's façade. A second story window was illuminated and from time to time a person walked across it like an actor on a movie screen. Two cops in uniform were watching the building's front door, one chewing gum, the other saying something to him softly, so the crowd wouldn't hear.

'What's going on?' I asked the woman standing next to me.

'No idea,' she said. 'I was watching TV then suddenly these police cars arrived. Just like something out of *NYPD Blue*, isn't it?'

Some plain clothes cops had come to the door and were conferring. Bill Litton was amongst them. They looked towards the crowd and I stepped forward. Bill said something to his colleagues and walked over to me. 'What are you doing here?'

'I should ask you that question.'

He turned his back to the crowd and moved his face closer to mine. 'We got a tip off ten minutes ago. The caller said we'd find something that would help us with the Cara Lane investigation.'

'And did you?'

He nodded slowly. 'Yeah.' One of the detectives was spreading crime scene tape along the fence. 'Come on,' Bill said brusquely, taking my arm

and moving me towards the door. 'It's alright, Moz,' he said to his colleague. 'She's one of us.'

I smiled at my promotion as I followed Bill up the stairs and into a room that was full of cops and other bulky shapes. There was an Edwardian chaise longue covered with dark green velvet. A baby grand piano gleamed as black as a coffin. A cupboard had been opened onto shelves of notepaper, books, boxes of chalk and poster paint. It looked as though someone had been using the place as a school of some kind. But the focus of everyone's attention was on the far side of the room.

A huge canvas stood on an easel. A woman with skin as white as capuccino froth was lying on a couch, smiling towards the artist. Her hair was loose and cascaded around her naked body. One hand was extended along her stomach and seemed to be pointing towards her pelvis. All around her on the couch and the floor below it were white flowers - roses, gardenias, daisies, jasmine, arum lilies. They crept like a scented tide up her legs and thighs and wove their way into her pubic hair. I'd thought about Cara Lane so much during the past six weeks that her body felt as familiar as my own. There was the long hair I'd discussed with Bill and Suzie that morning draped around her shoulders like that of the women in the art plates I'd examined at Brays. I leaned forward and sniffed the canvas. It had an oily, newly painted scent like the landscape in her flat.

'Was it a man or a woman who rang you?' I asked, my eyes still on Cara's face. Her expression was beatific. It was a look that was widely used in paintings of the Virgin ascending to heaven or someone about to seduce her lover.

'A woman.'

'Have you traced the call?'

'Not yet.'

The paint had been applied thinly and in parts the bare white canvas showed through. Cara's skin was painted in soft even strokes. Her dark hair was thick and highlighted with blue. Bill let the torch run along one of the strands while I checked the painting's lower, right-hand corner. There was no signature. 'This was painted by someone who knows what they're doing,' I said. 'A talented amateur perhaps, but the techniques they've used are sophisticated. The glazing, the way they've applied the paint thickly in some places and thinly in others, the dimension...'

'Look at that.' Bill pointed towards a tiny window that had been painted in the wall behind her. It back-lit the body, creating a series of complex light and shadow effects around it.

'*Chiaro scuro*,' I said. 'Light and shade. Do you reckon it was painted in here?'

'Don't know...But that's just what she looked like when we found her,' he said.

'And the person who killed her painted this or knew about the painting?'

He shrugged towards the forensic team. 'Let's get out of here and leave them to it. What were you doing around here, Nic?' he asked again when we reached the street. I told him I'd been tailing Ella Davies. 'And...?' he asked slowly.

'I was tailing Ella Davies. I lost her. Saw the flashing lights and came to see what was happening.'

Someone called his name and he turned and gave a nod. 'I'd better get back.'

'Can you come around on your way home tonight? There's something I want to show you. It doesn't matter how late it is.'

He said he would and walked back inside. The upstairs window was unnaturally bright in the building's dark façade. Bill appeared at it and looked down. He raised his hand in a kind of wave, then disappeared.

~ Seventeen ~

I walked straight back to Ella's, took the stairs to her flat two at a time, then tapped at her door. There was no answer. I waited a few minutes and tried again, louder this time. I stood right in front of the peephole so she could see me and tapped more insistently when I heard rustling behind the door.

'What?' she asked, pulling the door open on its chain and peering out.

'Let me in,' I said.

She slid the chain across and opened the door wide. 'I was asleep,' she said in an injured voice. 'I've got to run a tutorial tomorrow. It's worth thirty percent.'

'Where did you go tonight after you left the cafe?'

She pulled her dressing gown closer to her. 'I just wanted to stretch my legs. I knew you were behind me so I went for it.'

'Went for it?'

'Down the lane to Abercrombie Street, then back up Parramatta Road. Sometimes I get so tired I sleep badly. If I take a short walk before I go to bed I sleep a lot better.'

'Why do I think you're bullshitting me?'

'I'm not.'

I sat back in my chair and look at her hard. She was perched on the edge of the couch, her dressing gown clutched to her neck. Her hair was standing up on one side of her head and the corresponding cheek was flushed as though she'd been sleeping on it. I stood up and opened her bedroom door. Her bed was as tousled as she was. I pulled back the doona and felt the mattress. It was warm.

'Hey!' she said indignantly.

'Okay,' I said, smoothing the quilt. 'I believe you.'

'What's all this is about?'

'Murder. While I was following you the police found something that relates to Cara Lane's murder. I just wanted to be absolutely sure you knew nothing about it.'

Her face went as white as putty. 'No way,' she said.

'You made a phone call from the cafe downstairs.'

'Yeah, to Jane.'

'I can check redial on your phone.'

'I've made a couple of other calls since then to people in my tutorial group.'

Her face was so set and stubborn there was no point in demanding the phone and checking. If she'd called the cops she'd have made sure she covered her tracks. I was already halfway out the door. 'Okay,' I said. 'In the meantime, you'd better stay away from those lanes you use for your bedtime walks.'

~ *Eighteen* ~

Bill called at twenty to one to say he was on his way over. I was still up and wide-awake. I'd piled my small collection of art books on the coffee table. Reading them had kept me well and truly alert. Bill looked knackered when he finally walked in. He'd been running his hands through his hair and it stood on end as Ella's had and made him look gormless, like a baby bird.

'What's happening?' I asked.

'We're still going over the place. The owner's come and he's co-operating. He was storing some stuff for a friend - the piano, couch, a few boxes of books and painting tackle.'

'And the painting?'

'He didn't know anything about the painting. We've spoken to his mate who owns all the other stuff. He doesn't know anything about the painting either, or so he says, so it's been taken into custody.' He laughed dryly at his own joke and ran his hands through his hair again. 'Christ, I'm tired. I've been doing double shifts for the past week. Look, no-one's to find out about tonight. It's embargoed so no talking. We want to flush out the painting's owner. We're chasing up some leads in the arts and the place will be kept under surveillance.'

'Who in the arts?' But Bill just shook his head and closed up us tight as the new treasurer's budget for the unemployed. 'I've got something to show

you,' I said. I reached for the book I'd been reading before he arrived. Bill took it from me and stared at the cover where St Jerome was on his knees adoring the Virgin. He started to turn the pages. I sat down on the couch beside him and waited as he flicked and stopped, flicked and stopped, looking at one Renaissance painting after another. 'Give it here,' I said, impatiently. I turned the page and pointed to a Raphael, then Botticelli, Bellini, Leonardo de Vinci, Bronzino, Titian.

'I wanted you to see what I meant when I said that Cara Lane had been set up like a painting. There are clear similarities between these paintings and the way the woman was posed in that canvas tonight. Look...' I turned to Titian's Venus of Urbino and read the words underneath the painting slowly. *'She is wide awake and fully conscious of her charms as she gazes languidly at the spectator and rests her right arm upon a white pillow, while she lightly grasps a cluster of red roses. The dark green curtain, the red couch spread with white sheets and subdued light provide a muted foil for the resplendent beauty of the nude body.* I reckon whoever painted that picture was copying these paintings. So many of them are allegorical. Nothing can be taken on face value. They say things about the status of the subject, the artist, their patron, about the politics of the day.'

Bill looked down at the page again. 'I hear what you're saying, Nic, but it's out of my hands now. The painting's going to an expert at the Art Gallery tomorrow. They'll know all that Renaissance stuff and we'll know more after that.'

I told him I'd checked on Ella Davies. That wasn't to say that I believed her bedtime walking lark. My theory was that she was hiding Lee Han somewhere. I held up the little dragon I'd found on the railway track. 'I'm pretty sure this belongs to Lee Han. I was going to talk to her parents about it. See what they thought. But given tonight's discovery...'

He stood up angrily and my voice trailed off. 'Don't go anywhere near them, Nicola,' he said, taking the dragon and pocketing it. 'They're going through enough as it is. One minute she's a model daughter, their only kid, I might add, the next she's gone. If Lee Han and Ella Davies are stuffing us around they'd better watch out and you can pass that message on toot sweet to your young revolutionary.' He looked embarrassed by his outburst and his voice softened. 'I've got to get home. This is the most bizarre case I've ever worked on and that's saying something. The painting brings a whole new dimension to it. I'll call you tomorrow.' He took a quick look at his watch. 'Well, later today.'

I had a big day ahead. I needed to meet Jane Davies to talk about Ella. I also wanted to brief Rickie about the previous night's events. After the late night I felt groggy and disoriented. The newspaper brought me around. While I'd been tailing Ella through Chippendale the previous night, a man had rung talk back radio. Just as in the Cara Lane murder, he'd spoken in a synthesised voice. He told the cops to look on the southern side of the railway line, halfway between Central Station and Redfern. There, he said, they'd find Lee Han's denim jacket and a shoe. When the cops had followed the man's directions they found the items lying below the Cleveland Street Bridge, a stone's throw away from where Ella and I had crouched.

I stared at the newspaper photo. A uniformed constable held the shoe up for the journalist's camera. He could have been Prince Charming in a peaked cap, the shoe poised on the flat of his palm, black leather with the type of rubber wedge sole that had become fashionable again. Lee Han's tearful parents had confirmed the clothing belonged to their daughter and promised a substantial reward for any more clues. They'd even offered to go on talk-back radio to negotiate with the caller. If my hunch was right and Ella had gone to meet Lee Han in Chippendale, why was someone trying to link Lee's disappearance with Cara Lane's death?

Behind the police officer's back I could just make out Prince Alfred Park and silver, double-decker passenger trains full of commuters on their way to work. To the right was the square tower of the Greek Orthodox Church in Cleveland Street. The Police were taking the call very seriously. They'd issued warnings to women in the inner city to be careful, to travel

with friends and watch out for cruising cars. I scoured the newspaper from cover to cover. There was nothing about the discovery of the painting but I knew it wouldn't be long before the media got wind of the story.

I called Rickie as soon as I'd finished with the papers. He told me he was parked outside Ella's flat. 'We need to talk today.'

'What's wrong with now?' he asked.

'Not on the phone. Before we go any further with this job, you need to know what's been happening.'

'What about my surveillance?' he asked.

'Stay there. I'll come to you.' Something in the tone of my voice must have warned Rickie not to clown around. He rang off without his usual wisecracks.

Jane Davies sounded agitated when I called her. I asked if she was upset about the news. 'What news?'

'Lee Han.'

'Why? Have they found her?'

'No, just some of her clothes.'

She said she hadn't read that day's papers or listened to the radio. She seemed to be only half-listening when I told her I'd call over to her studio later on my way to Mirage's offices in Willoughby. I hung up with the distinct feeling that nothing I'd said had entered her consciousness.

Twenty minutes later I parked the 504 behind Rickie. He was sitting in his car outside Gleebooks, eating a doner kebab. I tapped on the window and he leaned across and opened the passenger door. 'Bit early in the day for one of those, isn't it?' I said, when he offered me a bite.

His mouth was full so he nodded towards the bookshop when I asked where Ella was. 'She's nice,' he said, wiping his mouth with a paper serviette. 'She waved to me this morning when she came out for a walk. She must be a bloody good student. She's always in the library or a bookshop.' He changed his tune when I told him about Lee Han's clothes and the painting. 'You reckon she knows about them?'

'She's denying all knowledge. But that's not to say she's not lying. I reckon she knows Lee Han's whereabouts. I'm meeting her at the Show at six. Can you stay with her until she's through the Show gates and in my sights?'

He nodded slowly and I could almost here the cogs of his brain whirring while he thought through the implications of what I'd told him. I glanced through Gleebooks' window. Ella was examining some books on a lower shelf.

'I'll see you later,' I said, getting out. I walked into the bookshop. 'Hi,' I said, crouching on the floor beside her.

'Hi,' she smiled back.

'Want to tell me anything more about last night?'

'There's nothing to tell.' She pulled out a book and looked at the back cover before replacing it.

'The cops found some of Lee Han's things beside the railway tracks.'

'I know. I saw it in the paper.'

'So tell me you don't know anything about it.'

'I don't.' She had the same set to her jaw I'd seen on her grandmother, something between the stony profile of an Easter Island statue and a clam, shut tight. She wasn't going to say another word.

I waited a few minutes, then stood up. 'I'll see you tonight,' I said.

Jane was painting at the window when I walked into her studio. The canvases she'd stacked around the room were the abstracts I'd noted when I'd met with her the previous Saturday. They certainly bore no resemblance to the painting of Cara Lane. The paint was applied so thickly your fingers would sink up to the knuckle if you poked too hard. There were landscapes too, full of wildly distorted trees and people dwarfed under their branches. Ian Routley should see these, I thought to myself. There was nothing tricked up or safe about them.

Jane hadn't watched TV the previous night so she'd missed the coverage of Ella's protest. She clicked her tongue with irritation when I told her about it. Given her hostility, I thought it best not to tell her about Ella's expedition into Chippendale. Jane wrote a cheque for five hundred dollars and asked for regular reports. Said over the phone would suffice. She seemed eager to get back to her work and her body language made sure I didn't linger.

I followed the wooden walk-way through the building and into the sun-filled street. I had an hour to kill before I drove over to Willoughby and I was tempted to sit in the sun in Jubilee Park. I resisted the impulse. The traffic on the Harbour Bridge was unpredictable at the best of times and I didn't want to be late for my meeting with Mirage.

I'd just edged the Peugeot into Glebe Point Road when a dark green Commodore pulled away from a parking spot not far from Jane's studio. It followed me to the Crescent and then onto the freeway. I flicked the indicator and moved across into the Harbour Bridge lane. The Commodore did the same. A couple of cars merged between us and I lost sight of it. I kept an eye open for it on the Harbour Bridge but the traffic was already dense and moving faster than the speed limit. It appeared in my rear vision mirror as I neared North Sydney. I almost missed the Willoughby turn off and did a quick merge into the right hand lane. I heard a squeal of brakes as the car swerved into the lane behind me, its tyres bumping along the tiger eyes.

I noted its number plate - LTS 231. The driver, a man in dark glasses, was of indeterminate age. If he were serious about tailing me he'd have been a lot less obvious about it. He clearly wanted me to notice him. I turned into Willoughby Road and drove towards Mirage. The car tailgated me for a couple of blocks. It slowed down and fell behind when I turned left. It was nowhere in sight when I pulled into Mirage's parking lot and parked beside one of the company's refrigerated transport trucks.

A security guard buzzed me into the building's foyer. I watched the street while he rang the Chief Executive to let her know I'd arrived. I was just about to go upstairs to the meeting room when the Commodore slowly drove past. Bold as brass, the driver stopped behind the Peugeot as though making sure I wasn't in it, then sped off.

~ *Twenty* ~

The meeting with Mirage finished at four thirty. A news bulletin announced there'd been an accident on the Anzac Bridge so I took the Fish Markets exit and went home through Glebe. I followed all the other drivers with the same idea up Bridge Road, then turned right at Glebe Point Road and headed down towards the water and Jane's studio. There was no sign of the green Commodore in the adjoining streets but I toyed with the idea of calling in to see Jane and asking her about the car that had started tailing me. It could have had something to do with the Mirage case but I doubted it. The perpetrators had left their run too late for any tactics to scare me off. The Davies' women were a different matter. I'd first noticed the car after my meeting with Ella, then again on the way to Marge's place. The car's appearance near Jane's studio meant someone was watching all of them, as well as me. But who and why?

Jubilee Park was a haven from the peak hour traffic. A couple of people were walking arm in arm. They only had eyes for each other. It had been a long time since I'd walked arm in arm with a lover. Too long, I realised, and I was missing it.

An old woman was standing at the water's edge. I would have known the aquiline nose, the bearing anywhere. Marge Davies. She turned when someone called. A man loped towards her across the grass. When he reached Marge he shook her hand, then they turned and started to walk slowly towards Glebe together. The car behind me tooted. Traffic on The Crescent had moved on, leaving a gap of about three spaces between me and the car in front. I waved an apology, indicated a left turn, drove up View Street and

parked. The man had gone but Marge was still there, facing the western sky which was already tinged yellow by the setting sun.

'Hello, Ms Davies,' I called as I approached.

She turned, surprised. Her voice was perky but it didn't disguise the suspicion that clouded her face as soon as she recognised me. 'Oh, Nicola. Don't you look smart?'

I did a self-conscious little bow. My Mirage outfit was a black jacket and tight black skirt, a white silk blouse, my mother's string of seed pearls. I was carrying a black leather brief case that made me look as though I might have an office in the city and an accountant who was into dot.com scams.

Marge stretched out her hand. 'I was just enjoying the last of the sunlight. Come and join me.'

'I saw you as I drove past, chatting to someone.'

'Chatting?' she said slowly. Then she smiled, her eyes fixed on mine. 'Oh, that was just someone needing directions to Glebe Point Road.' If the man had been a stranger, Marge Davies certainly took her civic duties very seriously. She turned and looked down into the water where a slick of oil and some discarded food wrappers were washing against the shore. 'Have you spoken to my daughter about Ella?'

'Yeah, I have. I've already been over to see her,' I said, pointing towards Jane's studio. 'And I've spent the last couple of evenings with Ella.'

Marge smiled. 'Jane always was a worrier but in this situation I think its warranted. Ella's a good girl, she'll do as she's told. Yours is a funny line of work. Hardly the sort of thing a qualified lawyer would do.'

I hadn't told her anything about my background. I wondered who'd been filling her in on my resume. If Ella had, why was Marge pretending she knew nothing about my nights with her grand-daughter?

'Do you think so?' I said. 'I've been roughed up once or twice. You learn fast. I'm a lot more careful now.'

We had neared Jane's studio. I wondered if Jane was at work and could see us. The sun had bronzed the studio's windows and turned them opaque. If she was in there she was invisible to me. Marge glanced towards the studio too.

'I must be getting home,' she said turning back towards Annandale.

'I'm interested in hearing what you have to say about Len Smith at Micheala's meeting next Saturday,' I said. 'You mentioned the other night that you knew a lot about him.'

'Not that I'd say in a public place.'

'You can trust me.'

She stopped. 'If you're interested in Len Smith you can find out as much as you want from old newspapers at the library. Ella tells me he even has a web site.'

'I know,' I said. 'I've already checked it out.'

'Then you'll know Len's been around a long time. Always conservative of course, but something tipped him to the extreme Right a couple of years ago.'

'Like what?'

Marge shrugged. 'Who knows? What makes anyone start to behave differently?'

'Maybe he was always an extremist. He just masked it well.'

Marge lifted her hands in a gesture that said perhaps. 'What I really want to know is where the money comes from for his political party. That's the mystery. The media says its coming from international fascist organisations. But I don't agree. Some of it may come from overseas but never underestimate local supporters. Len Smith's got plenty of them and they're a dangerous mob.'

We reached the pedestrian crossing and waited for the traffic lights to change. 'Do you need a lift home?' I asked, pointing towards View Street and my car.

Marge laughed. 'Good heavens, no. I need the exercise. I'm glad you're keeping Ella safe. You'll find her fascinating. She's a Davies, through and through.'

It was dark by the time I got back to Ballast Point Road. The street lights had come on and lights were on in all the houses in my row. The only house in darkness was mine and the cat sat impatient and accusing at the

door. I whistled to him from the car's open window and he snaked his way down the front steps and sprang onto the Peugeot's still warm bonnet. He sat there and watched while I got my bag off the passenger seat.

In my rear view mirror I saw someone walking towards Dock Road. There was something furtive about the way the person moved. I picked up my bag, locked the car and walked over to the corner. The person had gone. I did a quick tally of the parked cars. Most belonged to my neighbours. None of the ones that didn't was a green Commodore.

Some mail had arrived when I was out. I gathered it up as I went inside. I smiled when I saw a postcard from Bridget amongst all the bills. She was getting around: Uześ, Cavaillon, Apt, St Rémy-De-Provence. She described the house she was renting with friends in her usual illegible scrawl and raved about the local markets with their cheeses and olives and fabrics in vivid shades of yellow and blue. She wanted to know what was happening in Australia. French television news had been covering the new Australian government with interest and had compared the shift to the Right with the French National Front. People had been asking her how long Australia had harboured far Right elements.

I poured myself a glass of orange juice and scribbled a quick reply. I told her that the new government was a horror story. That I'd been dancing with Noni and had met a man with a pony-tail and a wacko dancing style. That I was missing her company. I put the letter to one side to post the next day. A boat on the harbour was sounding its horn, low and mournful. 'I'm getting paranoid, puss,' I said, opening a tin of cat food. 'Death is stalking Balmain's streets like a mangy, unloved Tom. I've found an important clue to a murder. And after a few days of mixing with the Davies' family I'm being tailed.'

The cat didn't contribute any new ideas so I rang Bill Litton to find out what was happening with the painting. One of his off-siders told me he'd had gone to Melbourne and wouldn't be back for a couple of days.

~ *Twenty One* ~

I changed my clothes before I went out. I wouldn't normally have bothered too much for a night at the Show but I wanted to look nice for Refraction. Noni Jacobsen called just as I was heading out the door. 'Hi mate,' she said, 'I've got that info you wanted.'

I grabbed a biro and notepad and started to write.

'Request number one. *Four Corners*. Eleven May. *Who's funding the extreme Right in Australia?* The ABC has been threatened with an injunction to stop the program so it looks like it won't be going to air. One of the reporters has received death threats.'

No wonder Marge Davies had been so interested, I thought. 'Does the program name names?'

'Yeah,' Noni replied. 'So it would seem. Some pretty well-known Aussies who'd rather their political donations to Len Smith's Forum remained anonymous.'

'Like who?'

'A wealthy business man in Melbourne for one. A judge. A university think tank that acts as a conduit for individual donations.'

'Is *Four Corners* spilling the beans on Len Smith as well?'

'What's to spill?' she sighed. 'You know party leaders have to be saints these days. God knows we've tried to unearth something on Smith, but he's clean as a whistle. Now about Cara Lane. She lived in Balmain. You know that anyway. Darling Street. Her funeral entitlement went to an address in Melbourne. 39 Charles Street, Collingwood.'

'That's the address I saw on the contract of sale for her flat.'

'Yeah, next of kin, her sister, Ms Gerry Hopkins.'

'Sister?'

'Yeah, Gerry, Geraldine, I suppose. Cara Lane had been a member of the union for only a year. She didn't belong when she lived in the bush. Must have decided she needed the union when she moved to the city.'

'Is that unusual?'

'Not really. Recruitment is always harder in country areas. A lot of people in country towns think they'll be branded as radicals if they join a union. Plenty join in secret but lots just don't bother. Cara Lane was a Level 11, with a salary of \$66, 232 when she died. That's all I've got on her.'

She paused while I scribbled in my notepad. If Cara Lane joined the union when she came to Sydney was there a reason she felt she needed them? Some trouble at work? Harassment? A fear of being laid off? 'What about Lee Han?'

'She wasn't a member but if it helps, someone here knew her. She worked for the Federal Equity Bureau. It looks after equal opportunity in the

Commonwealth public service. It's a separate public sector unit but it reports to the Attorney General through his department.'

'And Len Smith..' I said slowly, '... is the Attorney General.'

'Yeah, and not known for supporting equal opportunity and human rights. Everyone's saying there will be amendments to federal legislation very soon, particularly the Sex and Race Discrimination Acts. He'll tinker with a few of the provisions, then he'll really get stuck into them.'

'Cara Lane worked for the Attorney General's Department too.'

'Yeah, but that doesn't mean the women knew one another. Cara Lane worked for the International Law Unit. Its main office is in Canberra and there's a smaller unit in Sydney. They monitor the impact of international law on Australia's legal system.'

'United Nation's conventions?' I asked.

'Amongst lots of other laws. Trade policy and laws. International scams and frauds. Terrorism and rites of asylum. They look at how countries deal with political issues legislation-wise and if appropriate, recommend the Australian government consider going down the same route.'

'Wouldn't someone working there have to be a lawyer?'

'Not necessarily. A good research background and an understanding of the issues are probably enough. Still, it's a bit of a quantum leap from an employment office in Dubbo.'

She covered the mouthpiece and spoke to someone who had come into her office. Her voice sounded harried when she came back on the line. 'I've got to go, mate. There's a Trades' Hall meeting tonight. Should be scintillating. Just don't forget you promised me dinner and another night at The Weeds.'

~ *Twenty Two* ~

The Peugeot was acting ratty so I parked it in Rozelle and caught a bus to the Show. I headed straight for the Arts and Crafts pavilion when I got there and spent some time checking out the paintings. There were half a dozen nudes. The artists must have had obliging and un-self-conscious friends - or florid imaginations. Some were very good but none displayed the expertise I'd seen in the painting of Cara Lane.

A champagne cork popped and a gaggle of people formed in front of a woman in a tweed jacket who was pinning a certificate of merit to the wall. 'Well, hello,' a deep voice said. 'Fancy meeting you here. I wouldn't have thought the Royal Easter Show was your scene at all.'

Surprised, I turned to greet Ian Routley. 'Ditto,' I said as I shook his outstretched hand. In leather jeans and a crew neck sweater, he was as incongruous amongst the Show crowd as a sleek, black Porsche amongst a paddock full of tractors.

'I've been thinking about you since we met at Glebe,' he said.

'Yeah?' I replied with a laugh. 'After just one meeting? Why was that?'

He looked at me intently for a moment. 'Don't be so modest, Nicola. You're very striking. And a private detective. That means you're a woman who can look after herself.'

He was making me feel embarrassed and I checked over my shoulder to make sure no one was listening.

He pointed to the landscape that had just been awarded first prize. 'Isn't this painting excellent? I'm always pleased to judge unpretentious art. The artist, Luke Redmond, works as a teacher in Walgett. He couldn't make it down to collect his prize, unfortunately....'

I started when I heard the name of the artist who had painted the landscape in Cara Lane's bedroom, aware that Ian was watching me closely.

'...Artists like Jane Davies would think it beneath them to come out here. Pity, they'd learn a lot from these paintings.'

I raised my eyebrows in an attempt to look sardonic. 'What was it you said at Jane Davies' exhibition the other day? Something about not gawking at tricked up paintings of wheat and sheep?'

A photographer stepped forward and took a photo of us both. Ian smiled at her. 'Hello Judith.' When she asked my name I told her not to worry about it but Ian spelled it out for her. When she'd gone, we turned back to the prize-winning painting. It was painted in deep, swirling strokes and the wheat was bright yellow against a brutally blue sky.

With a self-satisfied look, Ian began to walk slowly down the aisle, scrutinising the art. I followed him, stopping from time to time to admire something good or to look with fascination at the paintings that were bad.

'Some of these aren't much chop but a lot are really quite remarkable.' He paused in front of a water-colour. 'People think I'm an art snob but I'm not. It's just a case of recognising amateur art and acknowledging the skill

that goes into it. Look at that one.' He glanced down at his judge's notes. 'Not quite good enough for a prize, but it would give a lot of pleasure on anyone's lounge room wall. You said you're working here. At what?' he asked, stopping again.

'I'm keeping an eye on someone.'

He turned towards me, his face so close I could smell the champagne he'd just consumed on his breath. 'Really? Who?'

'Len Smith. I'm just one of the many people letting him know I don't like his politics.'

'Len Smith's an unpleasant man. Pity people couldn't see it before the election but it's water under the bridge now.'

We had entered the photography section and he indicated a black and white photo of an old woman and a child. The woman sat on a bench. She was naked and her breasts sagged almost to her waist. Beside her was a girl of about fourteen - her granddaughter perhaps. The photo seemed immeasurably sad to me. The old woman would die. The teenager had her whole life ahead of her but, like the old woman, she too would age and sag and die one day. I swallowed the lump that had floated up to my throat, uncomfortably aware that Ian was watching me closely.

'Do you like this?' he asked.

'It's terrific.'

'I thought you would. Youth is so fleeting it has to be chronicled.' He finished his drink and looked around for somewhere to place the empty glass.

'How long have you known Jane Davies?' I asked as we walked back towards the other judges.

He did a quick calculation. 'Nearly ten years.'

'That long?' I said, surprised. 'Did you meet her overseas?'

He smiled a greeting at someone before answering. 'I first ran into her at the Venice Biennale. She was very friendly when she realised I was covering the event for the Australian media. I've been following her career since. The Archibald win put her in the spotlight and she hasn't really been out of it since.'

'Do you paint too?'

A crowd of grateful prize-winners surrounded us and he didn't get a chance to answer. He acknowledged their thanks with an occasional nod of his head then accepted another drink.

I could hear the tinkling music of a merry-go-round above their chatter. The sky outside the pavilion was dark and peppered with brightly coloured fairy lights. I touched Ian on the arm when I saw Ella Davies striding past outside. 'Sorry. I've got to go. Nice to have met you again,' I said.

He looked up for a moment, as though surprised by my defection, then returned to his fans.

~ *Twenty Three* ~

Ella had almost reached a group of men and women from Refraction who were drinking coffee at a wooden table. Daniel Conrad was amongst them. He seemed to have taken some time over his outfit too. He'd tucked his pony-tail into the top of his polo-necked jumper and replaced his usual denim jacket with a more tailored leather coat. I was tempted to tell him the look was very fetching, just so I could watch him blush. The ginger-haired woman I'd seen at the Federal Equity Bureau's stand the previous day was there as well. Her work clothes had been replaced with the tee shirt and jogging pants she'd been wearing when she'd danced with Ella on the wall above Len Smith. Perhaps she was planning to scale more walls that night.

Ella spun around when I shouted her name. She started to smile but it died on her lips. She stared beyond me, in the direction from where I'd come. I turned, surprised by the look on her face. Ian Routley was standing in the doorway of the Arts and Crafts pavilion, another glass of champagne half way to his mouth. He saw me turn and raised his glass in salute.

'What's he doing here?' Ella asked.

'Ian Routley? He was one of the Art Show judges. They've just been handing out prizes.'

'What's been happening?' she asked in a leaden voice, turning to the group.

'Not much,' Peter Watson said. 'We've heard Len Smith's not coming tonight. He's at a function in Parramatta but he might turn up later. His office is putting out lots of misinformation to foil the protesters.'

'If Len Smith isn't coming we might as well go home,' Daniel said.

Ella surveyed him with contempt then said something sharply to him in French. Daniel looked as though she'd slapped him. Ella seemed not to notice the flush of anger creeping up his face, but I did. She pointed to the woman from the Federal Equity Bureau stand. 'Len Smith or not, we should stay here and hand out fliers. This is Leonie Radcliffe everyone. Nicola was very impressed with our banner display yesterday, weren't you, Nic?'

I nodded. 'Yeah, very. It even made the late news.'

Ella had been scrounging through a large plastic bag. She pulled out a swag of fliers and started to pass them around. 'Some of you guys can head off and start handing these out,' she said. 'Daniel, Leonie and Doug can do the area around the entrance. I'll wait here till ten. Nicola, you stay with me.' I sat down while she got organised. She didn't seem to notice me observing her, or if she did, she didn't care. A frown danced across her forehead and her lips pursed as she counted, then re-counted the fliers.

'Has Bill Litton contacted you?' I asked softly.

'Yes,' she said, her fingers still working their way through the pile.

'And?'

'And...' she said with a quick glance up at me, '...I told him what I told you. I went for a walk before going to bed. If you had followed me, you'd

have seen I walked a few blocks then headed home along Parramatta Road. I was in bed by eleven. The guy at the cafe 'downstairs saw me come in - and the couple who live next door. I've given Bill Litton their names.'

She patted the papers into a neat bundle then turned to watch the crowds. She seemed fascinated by a man and a little boy who walked past. The kid was so loaded up with show bags he could hardly move. Whenever his father bent down and offered to help, the kid refused and continued to stumble on his way. Ella watched their pantomime until they'd walked behind a stall.

'Do you miss your father?' I asked.

She turned towards me sharply. 'Why?'

I shrugged. 'You just seemed taken by that kid and his Dad.'

She took a swig from a bottle of mineral water before answering. 'Yeah. I miss him.'

'Does he still live in France?'

She nodded. 'He's been here twice. He and Marge didn't hit it off. He wasn't encouraged to come back again.'

The fireworks display had started in the main arena and a rocket exploded overhead. 'Why didn't Marge like him?' Ella cupped her hand to her ear and I shouted the question again. I could see the purple reflection of a rocket in her eyes as she leaned forward to reply.

'He wasn't good enough for her daughter, I suppose. Your Dad seems nice.'

'Yeah, everyone loves Dad. He's great. But he drives me nuts sometimes.'

'Just like me and Jane,' she grinned.

She started approaching people. She certainly was determined. After dozens had knocked back my fliers, I just watched. It was getting late and the crowds were thinning. I could see Ian Routley just inside the doorway of the Arts and Crafts pavilion, still drinking champagne and chatting to the other judges. Every so often he'd look towards where Ella and I were standing. Crowds of people kept coming between us and Ian would crane his neck to get a better view. I was flattered at first, to think I'd made such a dramatic impression. Then I realised it was Ella he was watching.

My left foot had gone numb again and I stamped it to get the circulation going again. 'What's up?' Daniel said from just behind me. 'You look like a polo pony when you do that.'

I hadn't heard him walk up and I jumped. 'Cramp,' I said, the surprise making my voice hard.

He turned to look at Ella arguing with a couple of men.

'Much been happening at the gates?' I asked.

'Not really,' he said, his eyes still on Ella. 'Some people take the fliers, others don't. A Show ground official kept an eye on us for a while. They've

been remarkably tolerant, I have to say. We went to get a cup of tea and the official left us alone after that.'

'What did Ella say to you in French before?'

'She told me not to come here if I didn't believe in what I was doing. She also said not to be late again.'

'And how did you feel about it?' I said.

He was grinning and his smile was infectious. 'Not happy, as you probably could tell.'

'Yeah,' I said. 'You're the only man I know who can blush like that. It's very attractive.' On cue, he blushed again.

'What are you two laughing about?' Ella asked. She'd pulled up her sleeve and was looking at her watch. 'Not much happening is there? Want to head off?'

Leonie Radcliffe suddenly came flying through the crowd. 'Quick! Hurry up! Len Smith's arrived. He's at the main gate.'

Ella's fist shot up into the air. 'Yes!' She danced another of her little jigs. 'I knew he'd come, the liar. That Parramatta function was just a smoke screen.' She passed me her pile of fliers. 'Can you collect what's left and follow us?' Then she and Leonie tore off.

I picked up Ella's canvas carry bag, slung it over my shoulder and ran through the crowd after her. I could hear the chants before I could see Ella and the rest of Refraction. *Fascist! Fascist! Out! Out! Out!* I watched two

security guards push towards them, one already talking into a mobile phone. If Len Smith was fazed by the ruckus, he didn't show it. He stood silently, legs apart, feet pointing outwards like a ballet dancer about to execute a plie, and watched the crowd of protesters circle. His bodyguards were standing a few feet in front of him, watchful, arms folded across their chests. Show patrons were forming into little groups and the security guards looked from face to face as if defying someone to come closer. Suddenly, an egg sailed through the crowd and hit Len Smith on the side of his face.

All hell broke loose. Daniel, who had been bouncing on the balls of his feet beside me, shot forward towards Ella and Leonie. The shock of Len's face, smeared with the yellow yolk had momentarily hushed the crowd. Daniel pushed Leonie and Ella back towards me. 'Out!' I started to say something but his face was set in a furious mask. 'Come on, Nicola. Quick.' A sound like a boulder rolling down a hill followed us: outraged shouts, feet running, a whistle blowing. I didn't look back when someone screamed. Beside me, Ella was trying to pull her arm away from Daniel's grip.

'Let go, Daniel,' she shouted. 'It's just starting to get good.' But he was determined not to hear. He shoved her through the gates and towards the car park.

'Fuck off, Ella,' he muttered. 'Going back in there would be suicidal.'

I got a shock when I saw Daniel's car. It was the dark blue WRX with rear spoiler and alloy wheels I'd seen at The Three Weeds. He clicked a button on his key ring and the car winked back.

'In,' he said to no-one in particular.

I took the front passenger seat. Ella and Leonie sat silently in the back. Daniel swung the car out of the car park and into the stream of traffic. He turned into Olympic Drive just as four police cars, lights flashing and sirens wailing, flew in the opposite direction. We watched them pass, turning our heads as they pulled out of sight. Daniel looked over his shoulder to check his blind spot then accelerated and overtook a truck. The car's power threw us back against our seats. He was driving like a hoon, so tense the muscle in his jaw was working overtime.

'What's the race?' Leonie asked. 'You had no right to drag us out of there.'

'You're a public servant, aren't you?' Daniel said. 'Can you imagine what the media are going to start making of that? And you,' he inclined the back of his head towards Ella, 'probably haven't seen guys like Smith's bodyguards in action yet. I wouldn't recommend that you do. They train in countries with unsavoury regimes where crowd control is a euphemism for a bashing.'

'How come you know all this?' Ella asked.

Daniel didn't bother to reply.

'*Tu est un menteur!*' she shouted.

Daniel ignored her.

'*Qu'est-ce qui te permet de nous bousculer comme ça?*' she said, thumping her fist on the back of the driver's seat.

'Je prends en charge cette affaire. Tu n'agis pas une personne responsable. C'est tout. C'est termine,' Daniel answered.

My knowledge of French was pretty lousy but I understood enough to know Ella was furious about the way Daniel had taken control.

'That's what you think,' she said, when he told her it was over. 'And if you touch me again, I'll have you charged with assault.'

We travelled the rest of the way in silence and I used the time to reflect on Daniel's reaction: the speed with which he'd taken charge and the contempt he'd displayed towards us. From the stony faces I saw in the visor mirror, Leonie and Ella were thinking the same. Daniel just concentrated on the traffic. 'Where do you want me to take you?' he asked as the lights changed. The question was directed to the women in the back. 'Glebe Point Road?'

Ella was staring out the window and didn't bother to answer. Leonie nodded.

Glebe Point Road Road was humming with crowds emptying from the area's restaurants. As we drove up I caught a glimpse of Rickie sitting in the cafe under Ella's building. Daniel double parked outside Badde Manors and let Leonie and Ella out. They stood on the pavement and watched as he pulled into the traffic, then did a U-turn.

'You were too rough on them,' I said, when we turned into Wigram Road.

'I don't think I was rough at all. If I hadn't acted swiftly, they'd have been caught up in a meleé and arrested. I couldn't see the point in that.'

Anyway, I'm sick of being ordered around by a privileged kid who wears a \$5,000 watch and calls herself a socialist. I've always distrusted socialists as affluent as that.'

'Well, I'd say the feeling's mutual now.'

Daniel shrugged. 'Can't say I care. I didn't come along to these protests to be branded a Trot or a thug.'

'Why come along at all? You're not one of those men, are you, who thinks groups like Refraction are a great place to meet young women?'

I swear he blushed again. Then he put his foot down and sped onto Victoria Road. 'Where are you parked?' he said gruffly, 'or do you want me to drive you home?' When I told him the Peugeot was in the car park behind Retravision, he nodded and headed straight to it.

'You know this area well. Are you local?' I asked.

'Lilyfield. I live on the workers' side of Victoria Road.'

'Sure,' I said to myself as the WRX roared off. 'But you don't drive a workers' car.'

As soon as Daniel had gone, I called Rickie and drove back over to Glebe. Ella and Leonie were still sitting in the cafe where Ella had sat the previous night. Their discussion seemed heated and I wondered if Daniel's ears were burning. I parked in the Broadway Centre and took up a vigil opposite. Rickie paid his bill then crossed the road to join me. 'Much happening?' he asked.

'A demo at the Show turned nasty. Daniel Conrad drove us all back here.'

'Bloke with the flash car? His ears should be burning. Ella and her friend got stuck into him, big time.'

'He pulled them out of a protest. They weren't happy about it.'

'What is he? ASIO?'

'Probably.'

'He could be a drug dealer. Plenty of them target groups of kids.'

'No,' I said, surprised at the vehemence in my voice. 'He's not.'

He asked me if I'd heard any more about the painting. I shook my head. 'No, Bill Litton's still in Melbourne. Cara Lane's got family down there. I've been thinking about the canvas since I saw it. It was just so good. Only someone skilled in the painting techniques of the old masters could have done it - Titian, Botticelli, ... or Bronzino,' I said, slowly.

~ *Twenty Four* ~

I sat looking at the Uffizi Guide with Bronzino's portrait of Eleanora of Toledo on the cover when I got home. Eleanora looked regal and overdressed in a frock that was so voluminous it made her head seem small and out of proportion to her body. Jane had said the painting reflected the Medici's covert and unyielding pride. I couldn't see it. Eleanora's clothes and jewellery, the braiding of her hair, her hand with its long white fingers that would never be stained by work, were those of a noblewoman - but her eyes seemed terrified.

I'd been looking forward to a good night's sleep and was well into it when the phone rang at four o'clock. I groaned and rolled over. The answering machine was switched off. The ringing wasn't going to stop. I pulled the doona around my shoulders and picked up. Cursed when my hello was greeted by a loud click. I called * 10 #. A recorded voice told me the call had come from a phone with a restricted number.

I had just settled back into bed when the phone rang again. I let it go a bit longer this time, long enough to walk downstairs to the lounge room and the answering machine. I turned it on and waited for the voice to begin recording. The caller didn't hang up, but they didn't talk either.

'Hello,' I said impatiently, picking up the phone. 'Who's there?'

I could hear someone breathing on the other end of the line. I waited, the room's floorboards cold under my bare feet. Outside, I could see the street lights and the empty harbour. The mechanical sound took me by

surprise. It started as a high pitched whine, like a bag-pipe makes when its player is filling it up with breath, then the voice began to take shape, tinny and robotic. 'Nicola Sharpe?'

I got such a fright I almost dropped the phone. 'Who is this?'

The laugh sounded like metal filings hitting a factory floor. 'Someone really scary, Nicola. Hey, I can see what you're wearing. Your hair is nice too, blondie. You got anything on under that dressing gown or do you sleep in the nude?'

I dropped down onto the couch and tucked my feet under me.

A metallic laugh followed. 'I can still see you.'

I was starting to think there must be a camera in the room. I looked at the cornices, the intricate ceiling rose, the top of the bookcases, telling myself all the time not to be ridiculous, that there was no way an intruder could have come into the house without me knowing. *Who am I kidding*, I thought.

The caller took a last deep rattling breath. 'You're dead,' they said, and hung up.

I stood and turned off the light, closed the Venetian blinds, then walked quickly around the house checking windows and doors. Only when I felt safe did I go back into the lounge room to replay the tape. The voice was just as menacing on a second hearing.

My first instinct was to presume it was some person copying whoever had rung talk back radio about Cara Lane and Lee Han. Those calls had been given plenty of publicity. I had no doubt there were people out there who

were getting their jollies calling friends and scaring them silly. Thankfully, I didn't have any friends who would think a joke like that funny. The death threat had seemed deadly serious. Someone meant business. They'd called to warn me off. But off what? Minding a teenage protester like Ella was hardly big league work.

I ran through all the sounds that came to mind. The voice was too deep to be someone who'd breathed helium. Their voice would be high-pitched and pacey like a character in a cartoon. I'd heard TV journalists interviewing anonymous people in darkened rooms, voices disguised by a scrambler, faces in shadow or blurred by dots so they looked like a pointilist painting. Those voices had sounded low but stretched out, as though their words were toffee the journalist had pulled into a new and unfamiliar shape. I played the tape again and again. I decided in the end that it was similar to someone who had had their larynx removed and who relied on a voice synthesiser to get their words out.

I didn't want to wait for Rickie so I rang and asked him to come over straight away. 'What about Ella?' he said. 'Her friend Leonie stayed the night. They on together, you reckon...?'

I told him what had happened and he said he was on his way. I opened the door slowly when I saw him pull up. Jumped when he thrust a bag full of warm croissants through the gap at me. 'The bakery at the service station was open. God, you look like hell.'

I checked the street before closing the door. It was far too early for the morning papers or the most zealous of Balmain's joggers. 'You'd look like hell, too,' I said, rewinding the tape, 'if you'd been woken up for this.'

He concentrated intently as the metallic voice filled the room. 'Spooky,' he said when the tape had finished. 'Definitely intended to scare you.'

'It reminds of those devices used by people who've had a laryngectomy,' I said when the tape stopped.

'Could be. But it's just as likely to be a computer program. You type some words into your computer, use the voice program, turn it into whoever you want. Marilyn Monroe, Donald Duck, James Cagney, Al Pacino...'

'Sounds hi tech. Expensive?'

'Not really. It's a standard in most new computers. Half the teenagers in Sydney probably have the program.'

'Which means the cops have got Buckley's of finding whoever rang the radio station about Cara Lane and Lee Han. Or this?'

'Needle in a haystack unless they've been able to trace the call.'

I made us some coffee and took it into the lounge room. Rickie was tapping the tape between his fingers thoughtfully. I sat down opposite him, broke a croissant into pieces and dipped it into my cup. 'I need to up the surveillance,' I said grimly. 'I don't want another night feeling fearful. Funny, isn't it, that this started when I got involved with the Davies? Being tailed. Finding a necklace that belongs to a missing woman. Pretty heavy behaviour given I'm just minding someone's kid.'

'No doubt about you, Nic. Trouble finds you like blow flies find a picnic. All the more reason for letting the cops have this.' He flicked the tape onto the table.

'Someone doesn't want me around the Davies. I reckon Ella Davies and Lee Han are pulling a stunt for some reason. My gut feeling is that Lee Han is safe, though God knows what emotional damage she's causing her poor parents. I could push Ella, but the more I see of her the more I sense she'd just clam up. Marge Davies is being cagey too. I don't like her on again, off again charm, and her secret meetings. Yesterday's tail was probably a scare job. The driver was delivering a message - warning me to be careful. I've also seen some pretty suspicious characters hanging around in the street. They could be plain-clothes cops, though God knows what they'd want with me. After this death threat, I'm beginning to think the encounters are more sinister than that.'

Rickie leaned across the coffee table. 'Have you told the Balmain cops about any of this?'

I shook my head. 'Not yet. I might be wrong. I don't want to create any hassles if I'm over-reacting.'

'Want me to monitor them?'

I looked hard at Rickie. He's an expert on detecting unwanted surveillance. He's used by companies who need their premises swept for bugs. He's also good at planting them himself. 'Let me think about it.'

He took out an electronic notebook, and tapped away at its mini-keyboard. 'I'll get organised for when you decide. Where does Ella's mother live?'

'Jane's in Glebe. She seems to divide her time between her house in Arcadia Street and her studio. Ella's grandmother, Marge, lives in Annandale Street.'

'I can listen from the back of the van. If the old lady and Jane live in a house, that'll be easy. I'll park out in the street. The kid's a different matter. There's too much electronic interference around Parramatta Road. Keeping an eye on her movements has been okay so far, but we need to tap her phone. I can give you a bug to place next time you visit, or better still, I'll do it myself.'

'What's the chance of you tapping Jane Davies' house too? The van's a bit touch and go. She spends half her time at her studio so that needs a bug. I can let you know when she's painting, then you could go into her house.' I looked up at the ceiling. 'When I was listening to the tape I started to wonder if someone had been in here and hidden a camera but there's been no sign of a break-in.'

Rickie's eyes ranged around the room. 'If they're professionals you wouldn't know. I'll take a look around.'

I waited on the couch while he checked the house over. Twenty minutes later he was done. 'Clean - as far as I can tell.'

I'd have liked a bit more certainty.

I told him I'd be with Ella at the Show from six till eleven. I'd think the surveillance through and let him know what I decided. When he'd gone I made some more coffee and sat at the window, looking out into the street as I drank it. A heavy frost dotted along the branches of a jacaranda like a string of tears. In all the drama, I'd forgotten it was Good Friday. Someone in the

row of terraces had turned on the radio and a chorus from Handel's *Messiah* rose, deep and sepulchral:

Worthy is the Lamb

That was slain

And hath redeemed us to God

To God by his blood...

~ Twenty Five ~

I was feeling pretty sombre myself. The seed of a headache was germinating behind my eyes and my throat was sore. My mind kept probing a dream I'd been having before the phone call. It extracted fragments of fancy: rampaging paschal lambs, armies of naked mannequins marching down Darling Street, fields of rusty wheat turned useless by too much rain. The Show's crowds were sinister too. They'd taken on the characteristics of a Heronymus Bosch painting, leering and fearsome. Another night at the Show ground didn't appeal.

I switched on my computer and played around on the internet for a while: Art gallery home pages, university fine arts departments, artists' personal web sites. Looking for something that resembled the painting of Cara Lane was like searching for a needle in a haystack.

A search on Ian Routley was a different matter. It threw up over 2,000 references. The man certainly got around. He was cited in international journals as well as the local media. *The Herald's* archive contained most of his reviews including the one he'd done on Jane Davies a few months earlier. There was also his critique of Jane's Archibald winning painting of Marge. Ian didn't like it.

But the articles disputed Jane Davies' assertion that he picked on her. It was clear from the way he dished his criticism out that he was scathing about pretty well every artist that had ever exhibited in Sydney. And he clearly thought it his duty to point out all their failings.

Slowly, the street outside came to life. Joggers ran towards Birchgrove Oval. Ferries started their public holiday schedules. It was impossible to tell what kind of day it was going to be. Greenwich was still swaddled in a fret that stretched across the harbour to Hunter's Hill but the sky high above it was just hinting at blue. I heard the newspaper thud against the door and went out cautiously to pick it up: *politician attacked at Easter show*, the headlines said, and there was a photo of an egg-smearred Len Smith being helped to a seat by a concerned woman. Members of Refraction shouted abuse, their faces contorted with rage, their fists high above their heads. Len Smith looked vulnerable and trapped.

I sat staring at the photo. Ella stood out in the group. Her head thrown back, arm raised, she seemed to be calling over her shoulder for someone to join her. Even in the chaos of the moment she looked so beautiful she seemed more potent than a weapon and more dangerous.

I was still sitting at the dining room table reading the paper when I heard the front gate open. Then Dad tapped on the lounge-room window. 'Bit early for you, isn't it?' I said, letting him in.

'I thought I'd fix that leaking tap upstairs,' he said, indicating the spanner in his hand. He took a deprecating look at my tracksuit and socks, then pulled a rolled up *Australian* from his coat pocket. 'You seen this?' The front page had a bold headline too. *Sydney Easter show anarchy!*

'The Herald's got something similar. You can always count on the papers for a sensational headline. Make yourself a cup of tea. What?' I asked, when he stood staring at the kettle.

'Well,' he replied slowly, 'I wanted to hear what you make of all this.'

'What do you reckon? People are just letting Len Smith know what they think of him,' I said, angrily. 'Every time he opens his mouth he attacks someone: the unemployed, unions, students, Aborigines, Asians. Vicious stuff. There's been a rise in race-based bashings. The unemployed are being made to feel like social pariahs. His aim is to attack those who are vulnerable in society and to hell with the moral and ethical consequences. If you take these articles on face value, you'd think it was just kids like Ella who are protesting. But people from all walks of life are angry. The Show's security is pretty thorough, though. There are surveillance cameras in most of the public areas and guards walking around.' I stopped and clicked my fingers. 'Of course - *Liberty Leading the People*.'

'What?' Dad asked.

I explained that I'd been trying to remember what the photo of Ella reminded me of - it was the painting, *Liberty Leading the People*, by Delacroix. All Ella needed was a tri-coleur and a bare breast.

Dad poured himself a mug of tea and flicked through the Sports section while I read the rest of the paper. I could tell Balmain was doing badly in the Rugby League competition by the way he ground his teeth as he read.

'Oh shit,' I said. 'Get a look at this.'

A smile broke over Dad's face when I showed him the picture. In the middle of the Easter Show coverage were photos of the art and artists that had won the Show's major art prizes - and me with Ian Routley. *Art critic and judge Ian Routley with friend, Nicola Sharpe*, the caption read. Ian seemed pretty pleased with himself but I towered beside him, looking put out and

suspicious. Because we were both in black, we merged with the background, our faces and hands oddly bright and white like a couple of actors in an experimental theatre group.

'What happened to the other bloke you introduced me to? The fellow with the pony-tail. He seemed nice. God, doesn't this one look like a man on a stick? An art critic?' He noticed the black look on my face. 'Don't worry, it's only the back page. I'm sure you won't be the talk of Darling Street.'

'It's not funny.'

Dad thought it was. He chuckled all the way into the kitchen and came back with some scissors so he could cut the picture out and take it to the Dry Dock to show Ernie and his mates.

When the phone rang I let the machine kick in just in case the person with the robotic voice was ringing me again. I picked up when I heard Ella Davies.

'You never told me you knew Ian Routley,' she said in a voice as cold as a crisper. 'Or that you'd been drinking with him before you came to Refraction last night.'

'I don't know him, Ella. I ran into him at your mother's exhibition and at the Show.'

'I've told you that he gives me and my mother a hard time.'

Dad pointed his spanner silently up towards the ceiling and the bathroom above it, then headed upstairs.

Ian Routley had certainly been eyeballing Ella at the Show the previous night. 'How does he give you a hard time?' I asked, but she wouldn't elaborate. She had no trouble opening up when I asked her what she thought about the Len Smith coverage.

'Wasn't it brilliant that he copped egg on his face? Pity it wasn't a bullet.'

I said I hoped her phone wasn't being tapped by national security.

'ASIO don't need to bother doing that. Daniel Conrad will fill them in on everything we do.'

'Daniel? You sure about that?'

'Of course. He's not French. His accent is a dead giveaway. What time are you going to the Show tonight?'

'Five-thirty, six. Do you want me to drive over and pick you up?'

'No, I'll see you there. Peter Watson is giving me a lift. I'll be at home all day. I haven't finished my essay yet. I'll be outside the Arts and Crafts pavilion at six.'

Dad had finished upstairs and had gone outside to poke around in my garden shed. The end of the garden had once been a lane for the dunny carter. Now it was being overwhelmed by a sprawling Port Jackson fig. The tree's roots had already extended into the cliff face that was the garden's southern boundary, effectively blocking any access to my backyard. Its spreading branches guaranteed my privacy. Once, the tree and the blocked

off lane had made me feel secure. After the previous night's phone call, my complacency had fled.

Dad seemed preoccupied and I asked him what was up. 'I liked that young woman when I met her the other night. She was a chip off her grandmother's old block,' he said. 'But the Easter Show's the wrong place to be throwing eggs around. Country people are workers like the rest of us. Plenty of them fought against fascism in the Second World War. They've got their mates and they stick by them just like us fellows from the Island do.'

I started to argue. 'The protests aren't about the bush - they're about Len Smith.'

'Yeah, I know,' Dad said, 'but throwing eggs in front of kiddies isn't the way to make your point. You get people off side and you never get them back.'

Jane Davies called while I was in the shower. The message she left on the answering machine was more a command than a request for my company. 'Can you see me today? Twelve? Come to my house. Not the studio.' As I listened I could feel my plans for the day dissolving like Lenten ash. I didn't think I'd better keep her waiting.

Before I headed outside I made sure every window and door was dead bolted. The passenger door of the Peugeot was unlocked. I couldn't remember leaving it like that. I walked around the car. There were no scratches around any of the locks or signs of forced entry. The boot was full of the clothes and household junk I'd been meaning to take to the Op Shop for the last couple of months. I reached into the car and opened the glove box. It was still crammed with old Van Morrison tapes that I hadn't played in ages - *Days Like This* and *Underlying Depression* seemed pretty appropriate. I checked under the bonnet. Turned the car on and pumped the brakes. They seemed fine.

I drove over to Glebe and parked a few doors down from Jane's house. Spreading plane trees intertwined overhead, like long-lost lovers linking hands. They'd turned the dirty yellow-brown that passes for autumn colour in Sydney, and the street's gutters were already blocked by fallen leaves. Her house was one of the grand sandstone villas that make up the Toxteth Estate: single storied, double fronted with two bay windows that pushed into the front garden like breasts. She opened the front door before I could knock, its red, stained glass panels slashing light across the floor like blood across a butcher's block. She sighed as she closed the door and ushered me into her

lounge-room. I was starting to feel as I had at Fort Street High when the headmistress caught Bridget and me smoking in the toilets.

'How is it going?' she asked. 'Is Ella being co-operative?'

'Pretty much,' I lied.

She indicated *The Herald* spread open on the coffee table. Like Dad, she'd cut out some photos - Ella protesting and me with Ian Routley - and put them side by side. I didn't think they were destined for her family scrapbook.

'So why, if I'm paying you to watch over her, are you hobnobbing with the likes of Ian Routley?' she said.

'I'm looking after your daughter very thoroughly, Jane,' I said, my voice more defensive than I wanted it to be. 'Ella was out of the protest before she could blink. She got home safe and sound and she stayed there all night.'

'It's just so humiliating to see my daughter making such a show of herself. And she tells me she's going again tonight.'

'She's determined to protest against Len Smith so she'll go every night the Show is on. There's nothing you or I can do about that. She's over eighteen. We can hardly kidnap her and lock her up.'

A phone rang somewhere towards the back of the house and an answering machine kicked in. I could hear a man's voice, soft but indiscernible. There was something familiar in the tone and I realised I was

leaning forward in my chair as I strained to catch his words. My posture wasn't lost on Jane. She stood up and shut the door, cutting him off.

'If we're going to maintain a working relationship, I need to know more about your friendship with Ian Routley,' she said, sitting down.

'I don't have one. I met him at your art exhibition, then by chance at the Show. From what Ella's said,' I continued, 'you've had some problems with him yourself.'

Jane's manner changed abruptly and her hand flew to her neck. 'Yes, I loathe the man, and with good reason.'

'Like what?'

'He writes slanderous reviews of my work and wastes no opportunity to criticise me in public. No artist should have to put up with that.' She stood up again. 'Would you like some coffee? Yes? I'll be back in a moment.'

When she'd gone out to the kitchen I took a curious look around. The walls on either side of the marble fireplace were adorned with huge canvasses. One was a portrait of Ella when she was about twelve and just teetering on the cusp of adolescence. Jane had caught her teenage uncertainty as well as her insolence. There were landscapes too, reminiscent of Cezanne's Provence but peopled with the kind of suspicious men and women I'd seen in the canvases at her exhibition. I peered closely at Jane's brush strokes and her application of paint. They didn't look anything like the painting of Cara Lane. They weren't like any of the new paintings I'd seen at her studio either, but Jane was a talented artist who clearly varied her style radically to suit her artistic aims. She was probably capable of every painting technique in the book.

I turned when I heard her return with the tray. With a glance towards the landscape I'd just admired she put the tray down on the table and started to pour the coffee. 'I painted that in the Alpilles, in Provence,' she said slowly.

'It's lovely, but all the people in your paintings seem frightened to me.'

She looked up, surprised. 'Do you think so?'

'They're certainly watchful and ill at ease.'

'I suppose they capture the mood I was in when I painted them.' She spooned some sugar from a pot. 'Now let's get back to our arrangements regarding Ella. Please call me every morning to let me know what she's been up to. I'd rather not read about it in the paper.'

I started to protest, saying that Ella's name hadn't been mentioned anywhere.

'Oh Nicola,' she said in an exasperated voice. 'Look at her.' She flicked the photo of Ella with her index finger. 'What do you call that?'

'Ella was fine,' I repeated. 'I was with her every inch of the way. If there had been any danger, I'd have deflected it.'

'But the egg? How do you think it feels to have a daughter implicated in an attack on a politician like Len Smith? Let's harbour no misconceptions about Ella's behaviour. She's in danger. Cara Lane. Lee Han. Who abducted them? I don't want my daughter to be next.' She stood up as soon as I'd

finished my coffee and put my empty coffee cup back on the tray. 'Danger, Nicola. I love my daughter and I don't want her hurt.'

Jane's words were still ringing in my ears when I drove past Cara Lane's flat on the way home. The *For Sale* sign was gone. The windows and balcony doors fronting Gladstone Park were wide open. I hadn't seen anything to indicate the flat had been sold. Perhaps it had been withdrawn from sale. There hadn't been much interest when I'd looked at the property so it might have been rented and kept in trust for the kids when they were older.

I wondered if Cara Lane's sister, Gerry, knew much about Cara's business dealings. Her relationships. Her work in the Attorney General's Department. According to Noni, Cara's work unit conducted research into international law. What law? The new government was threatening to cut loose from its international obligations, the UN Conventions against sex and race discrimination, industrial legislation that guaranteed the right of association, trade. She could have been reviewing any one of them.

Gerry might even know where her sister had bought the painting by Luke Redmond.

I decided to give her a try. Directory assistance gave me her Collingwood number. There was no answer. I rang her again unsuccessfully at three, irritated that she didn't have an answering machine. I tried again at four and let the phone ring for a long time. I was about to hang up when a breathy voice answered. 'Sorry, if I've caught you at a bad time,' I said, I introducing myself.

'You haven't. I was just letting myself in. I could hear the phone ringing as I came up the street.'

When I asked if she was Gerry, the woman told me she was just minding the place and feeding the dog. 'Gerry will be back on Tuesday. She's taken the kids to Sydney. I can give you a number there if it's urgent...' She stopped suddenly, suspicious. 'You aren't a journalist are you?'

She sounded relieved when I said I wasn't, put the phone down heavily and went off to find her address book. 'We're sick of reporters always hanging around,' she said when she picked it up again. 'Always sticky-beaking about what the kids are doing.'

The significance of the open balcony doors hit me when she gave me a Balmain number. 'She's staying at Cara's flat?'

The woman said she was.

I sat looking at Cara's phone number for a few minutes before I dialled. If I'd had a sister who was brutally murdered the last thing I'd have wanted was a holiday in her flat. Every stick of furniture, every painting she'd hung on her walls would have reminded me of her death.

An answering machine kicked in on the first ring. *Hello. You've called Cara Lane. We're not here right now, but you can leave a message for me, Hannah or Ben after the beep.* Cara's voice was deep and confident. I couldn't have been more shocked if her mannequin had spoken to me on Darling Street. So shocked, I hung up without leaving a message. I told myself not to be so foolish, waited a few minutes then dialed again. This time I left a message asking Gerry Hopkins to call me as soon as she got the chance.

~ Twenty Seven ~

Daniel Conrad called me at four and offered me a lift to the Show. I was exhausted and disinclined to drive myself. I said *yes*. Pony tail, outmoded dancing style, fake French accent, what the heck. He had become as interesting as a foreign country. And I loved to travel in exotic places.

I dressed with the same care of the previous night, feeling as foolish as a teenager on a first date. When I was satisfied with the way I looked, I went downstairs to the lounge room. I pulled myself up twice when I found I was standing at my front window with my hands behind my back waiting for him to show up. It was a pose I'd seen Dad adopt whenever he was anxious about something. After the threats on the phone, I reminded myself, I should have been careful, certainly not watching the street in full view of anyone that might be observing the house.

After my meeting with Jane, I'd scrounged through my bookshelves and gathered every art book I had. The Uffizi guide. A vintage Helen Gardner I'd bought second hand. Gifts from a former boyfriend who'd thought my mind needed expanding. Some end of the year prizes from Fort Street High. I looked at all the pictures. The British school, the Flemish and Dutch. Italian and French. One particular passage caught my eye: *Like great works of literature, serious painting and sculpture may incorporate ideas which require considerable thought and even learning to be properly understood*. I couldn't argue with that. I'd have killed for another look at the painting of Cara Lane, to examine again the way her body was lying on the couch, the flowers, the light behind her, the way her hair was arranged.

I trawled on through the art books anyway. Japanese artists of the eighth century made plump beauty fashionable again. Northern German artists of the fifteenth century used a style called 'soft' because of its feminine suavity and curvilinear manner. French novelist, Zola, called the classic tradition in French art *cream-puff and pastry* painting. He reckoned it had become tawdry in the hands of those who practiced it without conviction. I learned a new expression too - *Sgraffito* - a decoration produced by scratching through a layer of plaster to reveal a coloured ground. I wouldn't mind giving Daniel a good sgraffito but once I scratched his surface I wasn't sure I'd like what I'd exposed.

I closed the blinds and watched TV until Daniel drove up. My coat and bag were on the hall table so I didn't bother to invite him in. If he was surprised he didn't show it. He waited as I dead-locked the front door. 'Good security?' he asked.

'Very,' I replied, as I followed him to his car.

He was in a cheery mood. He waited till I'd fastened my seat belt before roaring off. 'Here we go again,' he said. 'Off to do battle with the forces of evil. If you can't stop them at the ballot box, you can always throw eggs.'

When he changed gears I noticed that his fingernails were dirty and the skin on his fingers was stained. He was holding the gear stick as though his life depended on it. His WRX was five star motoring. Almost seventy grand's worth of speed. That roughly translated to twenty-six Peugeot 504s like mine. 'Nice car,' I said. 'Does it come with your job?'

'I've been saving my pocket money for the past twenty years.'

'Then paper runs must be more profitable than when I was a kid.'

'You jealous?' he laughed.

'No. I have a perfectly good, old car.'

'Len Smith reckons his detractors are angry because he's telling it like it is. We all resent the affluent because we envy the spoils of their hard work.'

'He would say that,' I said. '*The politics of envy* is one of his favourite sayings. It's his way of saying 'get stuffed' to people who resent social injustice.'

He pushed a CD into the stack and Ella Fitzgerald's voice filled the car. *I Got it Bad (and that ain't good)*. I was beginning to understand how the lady was feeling. 'God, she's got a voice like honey spilling from a tin,' I said. 'When I was at high school a group of us went through an Ella Fitzgerald stage. Every kid wanted to appropriate her name. Ella Davies is lucky to have such a classy moniker.'

'Now tell me,' he said with a quick glance at me, 'what you really think of Ella Davies?'

I thought about it for a moment. 'I like her. She's feisty. When you get older it's easy to forget how passionate you can be in your teens.'

'Yeah,' he smiled. Then his voice took on a different tone. 'But let's hope she grows up soon.'

A huge Good Friday crowd was making its way to the Show. The buses we passed were full and so was the Show ground car park. Daniel circled it

for ten minutes before he found a space. It was a long walk back to the gates. As soon as we were through the turnstiles it became clear there was no way anyone was going to get the chance to hand out fliers or demonstrate again. Police and Show ground security passed by in pairs. From time to time they stopped to question people or groups of teenagers who looked like they might mean trouble. Ella and Peter had arrived before us. They'd joined the Refraction day shift who were busy pretending they were there for the show bags and rides. Security had been one step behind them when they'd tried to organise a leaflet drop in the grandstands and they'd trashed any fliers Refraction left on the seats.

Leonie Radcliffe had come straight from her job at the Federal Equity Bureau stand. 'What a day,' she said, giving Ella a hug. 'We had to call security twice to get rid of people who wanted to take us on. Some guy called me a commo dyke and said he'd come back and get me later.'

'I hope you took his threat seriously and reported him to the cops,' Daniel said.

'Any thing on Lee Han?' I asked. The story about the attack on Len Smith had dominated the news and there hadn't been much coverage of anything else.

'Nothing,' Leonie said.

Ella slung her arm around Leonie's shoulder. 'Don't worry. I'm sure Lee will be fine.'

I looked across at Daniel. He was chewing gum and watching the women with interest. 'You sure about that?' he said.

Daniel was reflective at the Show that night. He seemed to avoid the others, preferring instead to poke around the stalls and food outlets by himself. I handed out fliers desultorily to those who were prepared to take them. My nostrils had become attuned to the Show's multiplicity of scents: fried food, the sickly breath of pink fairy floss, the wheaty, yellow smell of hay.

By nine my feet were aching and I had begun to clock watch. The Show wouldn't close till midnight and the hours stretched ahead of me like a dry and featureless country road. I had sensed someone watching me all night and had looked up on a number of occasions thinking it might be Daniel. But he was always busy handing out fliers or scanning the ground littered with papers and discarded food cartons as though it held secrets that only he could access.

The mood of the crowd had turned and there was more aggression than we'd experienced before. Ella didn't let the crowd's comments pass. She challenged people and asked how they thought their kids had a future to look forward to if Australia followed Len Smith's policies. Most people called her names or marched off in disgust. But there were others who let us know they didn't approve of Len Smith and the minority government either. Some even wanted to donate money to the anti-Len Smith cause.

The feeling I was being watched didn't diminish so I left Ella for a moment and did a quick sweep of the crowd. Kids were excited. It was a night for lovers strolling around arm in arm and teenagers showing off. Daniel was fifty metres away, talking to some young women who looked keen to engage him in more than political discussion. I walked over to the building opposite where we were standing. A man was slouched just inside the building's doorway. He glanced at me as I passed. I circled around and

passed him a second time. His eyes, as narrow and canny as a snake's, were on Ella.

'Do you know that man?' I asked when I rejoined her.

'Where?'

I pointed towards the doorway. The man had disappeared. Ella scanned the crowd too. 'I don't see anyone there now. Maybe he was one of Len Smith's bodyguards,' she said with a laugh.

I told her I needed a minute and indicated the toilet block. Turned at the door. Some youths in felt hats beat one another over the head with huge blow up batons. Ella ignored them and continued to hand out fliers. She had gone when I got back outside.

I swore under my breath and hurried over to where she'd been standing. Her discarded fliers littered the ground. I spun around and took in the crowd. I was about to start running towards the gate when I saw her up ahead walking quickly towards the man I'd seen earlier. My first impulse was to rush after her but the way in which she was moving made me hold back. The man beamed as she approached and opened his arms. Ella walked straight into them. They embraced and stood, back lit by a stand of gleaming balloons and blow up toys. I moved towards a stall selling dolls on sticks and watched Ella through a web of net and tinsel. She looked over her shoulder, a puzzled frown on her face, then turned back to the man. She said something to him in an excited manner.

'You all right?' a voice said, just behind me.

I turned to face a stout woman with her arms folded across her chest. 'Sorry?' I said.

'Do you want one of those dolls?' She rattled the coin pouch she'd slung around her ample hips.

I picked up a doll swathed in white net and flowers. 'How much is this?'

'Twenty dollars.'

'What about those?'

'Four. We do them for the kiddies. The dearer ones are for heritage doll connoisseurs.' For a moment I saw cane cutters taking the dolls home to eager girlfriends who displayed them on bedroom walls or in glass-fronted cabinets. 'Heritage,' she said again as she sold a blown up dinosaur on a stick to a little boy.

The man handed Ella an envelope and watched as she stuffed it into her coat pocket. He kissed her lightly on the cheek, turned and loped off. Ella looked around furtively. She moved quickly back to where her fliers were lying and bent to retrieve them. A little wind had come up and it played with the papers, teasing them left and right.

I smiled apologetically to the stall-holder and walked quickly back to Ella. 'Who was that?'

Ella started. I crouched down beside her. 'Who was he, Ella?' She shook her head. 'Shit, Ella,' I said, standing up. 'If you won't come clean, I'll find him and make him tell me.'

She rose slowly as well. 'He's my uncle, so mind your own business. You're being paid to keep me out of trouble with Len Smith. I don't recall anything being said about butting into other aspects of my life.'

'If he's your uncle, what was in the envelope? And why so furtive? Why meet him here?'

Daniel was walking towards us. Ella lowered her voice. 'It isn't drugs or anything illegal, okay?'

I toned my voice down too. 'Surely you realise that I have to be kept informed about everything that you do. How can I trust you when I see you talking to someone you won't name? Who gives you an envelope? It looks pretty sinister to me.'

Daniel had reached us. He looked from Ella's face to mine. 'Sinister? What are you two talking about?'

'Want to get something to eat?' Leonie said, walking up. 'People are saying Len Smith won't show up again but I reckon he will.'

We wandered in a thoughtful group to the food outlet run by the Country Women's Association in the Arts and Crafts pavilion and ordered some sandwiches.

'What makes you so sure Len Smith will be back?' I asked.

'He loves a fight. He couldn't stay away if he tried,' Ella said.

Daniel's face hardened. 'So why give him one? You play right into his hands.'

People were pointing to tapestries and knitted jumpers, scones and jams, as though they'd been made by the inhabitants of another planet. I looked across to the area where the paintings and photographs hung. There was no sign of Ian Routley. I was disappointed. I wanted to ask him what he'd done to earn such intense dislike from the Davies' women. Ian mightn't have been there, but the prize-winning art was. I joined the long queue of people snaking their way up and down the aisles. Paused in front of Luke Redmond's landscape. Ian was right. As landscapes went it was pretty good. The paint's texture added dimension to the clay-coloured hills. Yellow wheat shivered to the left and right. The sky was an intense blue and speckled with a flock of budgerigars.

Daniel came up behind me and stood looking at the painting too. 'This is a lot like Van Gogh. Your friend, Ian Routley, chose well,' he said enthusiastically.

'Yeah, the painting's good. But Ian's not my friend.'

'No? Then how do you know him? I would have thought getting photographed together in the social pages constituted some kind of relationship?'

'Why is everyone so interested in Ian Routley all of a sudden?' I said, turning to face him.

Daniel's expression was deadly serious, despite the jokey tone of his voice. 'Everyone?'

'Ian knows a lot about art,' I said slowly. 'He's an art critic and judge. You'd expect him to choose well.'

Daniel looked down at the catalogue in his hand. '*The Wheat Field*, Walgett, 1982. Pretty dull name. Do they grow much wheat in Walgett?' He laughed when I shook my head. 'Go on, admit it. You're as cluey about the country as I am. You probably don't even know where Walgett is.'

'I do,' I replied. In my mind's eye I saw little plastic maps of New South Wales. School kids at Birchgrove Primary tracing around them. Colouring them in: blue for the sea, green for the coast, then the Blue Mountains and the brown western slopes and plains. But I was laughing too. 'It's over there.' I pointed to the distant west outside where the sky was already dark and starless.

Daniel looked at the painting again. 'Yeah, and so is the rest of the world.'

The crowd was nudging us on and I turned back to where Ella and Leonie were sitting. They weren't there. I walked up and down the aisles, past the paintings and display cabinets. I turned to see if Daniel was following me but he had struck up an animated conversation with a woman selling exhibition catalogues.

Ella and Leonie weren't at the table where Refraction usually congregated. They weren't in any of the nearby pavilions and halls either. I cursed myself for letting Ella out of my sight. Jumped when someone on one of the rides screamed. I followed the crowd into sideshow alley. Guns popped at lines of ducks. Clowns swung their heads in endless, inane arcs and spat out ping pong balls. Teenagers were laughing and excited as they

queued for rides. I spun around when a voice called out. 'Come on. Don't be afraid,' but it was only the spruiker in front of the boxing tent.

I followed the smell of hay and piss to the cattle pavilion. Inside, the screams and snatches of music from the rides seemed a million miles away. Line after line of cattle stood or slept on their knees as though they were praying. A couple of men stood transfixed in front of an Aberdeen Angus bull and joked about the size of its balls. Ella and Leonie were at the rear of the building where it was quiet and dark. They were sitting on a large hay bale. Ella leaned her head towards Leonie and said something. The two of them burst out laughing. 'Hi, Nicola,' she said, turning towards me.

'I've been searching everywhere. Tell me where you're going next time,' I said, still breathless from the rush. My words sounded limp and Ella smiled. I felt even more foolish as I walked with them to where Daniel and the rest of the Refraction team were sitting. A young man with dreadlocks who I'd never met before was eyeballing a security guard who stood watching as though he expected a bomb to be thrown into the crowd.

Ella and Leonie seemed keen to leave. 'Drop us off again will you, Daniel?

I don't think Len Smith's coming, after all. Peter's had to leave and we don't have a lift. Glebe Point Road if that's okay,' Ella said.

Daniel nodded and turned to me. 'What about you Nicola. Want to go?'

I called Rickie while the others walked ahead and told him Ella was on her way. 'I'll pick up the Rex in Victoria Road. Can't miss a car like that,' he said.

We walked to Daniel's car in silence. 'Drop me off first tonight,' I said. Daniel nodded, his eyes sometimes leaving the traffic to fix on Ella and Leonie in the rear vision mirror. He drove in silence all the way to Ballast Point Road. I stood at my gate and watched him drive away. He looked like a moody chauffeur. The women in the back seat, still laughing, aware of no-one but themselves, sinking deeper and deeper into the WRX's upholstery.

I was thinking about Daniel and making myself a drink when Ian Routley called. 'I was wondering if you'd like to go out to dinner tomorrow night,' he said.

And face Jane and Ella Davies' wrath again? Not likely. I told him I was working.

'It seems to me, Nicola, that you lead very un-social hours.' He said it in such a chastising way I couldn't help but laugh. My response seemed to spur him on. 'If not tomorrow night, when?' he asked, his voice more insistent.

Ian Routley wasn't my type at all. He clearly spent more on clothes in a week than I'd paid for my car. I didn't mind Daniel's extravagant car and his smart clothes but I found it a turn off in Ian. If you'd asked me why, I'd have said it had nothing to do with conspicuous consumerism. Ian's articles showed he didn't care much for other people's feelings. I didn't like that in a man. He was also too sardonic, the type of person that would tell jokes that only he found funny. I didn't want to hurt his feeling but I also didn't want to lead him on. I decided it was best to be forthright.

'Perhaps another time?' I sounded like a wimp even to my own ears. I expected Ian to take the rejection, wimpy as it was, in good humour. His reaction gave me a shock.

'What has Jane Davies been saying? And her daughter? Don't think I don't know what you've all been up to. I could tell you things about that family that would make your hair curl...'

'Cool it,' I said. 'It's nothing personal. I'm busy at the moment. There's just no time for socialising.' My excuses seemed to calm him down. He rang off with a promise to call me again.

~ *Twenty Eight* ~

Gerry Hopkins returned my call at seven the next morning. Her voice was deep like her sister's. Matter-of-fact. 'You rang me,' she said. 'What do you want?'

'I want to talk to you about Cara.'

'Why?'

'I'm a private detective. I think there may be a link between a case I'm working on and your sister... but I'd rather talk to you face-to-face.'

She gave the matter some thought. 'Only if you can come straight over. The kids are still asleep. I don't want them disturbed.'

I told her I'd be there in ten minutes, pulled on some clothes and headed straight to the flat. Despite the time, the Balmain markets had opened and eager bargain hunters were already combing the stalls. I parked opposite Balmain Hospital and walked across Gladstone Park. Gerry Hopkins must have been listening for my footsteps because she opened the door before I had time to knock. With a finger to her lips, she closed it behind me with a quiet click and raised her eyebrows towards the couch. I sat down opposite her.

She'd been drinking tea and the teabag sat listless on a saucer at her elbow.

She indicated the cup and asked me if I wanted one. 'I don't drink coffee, sorry,' she said when I declined. 'So, what's all this about?'

Gerry Hopkins wasn't as beautiful as her sister but she had the same turquoise eyes and black hair which she'd pulled into a knot. She was all angles and sharp lines, nervous, like a Jack Russell Terrier.

'I came to see this flat when it was open for inspection,' I said, looking around. 'Has it been sold? I didn't see a sign on the front.'

'That's why we're here. It was a chance for the kids to have a last weekend in Sydney before the solicitor settled. And for Hannah to go to a friend's birthday party.'

I thought it would be traumatic for the kids to go back to the place where they'd lived when their mother was murdered. The look on Gerry's face told me she knew what was going through my mind – that I'd better not express concerns about things that were none of my business. I leaned forward and passed her my card. 'I have a client with a friend who's gone missing, Lee Han. You may have seen something about it in the paper. At this stage there's nothing to link the two, but I'm starting to wonder if there's a connection between them.'

She sipped the tea and watched me closely over the top of the mug. 'How?'

'That's what I want to find out. Lee Han worked in the same government department as your sister. Both women lived on the Balmain peninsula. The police were alerted to clues about her disappearance via a synthesised voice on a talk back radio program...'

'Are you suggesting this woman has been murdered too?'

'No. I think she's safe. But there may be other links that need to be explored.'

'Sounds like a long shot to me. Look, I'm sorry if I sound cynical, but I have absolutely no faith in the police finding Cara's killer. Have you heard of the Easy Street murders? Two women were murdered fifteen years ago, a block away from where I live in Collingwood. They still haven't found the person who killed them. No clues. No leads. Nothing. Cara's death is the same. I've asked the police for progress reports. What new things they've found. The answer is always nothing. No blood. No semen. Hair. Skin. Saliva. No finger or footprints. All they have is the crazy voice from the radio, and those stupid flowers that someone stuck all over her.'

I waited, wondering if she knew about the painting that resembled her sister's crime scene photo. If she did, she was keeping mum. After Bill's ultimatum I followed suit. 'Did you have to identify your sister?'

Gerry tucked her feet under her in the Lotus position. 'Yeah, unfortunately. There was no-one else to do it. Her ex-husband wouldn't come home from America. Mum and Dad are dead. So it had to be me.'

'Do you have any other family?'

'None. Just Cara. I'm five years older.' She smiled as if at some distant memory. 'Do you have a sister?'

I told her I was an only child, but with a lot of women friends - a couple of them so close, they might as well have been sisters. 'Did Cara do or

say anything before she died that struck you as odd or made you feel things weren't right?'

When she took a quick, nervous look towards the closed door of the children's bedroom, I looked around too. The lounge room was shambolic. Kids' clothes and toys spilled from a suitcase in the middle of the room. They'd eaten pizza the previous night and the empty pizza boxes were lying on the floor.

'Not really. She worked. Brought up the kids. She had been pretty damaged by her divorce and she swore off men for a while after that.'

'Did she ever talk to you about the men she met at work or elsewhere?'

'Elsewhere? She didn't seem to meet many. What man is going to get involved with a woman with little kids? She wasn't optimistic in that quarter. But she had started hinting that things were looking up. Now I look back on it, there was clearly someone new hanging around. Odd, don't you think that she never told me who?'

'Some women don't talk about their lovers,' I said, thinking about Bridget. Without a doubt, she'd be sampling any man that took her fancy in France. She'd tell me all about it when she got back. She always had - from her first sexual encounter with Fort Street's answer to Brad Pitt, Laurie Dalson, behind the bicycle sheds. Michaela was a different kettle of fish. She kept her lovers to herself, but I could always tell when she had someone new. It showed in her hair and skin, the way her eyes lit up. And I had no doubt I gave off signals too.

'Where did your sister get the painting that's hanging over her bed? Could it have been a gift from someone?'

'How do you know about it?'

'I noticed it when I came to view the flat at its open for inspection. The Police checked out who painted it. Someone called Luke Redmond. Then I saw another painting by the artist at the Royal Easter Show. He lives in Walgett.'

'Walgett? I don't think so. I had the distinct impression Cara's new man lived in the city.'

'Have you passed that information to the Police?' I asked.

She nodded. 'Of course. I gave it to them when they came down to Melbourne to interview the kids and me. They asked me about Cara's bank accounts. How she managed on her public service salary. How she paid the mortgage and her credit card bills.'

'Was one of the cops called Bill Litton. Big bloke, red faced, paunchy?'

'Smoked like a chimney? Yeah, he was there.'

She stopped abruptly when the door into the children's bedroom opened and a little girl popped her head out.

'Hi, Hannah,' she called. 'Want a glass of milk?'

The girl walked over, stood beside her aunt and regarded me with curiosity. I couldn't take my eyes off her, either. Hannah Lane had the face of an angel. White skin. Eyes the colour of every child's paint box blue. Hair as

black as a Currawong's wing. 'I hear you're going to a party today,' I said with a smile.

She nodded. 'Kimberley Goodyear's.'

Gerry had gone into the kitchen for some milk. She came back with a glass, patted Hannah on the head and watched her go back to her room.

'She's gorgeous,' I said.

Gerry's eyes were still on the closed bedroom door. 'Yeah. She looks just like Cara did at that age. It's going to be hard bringing them up.'

'What about Cara's ex-husband?'

'What about him? He's useless, always was. He doesn't want the kids. A lawyer's already told me not to waste my time pursuing him for their upkeep. It would cost me more than I've got.'

The bedroom door opened again and Hannah reappeared pushing a little boy in front of her. 'Morning, Ben,' Gerry said pulling him onto her lap. 'Get him some Corn Flakes, will you, Hannah.'

Ben leaned back against his aunt and watched me through sleepy eyes while he sucked his thumb, his red hair and freckles in striking contrast to the black hair of the women in his family. When the kids went over to the dining room table to eat, Gerry leaned towards me and began to talk in a hushed voice. 'All their father wanted was to be able to grow tomatoes and raise chooks. He'd disappear for weeks on end till Cara was at her wit's end. When she got a promotion and they moved down here his absences grew longer, and longer. In the end she'd had enough. Look, I don't want to be

rude, but I promised I'd help Hannah choose a present over there, so I'd better get moving.' She jerked her head in the direction of the markets. 'Hannah, keep an eye on Ben. I'll be back in a sec,' she said, standing up.

I stood too. Paused at the door and looked back at the room's chaos and the kids chatting and laughing as they ate.

Gerry followed me slowly down the stairs and onto the street. 'Does any of this help your case?'

I couldn't say. What was significant in a woman's need for a partner who loved her kids. The possibility of new lover. A desire for privacy. It all sounded common enough.

Gerry seemed to be reading my thoughts. 'I think she was getting somewhere at last. I just wished she'd confided in me more.'

'People often act secretive if they're scared they'll look a fool if a relationship doesn't last. I don't tell my father or my friends half of what I do.'

'Sure. I know all about keeping mum. When our parents had to walk off their farm after the drought of 1982, Cara and I got pulled out of boarding school. Mum and Dad sold everything but they still ended up in debt. I know how people behave when they're secretive and ashamed.'

'Your nephew looks different from the rest of you. Was his Dad fair?'

She looked down at her hand. 'No, he's as dark as we are.'

'Is Ben his kid?' I asked slowly.

She leaned against the rail. Hard. 'No. That's one thing Cara had no problem talking about. She wouldn't name the father but it certainly wasn't Neil.'

'Did you tell Bill Litton this?'

'Blind Freddy could have worked it out. But it wasn't just the way Ben looked. There were other things Bill Litton thought were significant.'

'Like what?'

'I don't know. All I can say is that he insisted on the kids having a blood test. I thought it would make them feel better, so I had one too.'

She nodded when I asked if the Police had given her a copy of the blood test results and forensic pathologist's report. Said she didn't have them with her so I asked her to fax them to me when she went back to Collingwood. She stared at me as she thought about it. 'This means more to you than you're letting on, doesn't it?'

I shrugged a *perhaps*. Something on my face must have told her how moved I'd been by the way the children were left on that hot February night, their mother so close.

'I'll help with what I can. I'd better go,' she said.

~ Twenty Nine ~

I picked up the newspaper from my front steps as I went into the house. Ian Routley had made good his threats against Jane Davies. *Provence - No Place for Pretension* his column began.

I have just spent a few days at this year's Royal Easter Show, judging the art, 'he had written. 'The winners, most of whom work hard on farms, in country schools and businesses across the State had only one goal: to create a work that reflected their lives and interests - without pretension or pomposity. It's a philosophy that many of our established artists should bear in mind when they next pick up their paint brushes. Sydney painter, Jane Davies, is no exception. Her current Glebe exhibition is more clichéd and sentimental than anything I saw at the Show. The cult for blue and yellow in home beautiful magazines doesn't translate well to the artist's canvas. Tourists and travel writers may indulge in a love affair with Provence but I can't say I share their sentiments. As far as art goes, it pays an artist to slice self-conscious romanticism from their canvasses. It's a shame Jane Davies didn't do that before she put her hodge podge collection together. What makes the exhibition doubly disappointing is the knowledge that Jane Davies' career started out so well. What happened to her vision and her skill? I can only presume it was stripped from her by the easy life in France and too much success, too young.

No wonder Jane Davies hated the man's guts. Ian had told me he'd reviewed Jane's latest work favourably and said it was good but patchy. That sounded pretty tame to me. This article had gone straight to the jugular. I wondered if Jane had seen the papers. If she had, I couldn't imagine she'd be feeling benign about it.

I needed to report on Ella's night at the Show, so I called Jane's house. She picked up on the first ring and the tone of her voice was a dead give-away. She was as angry as a hornet. She could hardly speak and her words shot out in little staccato bursts like bullets from a semi automatic. 'The hide...of that ... objectionable ... little runt... I swear... I'll kill him.'

'Look, if it's any consolation, I'd feel the same way if I was in your shoes. The article is disgusting and its not accurate.' Nothing I said mollified her so I started to tell her that Ella was okay.

'She obviously trusts you,' Jane said, her voice softening but still tense. Down the telephone line I heard a door bang shut. 'Angus Goodyear has just arrived. I have to go,' she said.

I read the review again. It was just as harsh on a second reading. Ian was in for it big time. Angus Goodyear would make sure of that.

At ten I rang Dad to see if he wanted to come to Michaela's meeting in Lilyfield. He's always been fond of her and has followed her political activities with interest. He said he'd love to come but couldn't. He'd arranged to go with Ernie to the Balmain vs Penrith game. They'd been looking forward to it for weeks. Their enthusiasm for the Tigers never ceased to amaze me. Balmain supporters were like blow-up punching bags that got knocked down but always popped back up into place.

'I tell you what, Nic,' he said. That mate of yours at The Herald had plenty to say today. He really got stuck into Marge Davies' lass.'

'Yeah, and I think he'll live to regret it.'

I wanted to take the Peugeot with me to the Show that night. Lifts with Daniel were all well and good but I needed to look after Ella away from his prying ears. I went outside, walked over to it and stood looking at the blisters of rust along the bottom of the doors. It might have been a shit heap but I was fond of the car. Like all the other 504 drivers in town I liked its little ways: a choke that needed plenty of foreplay to get it revving. A transmission that was apt to whine if you neglected it. Doors so solid you had to fight them to get outside. I liked the way 504 drivers saluted one another as they passed and checked out each other's cars, like competitive parents check out one another's kids.

I opened the front passenger door. The car's interior was scattered with old food wrappers and newspapers I'd read while I was on the job. I picked the rubbish up and shoved it into a garbage bag. I drew back in disgust when I felt something soft under the front passenger seat. I reached in and pulled out a plastic bag stuffed with fetid meat and prawn heads. 'Gross,' I said out loud, shocked. I tossed the mess into the bin and went inside to wash my hands. I unscrewed the hub-caps when I got back outside. All were clear, except the one over the driver's side front wheel. It had been stuffed with prawn heads too.

'Who'd do this?' I asked myself. Mr Mechanical who'd called the other night? The fellow Mirage was taking to court? Someone I'd pissed off in the line of duty? That narrowed it down to a couple of hundred people.

I slid under the car. The brakes looked fine but the muffler needed a bit of attention. I stood up and dusted my jeans, popped the bonnet. The engine looked healthy enough to outlive any manner of flash new models.

The inside of the car was looking cleaner than it had been in years but the smell of rotting garbage still hung in the air. I opened the back door and picked up some more papers. A couple were snagged in the loose carpet that had been in need of repair since I'd bought the car. As I pulled them out my fingers connected with a little round disc tucked between the carpet and the floor.

I was no expert of surveillance but I knew what it was. I went inside and called Rickie.

He whistled as I described the device to him. 'If it's what I think it is, it's top of the range,' he said, 'it's used by Defence, ASIO, some of the bigger companies who want to keep an ear on their competitors.' He thought for a moment. 'Someone's tracking you. Big time. Good job you found it. Presume that wherever you've been in your car has been tracked. The Easter Show, Mirage, Glebe....'

'Then the prawn heads must have been put in the car by different people,' I said. 'The bug planters wouldn't do something that led me to find it.'

'Local kids? I've also heard of cases where neo-Nazi groups put muck in people's cars. Happened to that activist in Erskenville a couple of months ago. Len Smith's opponents might be on their hit list. Has it happened to any of the other people in Refraction?'

'Not that I've heard. Whoever it was did me a favour. I might never have found the bug if they hadn't decided to stink the car out.'

'Whack it with a hammer and chuck it in the harbour on your way out' he laughed.

I told him I would, not sharing the joke. 'We're involved in more than just keeping a teenager from getting manhandled at political protests. I want to know what the hell all this is about and why it started as soon as I met with the Davies family. That surveillance we discussed? After this, I want to proceed.'

Rickie sounded gleeful. 'I'm ready to rock and roll. I'll put listening devices in all their places. One in each of their phones. A tape will cut in whenever they get a call. That should cover most contingencies.'

~ *Thirty* ~

Cecily Street, Lilyfield dips towards Lilyfield Road and the goods line that cuts the suburb in half. The Community Centre is halfway down the street. It's used for all sorts of meetings: writers' groups, art classes, community protests like the one Michaela had arranged. People had already gathered outside and more were joining them. Michaela was chatting to Renato Scarpi as I drove up. They made a good-looking couple. Michaela's body language was certainly indicating that they were more than friends. She'd taken a lot of trouble with her appearance and was wearing a grey ankle length skirt and a tight fitting top of the same colour. It suited her. 'It's a good crowd,' she said. Her lipstick was redder than the one she usually wore and her skin was glowing.

A car turned into the street and slowed down. Neil Gaunt, one of the Labor politicians who'd lost his seat in the federal election, waved to Michaela and parked, then walked around to the passenger seat to help Marge Davies out.

'It's standing room only inside,' Michaela said, taking Marge's arm. 'Shall we go inside?'

I followed and stood at the back of the hall. Latecomers tip-toed in only to find all the seats taken. They lined the walls until there were so many of them they began to spill out into the garden. People cheered when Marge Davies stood up. There was no sound system but Marge didn't need one. She looked tiny up on the stage, like one of the photos I'd seen of Edith Piaf, spot-lit on stage, diminutive but tough and street smart. She knew how to

work a crowd. She let her eyes meet someone's, held them, and pulled them towards her like a magician levitating a volunteer. Magician was a good analogy for Marge. I had the feeling she was playing some kind of game with me, just as her daughter and granddaughter were doing.

Someone tapped my arm softly. Daniel Conrad was pressed against the glass front doors. He smiled, then turned to listen to Marge. 'We can do something about what's happening in Canberra,' she was saying. 'We can insist that our rotten, little Prime Minister dissolves this minority government and forms a government of national unity with the Australian Labor Party. Did you see today's paper? The farmers are already lobbying him to do that. Why? Because they know their livelihood relies on healthy trade with the countries of the region. It will be the mining companies next, then the manufacturers. But what about the moral issues? How can we hold up our heads and say we're proud to live in a country where members of parliament are parroting the brutal slogans of Adolf Hitler and Mussolini?'

Daniel must have sensed me watching him out of the corner of my eye because he turned towards me and raised his eyebrows in a question. I concentrated hard on what Marge was saying but he tapped my arm again. He indicated the door and I followed him outside. 'What's up?' I asked, when he stopped at the gate. 'Didn't you find Marge's speech moving?'

'Not particularly. You didn't seem all that interested either. Coming here was a toss up. I'm at risk of missing the first half of the Balmain game thanks to this. Mind you, the people in the hall have got more chances of winning their fight against Len Smith than Balmain has its game.' He turned and looked at the crowd. 'I'm surprised none of the Refraction mob is here. You'd have thought Ella would have come to hear her grandmother.'

'You don't like Ella much, do you?' I said.

'So? Don't you ever question people's motives and ask yourself what they're up to? Ella's odd in more ways than one. I'm sick of the sneering references to country bumpkins, red necks and all the other shit she goes on with. Lots of country people might be conservative but they're not all racists.'

The crowd inside the hall cheered loudly and I heard Michaela's voice, as clear as a pipe asking supporters to donate generously. A few minutes later, people began spilling out of the hall and down the path. We moved to one side and let them pass. Daniel turned to watch two surly youths with shaved heads walk by.

'Do you know those guys?'

'I've seen them at rallies. The one on the right is called Skell - it's short for skeleton. They're usually on the other side of the fence. They like to heckle the speakers, cause trouble. I'm surprised they didn't play up today.'

I told him about the muck in my car. Asked him if any had found its way into the WRX.

'It's got a back-to-base alarm and global tracking. Punks like that wouldn't be game to touch it.' When the youths had walked up Cecily Street, he turned back to me with a smile. 'There's still time to catch the second half at Leichhardt Oval.'

I shook my head. 'I'm needed here. I'll see you tonight.' It was more a question than an understood.

'You will. Lift?'

'No thanks.'

Michaela and Renato Scarpi were stacking chairs inside the empty hall. They seemed to be taking their time and missing no opportunity to touch hands. Marge was having an animated discussion with Neil Gaunt. She was clearly exhausted by the meeting. Her face was grey and there were dark rings under her eyes. She said she was eager to get home so I offered to drive her. Michaela said something to Renato. He ran the forefinger of his right hand down her jaw. Called, *ciao*, as she walked over to Marge and me. I raised my eyebrows. Michaela just smiled enigmatically.

I hadn't thought of Marge Davies as old before but as she sat back heavily and fastened her seat belt she looked at least ten years older than when I'd met her earlier in the week. 'Well, how do you think that went?' she asked, in a flat voice.

'Terrific,' Michaela smiled. 'We collected over \$400 dollars from the buckets that got passed around. Renato has already been promised nearly \$10,000 by local businesses.'

I told Marge I'd enjoyed her speech. 'You talked about your family, but never mentioned your husband or your daughter,' I said.

Her eyes narrowed as I asked the question. 'My husband was killed in the Darwin air raids. Are you prying into my family, now?' She said it with a smile, but there was no humour in her voice.

'Not at all. I'm just curious about Ella's family connections.'

'Ella's father's family is no good.'

I glanced into the rear view mirror. Marge was staring straight ahead.
'Yeah? Why is that?' I asked.

'Like any parent who cares about their children, I checked them out as soon as I knew Jane had become involved with their son.'

'How?' I said. Michaela sighed in a way that made it clear she didn't approve of my questions but Marge didn't seem to notice.

'Through contacts in the French government. When Jane first went to live in the South of France, she sent me a postcard of a place called La Fontaine de Vaucluse. There's a wonderful Resistance museum there now. Jane couldn't see the irony of it when I told her her father-in-law had led Nazi raiding parties from there to capture the partisans.'

'Perhaps your sources were wrong.'

'They weren't.'

'Surely if it was true, he'd have been brought to justice.'

Her eyes met mine in the mirror, incredulous. Then she spoke slowly as though I was simple-minded. 'You clearly know nothing of post war history.'

I shrugged. 'Jane was in love. Perhaps she thought all that was past history.'

Marge snorted. 'Len Smith is a good example of why it's never history. People talk about him as though his politics are something new but his type is always around. And if we don't do something to stop him, they always

will be. Have you ever read Andre Malraux's, *The Walnut Trees of Altenberg*?' She sighed when I shook my head. '*Those encounters the tireless wind blows back to me, as it blows back at random my comrades' letters,*' she recited slowly.

'But Jane is a successful artist. You must be proud of that?' I glanced back at her again, but Marge stared silently ahead, her face speaking volumes.

As I pulled up outside her house I told her I'd seen a collection of Charles Cazneaux photos of kids in George Street and around the Argyle cut where she'd grown up. A couple of photos had the unfinished Harbour Bridge in the background. The children's mothers were shadows in their doorways, distrustful under lines of flapping washing in case the photographer spirited their children away.

Marge unbuckled her seat belt. 'Those women had good reason to be watchful,' she said, 'just as mothers have today.'

'Was all that questioning necessary?' Michaela asked with a quick wave to Marge as we drove off.

'Absolutely,' I said. 'Too much is happening around the Davies family for me not to probe.'

'Who was that at the meeting with you today?' she said. 'He looked very exotic.'

'Daniel Conrad. I should say *Dan-i-el*.'

She laughed at my fake accent. 'Don't tell me he's French?'

'No, he just says his name that way.'

'So, what does he do?'

'He a part-time student. That's really all he's told me. The students in Refraction think he's ASIO.'

'And you haven't checked him out? That's not like you, Nic. I hope you're not letting your heart rule your head.'

~ *Thirty One* ~

I heard Ian Routley's voice on the answering machine as I opened the front door. I raced over to the phone to pick it up. 'I'm ringing from a public phone in Oxford Street,' he said. 'I can't talk now but I have to see you urgently. Can you meet me this afternoon?'

'I'm pretty busy,' I said impatiently.

There was a long silence, as if he was deciding what to do. A bus accelerated and I heard some scattered, passing conversation before he spoke again. 'Please. I don't want to talk to the police. I've got some information. You'll know how to deal with it.'

'About what?'

'Not now.'

'Whereabouts do you want to meet?'

'Kings Cross? There's a cafe opposite the Alamein fountain. Two o'clock.'

'Make it three. By the way, I saw your review in *The Herald* this morning. You were very hard on Jane Davies.'

The background noise was so loud I could hardly make out his words. 'I can't talk now....Nicola.... but I..'

'What?' I shouted, but he'd hung up.

I called Jane Davies back to see if she had half an hour to spare. She'd been too angry when I'd called her earlier to ask about the uncle who had materialised at the Show. She said she was on her way to the studio so I said I'd meet her there. I took a wistful look towards Hunter's Hill as I left the house. Over to the west a maxi yacht moved behind the houses in Louisa Road. Eventually it would pass around the point and cross Snail's Bay, her sails unfurling like a bolt of silk, and the spinnaker, eager as a kid to take her out to sea.

Jane was surprisingly calm when I arrived. The paper was spread open on the bench top beside a half-finished cup of coffee but Ian Routley seemed the last thing on her mind. She hardly noticed I was there. A shipment of ceramic objects had arrived and she was painting them for an exhibition. She walked around the studio picking them up, then putting them down again. I asked her what was happening about Ian Routley's review.

'Oh, Angus is on to it,' she said with a dismissive wave of her hand. She changed the subject and started to talk about the pieces in front of her. Said she was about to start painting them for a ceramic artist who lived in Surry Hills. The shapes were round, like breasts and balls and heads. She held one towards me so I could admire it. It looked like a roosting chicken and Jane said she'd feather it in shades of white then cover it with tiny lines and capillaries and feather ends. She talked in a tight, clipped way and was clearly tired. Her pupils were dilated. There were purple shadows under her eyes. 'Red,' she said, rolling the 'R' as though she had a pebble in her mouth. 'This looks like a human heart so I'll paint it blood red.'

Her hands shook as she returned the piece to the table. She watched the ball wobble on its base, then walked across to a packing crate and pulled another one out of its bed of straw. 'I call this one Othello's ear. Just the right size to pour some poison into. She put it on the shelf next to the others then looked across to me. 'Ian Routley conveniently forgets he couldn't cut the mustard as an artist,' she said, bending to lift a wooden crate off the floor. 'Would you mind giving me a hand?'

When the box was in its place I lifted one of the pieces out. It bumped against the edge of the box and I almost dropped it. Jane jumped towards me, her arms outstretched. 'Please be careful.' She grabbed the piece off me and cradled it like a baby, carefully placing it on the shelf next to the others. 'You said you came over here to talk about the Show. Ella has already told me about Raoul. I'm sorry if he caused you some concerns. I should have told you he was in Sydney.'

'It would certainly have been better if you'd told me about him before he turned up. What was he passing to Ella in that envelope?'

'Just some family documents,' she smiled. 'I'm afraid Raoul can be a bit unpredictable.'

The canvas I'd admired a week earlier was now thick with paint. All the textures of the inner city were there: the scrubby trees that lined Lilyfield Road, the bright blue and orange containers stacked on the wharves, the goods lines snaking their way towards Darling Harbour. 'Ella told me Marge doesn't have any time for her father and his family. Why is that?'

'Oh, you know Marge. She's a woman of intense prejudice. She always has been. When I was a teenager I'd hardly dare to bring someone home that

she'd hadn't credentialled in advance. I couldn't wait to get out of Australia. *At last*, I thought when I got on the ship at Circular Quay, I can make friends of my own choosing.'

'And you met your husband in Paris?'

'That's right,' she smiled. 'We were both painting in the Place du Terte in Montmartre. That was the way art students made money in those days. You painted rubbish for the tourists during the day, then did your serious work at night. Art students probably still do it. Claude was in his final year. He had developed a nice line in tiny canvases of Montmartre's cats: lounging in front of Sacre Coeur, draped in front of a cafe 'or on top of the steps. The tourists couldn't get enough of them.'

'And does Ella take after her father or you?'

Jane laughed. 'Neither of us. Marge, more likely. Claude was a man of great subtlety. You'd hardly accuse Ella of that trait.'

She drew a line on one of the ceramic balls then stood back to admire the effect. 'Ella's father was short and angular.' She let her gaze travel down my body. 'Not at all like you or me. But he had a long face and a kind of regal bearing. Wonderful eyes. He was totally unselfconscious. When I was young and naive I used to think it was because he was French, but he was just very comfortable in his skin. He was one of the only people I've ever met who would unconsciously fall into a pose. He would rest his arm along the back of his chair, stand framed by a doorway or stretch out for a bottle of wine as though he was defying you to paint him.'

I looked across Black Wattle Bay to where cars were racing across the Anzac Bridge. 'I saw a childhood photo of you at Marge's place. You were in France, at a railway station, I think.'

She smiled. 'With Malraux? God, Marge is particularly proud of that one. I can't say I feel the same way. I just remember standing with my back to a railing, wishing to God they'd all hurry up. Someone had given me one of those Madeleine books. *Madeleine and the Gypsies*, I think it was. I was at the height of the crowd's knees. I looked up but all I could see was the steam from the train and cigarette smoke flying up to the arched glass roof of the station. The photo you saw was on the cover of *L'Express* the next day. *Délegation Australienne (et petite enfant) attend Malraux.*

'Why did you come back to Australia? Your life in France sounds idyllic.'

'It was.'

While we talked she'd painted a ball a rich, powdery green with a glaze of brown speckles. It looked like something that had been dug up from deep down in the earth.

'Why did you break up?'

'Why does anyone? Things hadn't gone well between us for years. Eventually, we were both fed up enough to admit the fact. But we decided to give it one last go. We thought we could rekindle what was left of our relationship with a visit to Florence. We took Ella with us. One day Claude said he needed to conduct some business at the bank so I told him Ella and I would stay at the hotel. When she got bored and restless, I decided to take her to the Uffizi.'

The look on Jane's face had turned sour, as though the memory wasn't one she cared to revive. 'Claude wasn't at the bank as it turned out. He was standing with a pretty young woman in front of Albertinelli's *Visitation*. They were totally unaware of us. As they stood hand-in-hand staring at St Anne comforting her daughter, I clasped my hand over Ella's mouth to stop her from calling out to her father. The image is etched in my memory. Up on the wall, St Anne was comforting her daughter. The voices of the tourists were hushed and reverential. Claude's head had rested against the woman's head as he spoke, his arm around her waist. She had waist length hair and Claude was playing with the ends of it. I decided to leave him straight after that.'

'But you've worked things out since then?'

'What do you mean?'

'Ella said her father keeps in touch. And clearly her Uncle Raoul visits.'

'Oh, yes,' she said, concentrating on her paints. 'We keep in touch.'

~ *Thirty Two* ~

Rickie was lounging on my car when I got outside. 'Hello,' he said slowly.

'What are you doing here? What's happening with Ella?'

'She's at home. I came over to tell you that all the devices are in place. That'll make our job a lot easier. Interesting conversation you just had in there. I didn't know you were so savvy about art.' He inclined his head towards a lane that ran at right angles to Glebe Point Road. 'Jane Davies is a bit too spacey for my liking. Come on, the van's up there.' I followed him and waited while he unlocked and opened the door. He looked around, climbed in and closed it behind him. 'I've got some other tapes you might like to hear. I hate to say it, but you're involved in something dangerous.'

'I gathered that. How dangerous?'

'Very.' He flicked a switch and let the tape play back the conversation I'd just had with Jane.

'She certainly sounds odd,' I said, 'but she always does. She's always tense. Hyper, talks in long sentences. I've always thought it was because she spent so much time on her own, painting.'

With a nod he leaned forward and began to speak quickly. 'The old lady's canny. She never says much on the phone. Since she got back from your Lilyfield meeting, Ella's rung her a couple of times. Asks her Grannie

how she's going. Their conversations are short. A minute or two. The old lady always says she's fine, then she hangs up. Ella natters away on her mobile phone for hours on end. She seems to reserve the landline for her computer. Must have a hell of a phone bill, that's all I can say. She hasn't had any visitors this afternoon, but she popped downstairs to the cafe. She played loud music for half an hour. She also practiced her clarinet, loudly. '

'What does she say on the phone?'

'She called some guy called Peter.'

'Watson. He's in Refraction.'

'She rang a woman she calls 'mouse' who also takes her calls on a mobile phone. Says she'll be with her soon.'

'Maybe Leonie? Or Lee Han?'

He shrugged. 'Possibly. She rang her mother to ask for some money. Jane seemed happy to supply it. And..' he added, theatrically...' there was a call to some Frog called Raoul.'

'He's her uncle.'

'Well, *Uncle* Raoul said he'd see her at the Show again tonight. Asked her to pass on some more money to her Mum... wait for it... \$3,000.'

'He gave Ella an envelope at the Show last night. When I challenged Jane about it she said it contained family documents.'

'Yeah? Well I wish I had a family that wrote its history in bank notes. And Uncle Raoul he ain't...' He reached for another tape and fed it into the machine. '...cause if that's the case, he and Jane are kissing cousins.'

The tape began with the sound of two people greeting one another—two people who hadn't seen one another for a long time. It heated up when Jane suggested they sit down on the couch. Rickie turned it off when they advanced towards sex.

'Get the picture? That happened while you were at Michaela's meeting.'

'Why would he pass money on to Ella when he could just as easily have given it to Jane.'

Rickie shrugged. 'Your guess is as good as mine. Maybe it's to pay her phone bill.'

'Drugs? Ella could be a courier.'

'Beats me. Now, listen to this. It's Ella's apartment at twelve o'clock. Ella was downstairs in the cafe at the time.'

The sounds were barely discernible on the tape, but someone was moving around. A door opened slowly. Then closed.

'Someone was in her flat?'

'Yeah. And Ella Davies wasn't.' He leaned towards the deck and pulled out another tape. 'Ready for the pièce de résistance?' He turned the volume up and closely watched my face.

'Jane?' a man's voice said.

'Hello,' Jane said softly. 'I've been expecting your call.'

'I need to meet you soon.'

She paused for a moment. 'Can you come to my house in Glebe?'

'Tonight. Eleven.'

A crackling silence seemed to go on forever, then two phones were hung up.

'That call was made to Jane's studio this afternoon, ten minutes before you arrived. Recognise the voice?' When I didn't answer immediately, Rickie raised his eyebrows in a parody of a prompt. He reached over, rewound the tape and played it again.

It took me a few minutes. 'Jesus, it's not Len Smith, is it?' I said, slowly when the tape had stopped.

'Give the lady a prize.'

'How the hell does Jane know him?'

'You and I, Nic, are going to find that out tonight.'

I stood up and opened the van's door. Blinked at the bright sunlight that flooded in. We'd been so engrossed in our work, I'd forgotten we were

in a Glebe lane. 'I'll meet you here at ten thirty tonight,' I said. 'We'll have to be very careful. Len Smith will have minders with him, I presume.'

He touched the van's equipment. 'And they'll have surveillance that will make all this stuff look like a crystal set.'

~ Thirty Three ~

I kept an eye open on the way to the Cross, but if anyone was tailing me they were being very subtle about it. At ten to three I parked in Victoria Street. Church bells were tolling in the city and the sound wafted across the Domain. In Macleay Street the Alamein fountain was playing water onto the footpath. I chose a table with a clear view of the passing crowds and ordered a strong cafe latte. It arrived weak and milky.

Ian hadn't shown up by three fifteen so I watched some Japanese tourists having their photo taken with the dandelion shaped fountain behind them. I gave him till three thirty then asked the waiter for the L-Z telephone book. An I. Routley was listed in Challis Avenue. I tried the number on my mobile and left a message when his answering machine cut in. 'Where the hell are you?' I said. 'I've been sitting in this fucking cafe for more than half an hour. I'll give you fifteen minutes more, then I'm off.' I left my mobile number and told him to call me back if he intended turning up, then ordered another coffee. Fifteen minutes later I paid my bill and walked back to the car via Challis Avenue and the red brick block of flats that Ian called home. It was a security building with no access to the foyer. I pressed the buzzer to Ian's flat but there was no reply.

I was still feeling irritated when I rang Ella from my car. 'Do you want to talk to me about last night?' I asked.

'Should I?' she said.

'Yeah, you should. I've already spoken to your mother about your uncle. Now I want to hear your side of the story.'

She sighed. 'Want to come over now?'

I said I was on my way then drove over to Glebe via Cleveland Street and City Road. Victoria Park looked tempting in the sun. The newly refurbished lake was dotted with little yachts that kids were sailing from the banks. As I climbed the stairs to Ella's place I could hear music coming from one of the flats. Ella's door was ajar and I pushed it open slowly. She was standing on the other side of the room and had her back to me. She was holding a B flat clarinet to her lips and playing the last bars of Woody Herman's *Golden Wedding* towards the park and the kids with yachts.

'Hi,' I called from the doorway. 'I didn't know you played so well.'

'Yeah. Do you play anything?'

I shook my head. 'I'm strictly a music voyeur.'

She lifted the clarinet towards her mouth again. 'Well,' she said, her lips already on the reed, 'you just pucker up and blow.' She began to play the opening bars of Mozart's Clarinet Concerto. With a sly smile she moved flawlessly into an improvisation ending on a long, low, F sharp. 'That's what I call a dying fall.' She wiped the instrument with a piece of cloth and started to dismantle it, then put it in its case. 'But you didn't come to talk about music, did you?'

'No, I came to hear whatever it is you're going to tell me about last night.'

'That man,' she said slowly, 'was my Uncle Raoul.'

'So you've said. And?'

'And what?'

'Well, if he's your uncle, what's the secrecy? Why the clandestine meeting? The sneaking around? The envelope and whatever it contained?'

She turned towards the window again. It was double-glazed but I could still hear the rumble of traffic outside. 'I don't want Marge to know.'

'What's with Marge? Your mother has already told me she has no problem with you meeting your uncle. Why would Marge mind?'

'Marge doesn't have any time for my father or his family. She says they were collaborators during the war.'

'And were they?'

She turned around angrily. 'How could Dad and his brothers have been? They were only children.'

'So why not just meet him here or at your mother's place?'

She shrugged and looked back at the view outside. 'It's convenient to meet at the Show, okay? So let's change the subject.' Her shoulder blades were pressed up against the glass. 'Want to go for a drink?'

I took a quick look at my watch. The afternoon was marching on. 'Are you intending to go to the Show again tonight?'

'Of course,' she smiled.' It said in today's paper that Len Smith's going to address his supporters at eight o'clock.'

I did some fast mental arithmetic. Eight at the Show. Leave by nine thirty. Thirty minutes in traffic. That gave Len Smith an hour to kill before he met Jane.

Ella was watching me, a troubled look on her face. Despite her bravado, something had her scared. 'What's up?' I asked as she picked up her leather jacket from the couch and pulled it on. For a brief moment her shoulders sagged. I went to put my arm around her but she pulled away.

'Let's go to the Lansdowne,' she said when we reached the street. 'They usually have a band on Saturday afternoons.'

I told her I'd give it ten minutes and followed her across Parramatta Road and up the pub's stairs to the bar on the first floor. Smiled politely when she introduced me to her friends. I recognised one of them from the cafe under University Hall. They were all around Ella's age, clever, funny. They talked about essays due the following week, whether they'd do an Honours year and where they'd spend their next holiday.

I offered to buy them all around of drinks and used the opportunity to ring Rickie from the bar. He was at a family barbeque in Newtown. 'How hard would it be for me to break into Ella's flat?' I said softly, my eyes on Ella and her mates.

'Very. She's got a state of the art deadlock.'

'But you could?'

'Of course.'

'Any chance you can get in now? I reckon she's going to be here for another half hour.' The women had their heads together across the table.

'I can be there in ten minutes. Can I ask why?'

'Just call me when you're in. I'll need you to keep watch on the corner in case she follows me.'

I took the drinks over and sat down. The women were talking about a tutor they fancied. It was fifteen minutes before my mobile rang. I stood up and said *family crisis* when Rickie said the magic words, *I'm in*. Ella nodded in a sombre way when I said I'd see her later. Her friends might have distracted her from her fear for a while, but when I glanced back at her it was back on her face, big time.

~ *Thirty Four* ~

Rickie opened the door as soon as I reached it. I told him to head downstairs, fast, and call me if Ella made an appearance, then I shut the door behind me and attached the door chain.

Ella was certainly tidier than I'd been at nineteen. There were no unwashed dishes on the sink. The kitchen bin was empty and swathed in a liner bag. The carpet was unstained. I glanced out the window towards the Lansdowne, then got to work. Checked under the couch, inside the zippered cushion covers, in the pockets of a pair of jeans she'd hung across the back of a dining chair. Her CD collection showed she had pretty eclectic taste. Some Killing Heidi, U2, Paul Kelly, Sinéad O'Connor and a few Chet Baker compilations. I flicked them open one by one. Apart from some inspiring lyrics and groovy CD designs there was nothing that helped me.

Her bedroom was as sparsely furnished as the lounge. Bed neatly made with bed linen from Country Road. Unlike Cara's empty cupboard, Ella's yielded clothes with Italian and French labels and a liberal smattering of Marcs tee-shirts and trousers. I wasn't expecting to find a Len Smith flier but I checked the corner of the cupboard anyway. Ella's shoes were neatly arranged, so was the bathroom cabinet, with neat bottles of make-up and perfume lined up on the shelves. Some flash looking cakes of soap and a bottle of bath oil were arranged on the rim of the bath. It was very clean, and smelled perfumed.

'Bingo,' I said out loud, when I saw the long black hair that was lying next to the plug hole. I took my notebook out of my bag and placed the hair between two of its pages.

The second bedroom was clearly Ella's study. There was no bed, just a desk and a blue apple iMac with some books about globalisation and economics in developing countries beside it. The notebook next to the stack contained Ella's comments about Fukuyama and some quotes she was going to use in an essay. She clearly wasn't a big fan of his endism theory. I clicked the computer on. It presented its smiley face then went through its verification process. It was a hell of a lot quicker than the computer I had at home, but I'd have liked it to have been quicker. A desk top file called *essays* contained Ella's Fukuyama draft and some history notes. The hard disc yielded only uni work as well. Her letters file contained a couple of drafts to the university asking for information about her HECS liability.

She had a dated Eudora program for her email. Unlike me, she cleared her in and out files. I didn't think it wise to check her incoming mail. Instead, I clicked on her email address book. I recognised some of the names as I scrolled slowly through it. Lee Han, Peter Watson, Leonie Radcliffe, contacts at UTS. Then I saw Cara Lane's. The email address beside it was a work one - c.lane@agsil.gov.au.

I was feeling very uneasy when I clicked on the Netscape icon. Ella had bookmarked dozens of web sites. I was still scrolling through them when my mobile rang.

'She's saying goodbye to her friends outside the Landsdowne,' Rickie said.

'A minute more. Stay on the line.'

Most of the bookmarks related to university work. There were some travel ones too, Bali, Chang Mai, Phuket, as though she was planning a holiday during the semester break.

'She's moving, Nic. Get out.'

'Not yet. I've just struck gold.' There were more familiar sites: *The Herald*, Len Smith, Ian Routley's reviews. 'She's book-marked stuff I've used myself.' Then I saw Commonwealth Attorney General's Department.

'Move it, she's crossing the road,' Rickie said. 'Hear me? Crossing the road. You've got about two minutes.'

I shut the computer down and grabbed my bag. Did a quick check of the room and headed out the door.

'She's coming up.'

I took the stairs two at a time to the floor above. Waited till I heard her key in the door, then the door opened and shut.

When I got downstairs Rickie was waiting beside his car. 'And?' he said. He'd bought me a take-away flat white. I drank some of it before I spoke.

'What would you say if I told you Ella Davies had Cara Lane's work email in her address book and she'd book-marked the Attorney General's web site?

She's also been following media coverage about Cara Lane's murder. A bit too intently to be healthy for my liking.'

'I'd say it was worth my sister's wrath for leaving just as my nephew was blowing out his birthday candles. Were you able to check her email messages?'

'She's deleted them. *In and out.* Very tidy. Who has the time to delete all their emails? You let them build up a bit, then do a clean out. Unless you're really worried that someone might read them.'

~ *Thirty Five* ~

Rickie went back to his family and I went back to Balmain. I was so engrossed in trying to fathom Ella Davies' interest in Cara Lane that I ran a red light on the Crescent. The driver of a car turning into Johnson Street yelled something rude at me. I glanced in my rear vision mirror. A green Commodore had come to a screech behind me at the lights. I hadn't noticed it tailing me. For that matter, I hadn't noticed anything on the road - suspicious green Commodores, red lights, or the route I'd taken since leaving Ella's place. I touched the brakes and looked in the mirror again. The bend in the road made it impossible to read the Commodore's registration. I paid more attention to what I was doing as I drove the rest of the way home. I kept an eye open for the Commodore too, but I didn't see it again.

A letter from Bridget was sticking out of the letter-box when I got home. A little yellow post it note had been attached to the back of the envelope explaining that it had been delivered by mistake to a house in Dock Road. Inside was a photo-card of a field of lavender planted in long, purple rows. The envelope was postmarked *Avignon- City of the Popes* - and the bridge about which I'd sung at Birchgrove Primary School.

Bridget wrote that she loved the place, but there was an edge to her words that I hadn't picked up in any of her previous letters. She seemed angry, which wasn't like her at all. My address on the envelope had a lean to it as though she'd scrawled it in a hurry or an angry frame of mind. Inside the card were a couple of foolscap pages that she'd covered in her tiny, erratic script. The paper was as flimsy as organza and in parts her pen had pierced it like a scalpel pierces skin. Her usual descriptions of Provençal

restaurants and markets had been replaced with an angry diatribe about a meal she'd eaten at a Nice restaurant a few nights before. She'd gone with a North African man she'd met through friends. As they'd walked along the Promenade des Anglais they'd been subjected to a barrage of racist comments from a gang of youths on mopeds. Bridget had never experienced that kind of aggro. She'd wanted to take the youths on, but her friend had heard it all before and wasn't prepared to risk a fight.

When a pro-Jospin rally was held in Marseilles a few days later, Bridget went along to watch. She'd taken some photos and had included a couple she thought I might like to see. I smiled to myself as I held them towards the light. She looked wonderful: tanned and sporting the kind of relaxed smile that only a holiday in the sun brings. But there was something defiant in her pose as well. Her friends, including the North African man, were tall, lean and determined beside her. The background scene was a porcupine of banners and posters proclaiming France a non-racist state. A group of skinheads held up posters too, covered with swastikas and other fascist insignia. I turned to the back of one of the photos where she'd *scrawled getting into the spirit of the place*.

I drove round to Michaela's to show her the letter and photos. She studied each one carefully, a sneer curling around her mouth as she passed them back to me. One of the boys was about sixteen. His head was shaved like the men I'd seen at Michaela's meeting and like them, he looked skeletal. His mouth was open and his arm was raised in a Nazi salute. He had a tattoo on his right cheek. Behind him were the soft, yellow-coloured stone walls and iron balconies I associated with cities like Nice and Lyon.

'Thugs are the same the world over aren't they?' Michaela said with a sigh. 'These fascists have all read the same book.'

'Have you got a magnifying glass?' I asked.

She poked around in the drawer of her dresser, found it and passed it across the table. The youth's tattoo looked like a sheaf of wheat. I handed the photo and the magnifying glass to Michaela. 'Take a look at that.'

She frowned and held the glass against the print.

'It looks like the symbol that was on the bottom of Jane Davies' painting of the reclining nude,' I said.

Michaela sat back in her chair. 'Are you saying there's a link between Jane Davies' paintings and these idiots?'

'Not necessarily. It's odd though, don't you think?' But Michaela couldn't see what I was getting at.

I spent half an hour scrolling through the internet when I got home. There were plenty of fascist sites. I started to feel nervous in case the organisations could trace the hit back to me. Rickie once told me that governments monitored people who entered pornography or extremist political sites. I certainly didn't want them to put me on their files as a Nazi sympathiser.

The first impression I got from some of the sites was that they weren't extremist at all. Instead of organisations supporting ethnic cleansing and death camps, they could have been inviting a person to take part in a car rally or a quiet afternoon tea. I suspected that that was exactly how people like Len Smith wanted it. Tame, inclusive, understanding prose, chapter meetings in church halls, cake drives and needlework afternoons. It was

only when you started to read the stuff about Jews and blacks and Asians that the madness started seeping out of the cracks.

I also found out that the fascist insignia isn't a sheaf of wheat at all, but a bundle of rods with an axe blade peeping out of the top.

I also hit the Attorney General's web site that Ella had book marked but any reference to Cara Lane had been deleted with her death. Lee Han was still there though, smiling in an enigmatic way from her staff photo. I made a note of her email address and her work phone number. As soon as I'd shut down, I rang Rickie.

He was back at his sister's barbeque and I could hear kids squealing in the background. 'I've been thinking about Ella Davies,' he said. 'Trying to work out what she's up to.'

'Tell me about it. But there's a fine line between pushing her and giving her enough rope to hang herself. I don't want to do either.'

He answered curtly when I asked about security organisations monitoring use of the internet. 'They can trace you, Nic. Through the internet, by noting one of hundreds of key words when you're on the phone: bomb, assassinate, terrorist, IRA, Gadaffi. They can track your mobile. They can also get access to your email and all the documents on your computer. As far as technological developments go, 1984 was eons ago.'

I made one other call but Gerry Hopkins wasn't at Cara's flat. I left a message on her answering machine asking whether Cara had ever mentioned anyone called Davies - Marge, Jane or Ella. Especially Ella. I asked too, if Cara had owned a personal computer. There hadn't been one at the flat, not significant perhaps, given that most of Cara's personal effects

had gone. But if she'd had a home computer, I needed to know if Cara had installed an email program on it, and could use it to access any messages sent to her at work. I told Gerry I was going out but she could leave a message on my machine if she liked.

~ *Thirty Six* ~

Bill Litton was back from Melbourne. He rang as I was getting ready to leave to say he was knocking off at six. He suggested we meet for a beer at the Town Hall Hotel. When I arrived he was sitting beside the window that looked out across the intersection of Darling and Rowntree Streets. On the wall above him a sign advertised cocktails with the kinds of names that make grown men cringe if they have to order them in front of a crowd. He had lost his harried expression and looked fitter all round. I wolf-whistled. 'Hey, what's happened to you?'

He smiled slowly and took a sip of beer. 'Let's just say I'm feeling on top of the job again.'

I got myself a drink and sat down beside him. His old verve had come back. I presumed that meant one thing: he was confident about solving the Cara Lane case.

'I heard you'd gone to Melbourne,' I said. 'I met Cara Lane's sister yesterday. She's staying here in Balmain. She told me you'd interviewed her in Collingwood.'

'Nosey bugger, aren't you? And what did she say?'

'She told me about the kids having a blood test. About Cara having a boy friend. Sounds like you're making progress.'

He raised his eyebrows slightly. 'I wouldn't say that. But the links are coming together. It's only a matter of time.'

'She also told me that Cara had been seeing a new man.'

Someone was playing the jukebox: Talking Heads *Same as it Ever Was*. The music was so loud we couldn't hear one another talk, so we sat listening to the words and sipping on our drinks. Bill had a packet of cigarettes on the table but he hadn't smoked one. I pointed to them. 'Given them up too?'

'Yeah. But I'm not at the stage where I can sit in the pub without the packet.'

'Can you tell me any more? What Cara's links with Luke Redmond and the painting?'

'It's confidential - not worth my job to tell you.'

'I've been doing my own research,' I said. 'It's amazing what you find in art books. Did you know that artists use women and flowers to convey a whole range of ideas: innocence, licentiousness, virtue, fecundity, perfidy? Shakespeare had flowers create word poems all of their own. Their messages were as telegraphic as yachts displaying flags to say drinks are on at six. The flowers used on Cara Lane might well have been a message to the people who found her.'

Bill just sat looking at me when I'd finished. 'Thanks for the lecture, Nic,' he said with a glance at the bar. He leaned towards me and spoke in an undertone. 'The Art Gallery has given us a register of Sydney artists who paint in the style on that canvas. We're working our way through it.'

'Let me guess. Ian Routley's and Jane Davies' names are on it.'

He pulled his face into the poker expression I'd seen Dad use when he was playing cards with Ernie. 'And Luke Redmond?' I asked. But Bill could have had four aces up his sleeve for all his face told me. When he refused to open his mouth again, I filled him in on what I thought Ella Davies was doing with Lee Han. Told him not to act on the information. If Ella was hiding Lee for a reason, I wanted to find out what it was. I took out the hair I'd found in Ella's bath. 'I think this hair belongs to Lee Han.'

Bill sucked in a deep breath and took the paper-wrapped hair from me gingerly. 'Just let Ella Davies know the cops are getting closer to what happened to Cara Lane.' He tapped the side of his nose with his index finger. 'And that, Nic, is what mates do for mates.'

I patted him on the shoulder and got up to go. Despite the flab around his middle, he was solid muscle and built like a bull. For a brief moment I was tempted to tell him about the phone calls Rickie and I had overheard but that would involve explaining what we were up to and I didn't want to do that.

'I nearly forgot this,' I said, handing him a slip of paper. 'Some jerk in a dark green Commodore, registration LTS 231 has been tailing me. Can you check it out?'

'Just remember about mates helping mates,' he said, putting it in his pocket.

~ *Thirty Seven* ~

The traffic was thick all the way out to the Show. I was late by the time I joined the Refraction day shift at their usual table. Their collective mood was as tense as a stretched rubber band. They bore all the wounds of seasoned political campaigners: sun burned noses, blisters and aching legs. They were angry about the insults that had been hurled at them all day by Len Smith's supporters. Smith's Forum had wised up to the need for a group of their own supporters to counter the protesters. They'd set up a campaign stall not far from Refraction. The two groups eyed one another uneasily while the Show ground crowd ambled past. It was clear that both groups were edgy and spoiling for a fight. I'd seen crowds go troppo on less energy than that.

A security guard walked over and asked us to move on. 'Why?' one of the Refraction men challenged. 'What are we doing wrong?' The guard just turned silently and walked back to a group of men in suits.

'Where's Ella?' I said. 'She told me she'd be here tonight.'

Peter Watson shrugged. 'I called her at five to see if she wanted a lift but she reckoned she was running late. She said she'd make her own way.' He looked around. 'Daniel's not here yet, either.'

The security guard came back with the three plain-clothes men. 'I'm sorry. I'll have to ask you people to leave. Management has been very tolerant but we aren't able to allow any more protests.'

The Refraction team was standing now, challenging. Suddenly Peter Watson shouted 'run!' and they sped off in all directions and disappeared into the crowd, the guard and two of the other men in pursuit.

I took my mobile phone from my bag and began to walk towards the gate, passing Len Smith's supporters who were still sitting at their table. Through the gate I could see buses pulling up and disgorging their passengers, then driving off. A WRX was parked under a 'no stopping' sign and Daniel was sitting in the driver's seat. A security guard leaned through the window and did a high five. Daniel grinned at him then drove off. I waited near the gate while I called Rickie. He told me Ella had had a meal with a friend. She was on her way and just turning into Olympic Drive.

Daniel walked through the turnstiles as I hung up. 'Hello,' he said with surprise. 'Are you leaving? Sorry I'm late. The traffic was hellish. I've only just arrived.'

'I'm waiting for Ella. Len Smith will be here soon, too, I gather. I don't think I can bear to see his smug face again.'

Daniel grinned. 'Oh, come on. You're tougher than that. Where's the rest of the team?'

'They scarpered when security started giving them a hard time. I suppose they'll regroup as soon as Len Smith arrives.' He was fiddling with his car keys and I noticed that his fingernails were still stained and dirty. 'I saw you earlier, parked outside,' I said.

He looked at me thoughtfully then shook his head. 'I only arrived a few minutes ago.' He glanced around at the crowd. 'Want to get a bite to eat before the action starts?'

'What action?' I asked, surprised at how tense I sounded.

'Turn of phrase. I meant the fireworks. What about Ella?'

'She'll catch us up.'

We walked slowly through sideshow alley. Under the neon lights the air seemed full of electricity. We bought hamburgers and cups of coffee and took them into the grandstand. It was already crowded and we pushed our way along the rows, manoeuvring between people's knees and stepping over show bags. Down on the arena a group of workers was setting up pegs for the tent pegging competition.

'You know, you've never really told me what you do for a living or what you study at UTS?' I said, when we'd sat down.

He took a sip of coffee before answering. 'I'm doing a Master of Social Sciences.'

'Yeah?' I said, 'I'm impressed. You knew Lee Han then?'

'No. She's an undergraduate. I don't have much contact with those students. What about you?'

'I finished with study ages ago. I had my fill when I did Arts/Law at Sydney University.'

'And you've never told me if you've got a boyfriend or a husband.'

'What's that got to do with anything?' I laughed.

'I wasn't sure what the story was with you and Ella,' he said awkwardly. He leaned back in his seat and watched the workers down on the arena, then turned and scrutinised the crowd as it moved up the stand. He leaned towards me. 'You give the impression of being someone who's come along for the ride.'

I thought for a few minutes before answering. He was observing me closely through half-closed eyes, so close I could feel his body heat. The workers had finished down on the arena. In another few minutes the tent pegging teams would be riding out. 'I could say the same about you. I'm here because I hate racism. I happen to believe it diminishes all of us. Anyway, my background's working class Balmain, so I know what it's like to do things tough.'

'You said you were a lawyer. You can't have done too badly to get to that. You'll be telling me you grew up in a shoe box next.'

'A single storey terrace in Balmain isn't much bigger,' I said unconvincingly.

He laughed loudly. 'I bet you know exactly what it's worth too. Come on Nicola, you're middle class, admit it.'

'And what does your car say about you?' When he didn't reply, I turned to him slowly and spoke in an undertone. 'Ella thinks you're with ASIO. And Peter Watson was saying the other night that radical groups expect people like you to infiltrate them.'

Daniel stared straight ahead at the crowd.

'I won't hold it against you if you are.' I picked up his hand and touched his fingernails. 'I wouldn't have thought that an ASIO agent would have paint under his fingernails. But then again, the way you watch everyone does make me wonder.'

He looked down at his hand. 'That's paranoid stuff. Kids like Peter and Ella want to believe it because it makes protesting seem more romantic. As for the paint, I'm renovating my house.'

But house paint doesn't smell of oils and paraffin, I thought. I put his hand back on his knee and looked down at the arena. One of the riders had hit the ground and the crowd let out a collective *oooh*. 'Daniel is a nice name' I said, 'especially the way you say it.'

'My mother's French. Everyone in my family speaks it fluently.'

'Say something then.'

The next rider was on the course. Daniel waited till they'd completed their round before he turned to face me. *Tu resembles Annie Lennox. Elle est ma chanteuse favorite. Sexy. Audacieuse. Tu as beaucoup d'aplomb tu sais - il ne te manque pas d'air*. Anyone ever told you that before?'

'Yeah,' I said, grinning back. 'I've been told that by a couple of million people.'

The grandstand was filling up with families, exhausted and in need of a place to sit down. 'I've always wished I could ride a horse like that.' He rested his chin on his hands and spoke in an undertone. 'I just hope I can trust you, Nicola, because I tell you what, we're in real shit if I can't.'

'From whom?'

Leonie Radcliffe was climbing the stairs into the stand. She was scanning the crowd but hadn't seen us. 'Watch it,' Daniel said, ignoring my question, 'Bodicea is on the night shift tonight.'

Leonie caught sight of someone in the crowd and waved. I turned and followed her gaze to the back of the stand. A couple of the Refraction team members were sitting in seats over to the side. Leonie climbed the stairs then pushed her way across the row to join them.

'I've got a bad feeling about this,' Daniel said suddenly.

'Why?'

'I don't know. Len Smith's going to do something silly, I reckon. To discredit the people who are giving him a hard time.'

I started to stand up. 'Shall we go and see what's happening?' I asked. 'I haven't seen Ella yet.'

Daniel jumped to his feet and pulled me back down. 'Don't.'

The lights had been dimmed and an announcer was asking the children in the audience to count down to the fireworks. '*Ten...nine...eight..*'

'Why did you do that?' The small of my back had hit the seat hard and a twinge of pain ran up my spine.

'*Seven...six...five...*' A little girl in front of us could hardly contain herself. She stood on her seat and shouted, '*three...two...one...*'

The first rocket was a sunflower against the night sky. The crowd roared its approval. I stood up again. 'I need to find Ella.'

Daniel caught my hand by the wrist and held it tight this time, his fingers biting into my skin. 'Please wait.'

The air was full of gunpowder. I pulled my hand away and began to push through the crowd. I ignored the protests as I blocked people's views. Then I was running towards the exit. Crowds were still thronging in to find seats before the fireworks ended. I barged through them, aware of Daniel close to my back. It was quiet away from the stands. A pall of smoke from the fireworks was already settling over the pavilions. I turned towards the gate. Stopped dead in my tracks. The place was crawling with cops. Police cars with their lights flashing lined the roadways. Half a dozen ambulances were parked next to the gates and sniffer dogs were probing the area where Refraction usually met.

'Shit,' I said, my eyes on the female police officer who was ushering a group of families through the gates.

Daniel had turned and was striding back towards the stand. I caught him up when he stopped at the base of the stairs and looked up to where Leonie and the others were sitting. Ella was up there too. She waved when she saw us and beckoned for us to join them. I checked my watch. Wondered how long she'd been there and how she'd managed to reach her seat without Daniel or me catching sight of her.

'You knew something was going to happen, didn't you?' I shouted at Daniel over the din of the fireworks.

He shook his head and began to climb up to where the others were sitting. I followed him and Ella stood up to let me squeeze into the seat next to her. My mouth was so dry I could hardly speak. 'When did you get here?' I asked her slowly. 'What time did you arrive?'

She moved her sleeve aside and looked at her elegant watch. 'Ten past seven. I called Leonie on my mobile and she said you were all in the stands so I came straight here.'

'Have you seen what's happening outside? Show me your fucking mobile.' My voice was raw and loud and the woman sitting behind me clicked her tongue in disapproval. Ella reached into her bag and pulled out a Nokia in a red leather case. I grabbed it off her and pressed redial. Leonie's mobile began to ring. She reached into her backpack and lifted out her phone. 'Hello?' she said slowly, watching my face. I turned Ella's phone off and handed it back to her. 'The area where we all used to meet is being searched for a bomb.'

Leonie looked as though she was going to be sick. 'A bomb?'

'You don't think we'd do something as stupid as that do you?' Ella asked.

I shrugged, 'I don't know what to think anymore.'

A voice came onto the public address system asking people to start making their way towards the exits. Dozens of police and security guards had moved into the stands. They stood at the base of the stairs and the end of each row and watched as people began to leave. Leonie, Ella and I stood and filed out. I looked around for Daniel but he'd disappeared.

'Why didn't the announcer just tell the crowd there was a bomb threat?' Ella said, when we'd passed the police.

'Why do you think?' I said. 'The fireworks were about to start. They had to avoid panic. Isolate the area. They'll have made sure the rest of the place is safe by now. Let's get out of here. They'll have us all on security video. I imagine we'll be getting a visit from Special Branch before the night's out.'

Leonie was still as white as a sheet. She took Ella's arm and they walked shakily down the stairs in front of me. 'I'd like to know who was so bloody stupid,' she said. 'A bomb threat in a crowd like this could have caused a complete stampede.'

~ *Thirty Eight* ~

I was still bristling with anger when I'd dropped Ella off at her flat. I drove straight down to Glebe Point and joined Rickie in the little lane across from Jane Davies' studio. He'd stencilled a sign to the side of his van - *The Glebe Flower Pot* - because he didn't think anyone would look twice at something belonging to a local business.

'Amazing,' he said, when I told him about the bomb scare at the Show. 'Reckon Ella had something to do with it?' He parked four houses away from Jane's. 'Nasty if she was. Well, it's certainly dead quiet here.' He looked over his shoulder, then peered across the street. 'I'm taking a walk to the corner. Sit low. If a car drives past, get lower. I'll be back in a minute.'

I watched him stroll off nonchalantly, like a local taking the air and listened to the night noises till my ears felt as though they'd burst. Jane lived in a much quieter part of Glebe than Ella. The houses were set well back from the road with wide gardens and hedges. It was darker too away from the shops on Glebe Point Road. The leaves that spilled across the footpath like soggy cornflakes muffled any footfalls.

Ten minutes later Rickie tapped lightly on the back of the van, opened the rear doors and got inside. I looked around, got out and followed him. We did a last minute check of the equipment and put some earphones on. Then we sat in the dark, waiting.

At exactly eleven, a man walked slowly up Arcadia Street and opened Jane Davies' gate. He didn't knock on the door. The hall light went on,

momentarily lighting the blood red glass. The door opened and closed. The hall light went off again.

Even though we were expecting it, Len Smith's voice came as a shock. He and Jane exchanged a few pleasantries. Jane offered Smith a drink. He refused and got straight down to business.

'I need another painting.'

Jane's response was muffled. She sounded as though she was opening and shutting drawers. Then her voice was louder. She sounded surprised. 'Why, what's happening?'

'We're planning a TV campaign and some of the Europeans need money.'

There was a long silence. 'There's the girl. It would be worth millions at auction but you'd only get that overseas. I can arrange a showing in Berlin.'

'Geneva might be better,' Len Smith said with a dry laugh.

'Yes, I see what you mean,' Jane said. 'It'll take about three months to organise things.'

'It must be sooner than that.' Footsteps walked across the room. 'Ella was certainly a pretty child,' Smith said.

I could place him then, standing as I had done, in front of Ella's portrait.

Jane laughed. 'She's much more beautiful now.'

'Pity she's so hot headed. But don't worry, we'll keep an eye on her. She won't get hurt.' He cleared his throat. 'This painting is excellent. You are uncannily good with the human form.' His voice had a hard, mocking edge and I waited for Jane to reply. She didn't. Len Smith waited a few minutes. 'I'd better go.'

Their voices muffled again. Rickie leaned forward and fiddled with the panel in front of him. It didn't help.

'Len...,' Jane said, 'I ...thi.....au....gard..' Then silence.

When Jane's front door closed with a little click, I took off my earphones and put them next to Rickie's. Len Smith came out into the street, looked left, then right. Walked towards the corner. A car with government plates drove up and he got in. We watched the red tail-lights until it turned onto Glebe Point Road and was gone. Then we waited in the back of the van for another twenty minutes, not saying anything, just thinking.

'What's wrong?' Rickie asked when I shivered.

'I was just thinking about the way Len Smith said Jane was uncannily good with the human form.'

'Well, she is, isn't she? She draws people well, I reckon.'

'It's not what he said, it's how he said it. Mocking. Like someone sharing a nasty secret with someone else.'

'And?'

'A secret about the way Jane draws bodies...'

'You still trying to connect her with Cara Lane?' he asked, his face sceptical.

'It's a possibility, isn't it? She's an artist.'

'Yeah, but what possible motivation would she have?'

We sat contemplating the question. Cara Lane and Jane Davies were a million miles apart. Both might have been single mums with kids to bring up, but Jane's lifestyle, her international travel and political connections were a far cry from Cara's rural background. The only link I could think of was Len Smith and it was a tenuous one. Working for the government department of which he was Minister would hardly put a middle ranking public servant in his path. Ella Davies was a different matter. Her bookmarks and email addresses showed Cara meant something to her. But what?

The empty street was silent. Rickie stood up and quietly let himself out. He repeated his walk to the corner. When he came back, he drove me down to my car and we sat watching the lights playing tricks with the waters of Black Wattle Bay. 'Funny that Smith turned up with no goons in tow. What was the driver doing while he was in with Jane?' he asked.

'Driving around. A government car would be obvious if it parked.'

'So what was all that about?'

'Art fraud,' I said slowly. 'It sounds like Jane is forging paintings and selling them to raise money for Len Smith. I want to check out Jane's studio,' I said. 'If she's forging paintings that's where they'll be stored.'

'Now?' he asked.

'Now,' I said.

He slowly edged the van forward, saying he didn't want to take any risks and drove to The Crescent by the most convoluted route he could find. He doubled back and checked we weren't being tailed. When he felt safe, he drove back to The Crescent and parked behind a carpet store. We waited a few minutes then got out. Rickie slung a canvas bag over his shoulder and gave me a black beanie to cover my hair so it wouldn't stand out in the dark.

We discussed our tactics as we walked across Jubilee Park. Glebe Point Road was quiet and I waited in the shadows underneath the studios while Rickie did a quick circuit up the hill, then down the other side. 'Ready?' he asked when he re-joined me. I followed him down the steep driveway that led towards the water. We stopped outside a pottery shop with a window full of unglazed pottery. 'I checked this out yesterday,' he said. 'The locks down here are hopeless. A kid could kick them in. The door into Jane's studio is another matter. It's a state-of-the-art dead lock. All the Davies' women are good on security. Deadlocks on doors, bars on their windows. Funny, you'd think they have something to hide.'

With a quick push he had the door open and we were in the building. We moved quickly along the wooden passage way towards Jane's studio. Rickie stopped at the door, listened, then took out an instrument that wouldn't have been out of place on the table of a medieval torturer. He inserted it in the lock and flicked it twice to the left, to the right, then back to the left again. The lock clicked and he pushed the door open.

I shut the door behind him and moved towards the window. My eyes were already accustomed to the dark and I could see the square shape of Jane's canvasses, some still on their easels. Tubes of paint stood like soldiers to attention beside jars of solvent and glazes. The round pottery shapes Jane had been working on when I'd last seen her in the studio were roosting on their shelves. She'd painted some in startlingly bright colours, others were more subdued.

Rickie had a couple of pencil torches. He passed one to me and I let its beam flicker across the room like a laser.

'If she's got a safe, where would it be?'

I directed the torch beam to the stack of paintings beside the wall. 'Behind that? It's the first place I'd try.'

We started to lift the canvasses. When the wall behind them was cleared we tapped along it, me with my torch, Rickie with a rubber mallet. It replied with the sound of solid brick. I let my fingers probe along the skirting board and architraves, just to be sure, then we put the paintings back. Rickie let the torch slice across the room again and walked around the walls, tapping under the windows and behind the little table where Jane stored her kettle and teapot. I stood sentry at the window while he checked the floorboards to see if any were loose.

The waters of Black Wattle Bay were as smooth as glass. The container wharf was lit up like Christmas and I heard a soft thud as a crane lifted a container from a ship and deposited it on the wharf. No pleasure boats graced the water, but there were plenty of places below the studio for a boat to put ashore. If Jane didn't want a client to come by road, they could easily

moor in the area near the pottery shop we'd passed or the berth just below her window.

When I turned back to the room, Rickie was standing with his left hand on his hip, staring up at the shelves where the painted ceramic pieces sat. He reached across and touched the wall behind them and began to tap again. He tapped lower and lower until he was kneeling on the floor.

'Eureka,' he said, and I hear a dull, hollow sound. 'Give us a hand.'

He was so excited as he stood up he cracked his head against one of the shelves. Cursed. The pottery pieces rattled against one another. Then one began to roll. Before either of us could stop it, it hit the floor with a crash. We froze as rigid as shop dummies and listened in case the noise had tipped someone off to our presence. 'Damn,' Rickie said softly. Half a dozen clay fragments were scattered at his feet.

'Stand still,' I whispered, and bent to pick them up. I arranged them on the shelf while he guided me with his torch. The object we'd broken was hollow, green and subterranean. 'Jane went spare when I nearly dropped this piece the other day.'

Rickie was occupied with the wall. He'd bent down to the floor again. He carefully pulled away a piece of particle-board and flashed his torch inside the wall cavity. 'There's no safe in here that I can see,' he said, his voice as disappointed as a kid who'd been given socks for their birthday.

I bent down beside him. The space was about six feet square and lined with a thick foam mattress. A doona and a couple of pillows were scrunched up in a corner. An empty bottle of mineral water was lying beside some take-

a-way food wrappers. I crept into the space and tapped at the walls at the back. They were solid brick too.

'No safe,' I said, knowing what we'd found instead.

'Funny place for a bed,' Rickie said. 'If Jane Davies wanted to sleep over, I'm sure she'd have something a bit more salubrious than that.'

'It's a hiding place. Jane Davies probably doesn't even know it's here. I reckon Ella Davies moves Lee Han every few nights to avoid detection. She's probably got a key to the studio. She brings Lee Han here for a night or two. May even stay here with her. My hunch is that Ella gives Lee access to her flat in University Hall when she's sick of sleeping in places like this. It would certainly explain the noises you picked up on your tape. So Lee showers, enjoys some home comforts, then goes rough again. Have you picked up anything from the recordings?'

Rickie shook his head. 'Not much. The technology can't tape what isn't there. Their conversations are pretty bland. When Jane and Ella are together, the mother asks the daughter questions. The daughter answers in monosyllables. The mother asks more questions. It struck me as I listened that the Davies' women always seem to be keeping tabs on one another. Jane wants to know where Marge is going. Ella likes to know when her mum will be at the studio. They add a whole new dimension to the *term living in someone's pocket.*'

I bent down and helped him re-attach the plasterboard to the wall. 'Well, now we know why it's important for Ella to know when Jane will be here,' I said. 'She brings Lee to the studio on the nights when Jane's staying away.'

Rickie held the torch under his chin. He looked just like Ian Routley had in my nightmare and I shivered. 'There's no safe, Nic,' he said. 'We'll have to try Jane's house.'

'But she said she'd have to go *over* to the safe. If it had been in her Glebe house she wouldn't have used that term.'

Rickie shrugged. 'What else would you suggest?' He was playing with the clay shards on the shelf. 'What are we going to do with this?'

'Take them with us. We can't just leave them there like that. Jane will twig straight away. Open your bag.' I slipped each piece inside, then dusted the shelf to ensure there were no clay crumbs left. I rearranged the other objects so the gap caused by the broken one was no longer obvious. Rickie ran his torch along the line.

'You'd never know it was here.'

'Jane will. But with luck she won't notice it's gone for a day or two.'

I looked around the studio as we left: at the slashes of paint on Jane's unfinished canvasses, the round pottery objects, lined up on their shelves like a row of decapitated heads.

'Come on,' Rickie said impatiently. He closed the door behind us, locked it with his key, then wiped the door and the lock clean of fingerprints.

It was cold when we got outside. 'You take these,' Rickie said shivering, when we'd walked back to my Peugeot. He passed me the broken pottery. 'See if you can stick them together. Now get going. I'll head the other way.'

I watched him sprint across Jubilee Park to his van. He had pulled out and was heading towards the city as I drove to Balmain. Up on View Street a car turned on its lights. I slowed down, nervous, in case it was the green Commodore. But no-one followed me home.

~ *Thirty Nine* ~

A silver Magna was parked outside my house when I got back. I parked the 504 behind it and opened the door cautiously. The driver and passenger in the Magna opened their doors too. Bill Litton and a woman got out. The woman pulled her ID out of her coat's inside pocket. 'I'm Detective Inspector Janice Mattingly,' she said. 'I'm with the Kings Cross police. I gather you know Bill Litton.'

Bill's face was as closed as the country branch of a bank. It was clear he wanted his colleague to think our acquaintance was fleeting.

They watched while I rummaged through my shoulder bag for the house keys, then followed me up the stairs to the front door. I kept telling myself there was no way they could know I'd just spent an hour eavesdropping on a Minister of the Crown, but who could be sure? They waited by the open door while I walked around the house turning on lights. 'Would you like a coffee or something?' I shouted from the kitchen. When they called *no thanks* I filled a glass with water and took it into the lounge room.

'Were you at the Show all night?' Janice Mattingly asked. 'We've been waiting for nearly two hours.'

'I met a friend in Glebe,' I said slowly. 'You're not here to ask about the bomb scare out at Homebush?'

'The bomb squad will handle that.' She turned her body towards Bill, who was sitting on the couch next to her. 'We're here about another matter. Ian Routley. I gather you knew him.'

My throat was dry. I took a long gulp of water. 'Not well.'

'He's dead, Nicola,' Bill said.

I put the glass on the coffee table. 'Dead?' The room suddenly seemed icy cold.

'Routley was a doodler. He left a choice selection on the note pad next to his phone. Crosses. Little daisies. Kangaroos. Breasts and bums. Some bloke with a nose like Hawkeye the Indian. And your name written out half a dozen times.'

'He rang and asked me to meet him this afternoon,' I said. 'He didn't show up. I called to see what was keeping him but he wasn't at home.'

Bill leaned forward. 'He was home. He just wasn't in any state to pick up the phone. Why did he want to meet you?'

I shrugged. 'I don't know. I've only ever met him a couple of times. Once at an art exhibition, the other at the Easter Show. He was one of the art judges. He was very friendly. Chatty. He asked me for a date.'

'What else did he talk about?' Janice Mattingly asked.

'At the Easter Show?' When she nodded I told her we'd talked about the paintings on display in the Arts and Crafts pavilion. 'Ian pointed out a

few he really liked. He'd just awarded a prize to one painted by a teacher in Walgett.'

Bill was busily taking notes. He scribbled something then looked up from his note pad. 'Did he ever get physical. Make a pass at you?'

'No?' I said, incredulity scoring my voice. 'He just wanted to have dinner. A drink. He made some comments about the way I looked, that was it.' I thought for a moment about my meetings with Ian. His tone had always had a mocking edge to it. 'He said he liked a woman who could look after herself. That struck me.'

'Why did he say that?' Bill asked.

'He knew I was a private investigator and that I sometimes minded people. I told him as much when I met him at the Show.'

'And you think that was why he wanted to meet you today?' he asked.

'Perhaps.'

DI Mattingly cast a quick look around the room. 'Can I use your answering machine?' she said, inclining her head towards it. Without waiting for my reply, she opened the top of the machine, took my tape out, then popped hers in.

My voice seemed overly ocker and aggressive. *Where the hell are you? I've been sitting in this fucking restaurant for half an hour. I'll give you fifteen more minutes, then I'm off. Ring me on 0416 120 338. Bye.* There was a loud clunk as I put the phone down, then three insistent beeps from the machine.

Bill was doing a bad job at suppressing a grin. 'You sound pissed off.'

'I was. I hate drinking weak coffee and being stood up.'

'Did anything strike you when he called you?'

I shook my head. 'Nothing. I suppose he sounded nervous, that's all. I put it down to the fact that he'd published a particularly vitriolic column in *The Herald*. And that he was probably going to be sued over it.'

'Jane Davies?' Mattingly asked.

'Yeah. The article ripped her art to shreds. She had already engaged a lawyer.'

She leaned over and took her tape. 'Well, someone wanted Mr Routely dead,' she said putting mine back.

'When he didn't show up I went past his flat on the way back to my car,' I said. 'I buzzed but there was no reply. It was the kind of building you couldn't just walk into. Good security. I'd have gone up and knocked on his door if I'd been able to but I couldn't get into the foyer.'

She put the tape into a little plastic bag and dropped it into her purse. 'That building isn't as secure as it looks. All it needs is someone careless enough to take pity on a person saying they've lost their keys.'

'When do you think it happened?'

She shrugged. 'Forensic is working on it. Where did you go after Ian failed to turn up?'

'I went over to Glebe to talk to Ella Davies.'

'And then?'

'The Easter Show.'

She raised her eyebrows. 'Got a bit of a thing about the Show have you?' she smiled.

'Yeah,' I said. 'I like the rides.'

'Come over to the Kings Cross Police Station in the morning to make a formal statement.' She handed me a card with her name and number on it. 'Call me if you remember anything else.'

'Who found him?' I asked, my eyes still on the card.

She seemed to be talking through clenched teeth. 'A neighbour downstairs. He's not a happy man. He recently painted his place. Blood soaked all the way through Mr Routley's floorboards and onto his neighbour's ceiling. Doesn't go too well with beech veneer and stainless steel. The killer knew what they were doing. They cut his throat with something so sharp it could have been sliced open by a surgeon.'

I watched from the doorway as they walked over to their car. Bill lit up a cigarette as soon as he'd left the house. So much for giving them up.

The news of Ian's death had left me feeling very vulnerable. As soon as they'd driven off, I dead locked the doors and closed the blinds. Then I arranged the broken pieces of Jane's pottery on my coffee table. The clay was

thick and deeply pitted. Jane had applied paint in her trademark wolds, deep green and spattered with a lighter shade. I lifted up each fragment and examined how it might be repaired. The centre was hollow. I let my fingers play around the trough. I sniffed, but the only thing I could smell was the oily scent of new paint. I got out the super glue and set to work. When I was finished it looked as good as new, if you ignored the cracks.

By the time I got to bed it was nearly two and I was wide-awake. I flicked on the TV and channel surfed in the hope of finding a news broadcast. When nothing materialised, I crawled into bed and listened to the radio. Ian Routley's death wasn't receiving any attention but the bomb threat at the Showground was. The Police Commissioner praised his men and women for their crowd control. Len Smith called it an irresponsible act of terrorism aimed at silencing the voice of democracy. I wondered if it had made his getting to Glebe more difficult. Reporters would have been pursuing him for his views on the incident. No-one had claimed responsibility but the police said they had a list of suspects.

~ *Forty* ~

Dad rang as soon as he saw read about Ian Routley's death in the next morning's paper.

'I know all about it,' I said. 'The cops came here last night especially to tell me.'

I could hear him breathing as he slowly took it in. I expected a barrage of questions but he just asked if I'd eaten breakfast. 'Come round here and I'll make you some eggs on toast,' he said, when I replied in the negative.

'Okay,' I said. 'Give me an hour. I haven't seen the papers yet and I want to go for a run. I won't be able to stay long. I've got to go over to Kings Cross.'

I pulled on a pair of track pants and an old tee shirt and headed for Mort Bay. My feet seemed to beat Ian Routley's name into the gravel as I raced around the water then up the Thames Street hill. Ian had been an unpopular reviewer but I couldn't imagine a disgruntled artist doing him in. Jane Davies was another matter. She'd been so incensed by his article she'd threatened to kill him. The previous night's surveillance had shown she was involved in something very shady. Had Ian found out about it? Threatened to expose her? He'd certainly been keen to tell me something. But what? And who had got to him before he could talk to me?

I was panting by the time I reached Darling Street. I turned down Phillip Street and cut across Curtis Road. I could see Dad sitting on his

verandah with the newspaper as I ran up Short Street. The scene looked so normal - Dad in his wicker armchair, the neighbours watering their gardens and playing with their kids - that I relaxed a bit. Dad followed me inside and started to make some toast. I read the paper while he cooked. Ian Routley's murder shared the front page with the story about the bomb scare at the Show.

As it was, the journalists weren't able to say much. Just that Ian Routley had been found in his Pott's Point flat and that the police weren't ruling out the possibility that he knew his killer. An obituary chronicled his career with *The Herald* and as a Fine Arts student at Sydney University. He'd tried painting for a while but the art critics had savaged his early exhibitions and he gave it away after that. There was a stint with The Institute, then he'd gone into art criticism himself, first with *Artz* magazine and then *The Herald*. The photo the paper had used in the article didn't look like Ian at all. He seemed younger and less trendy than when I had met him, stunned and guilty like a criminal in a police mug shot.

The story about the bomb threat was a different matter and the journalist had explored some theories of their own. Could the hoax have been staged by a left wing protestor or did one of Len Smith's right-wing sympathisers do it to win public support? They made it all sound like a Cold War cloak and dagger game.

I wasn't all that hungry as it turned out. Dad seemed tired too. The house looked cluttered and he'd been piling old newspapers on top of the dresser instead of the recycle bin. His clothes looked shabby. When the case was over I was going to take him shopping at Gowings to shout him a new winter coat and some shirts.

'What?' he said, when he caught me watching him.

'I was just thinking that I haven't had much time lately to give you a hand with this place.'

'What's wrong with it?'

In silence we both looked around the room. It was starting to display all the hallmarks of an old man's house: the piled up newspapers, the margarine containers he was saving for seedling trays, all the plates from my childhood, chipped now and showing their age. The things were so familiar to me, I couldn't imagine a world without any of them.

'Nothing,' I said.

~ *Forty One* ~

Ian Routley had wanted to discuss something important with me. Now he was dead and I wanted to know why. I left Dad to potter in his garden, then went home to change. Gerry Hopkins had left a message to say she was going back to Melbourne on the 1.15 flight. Like most of her personal items, Cara's computer was still in its box in Collingwood. Hannah had been at her to set it up but she hadn't had the time. She'd let me know about Cara's email as soon as she could.

I drove up Oxford Street on the way to the Kings Cross Police station. Ian had called me from a phone booth in Oxford Street. There were plenty of them: one on the corner of Oxford and Riley streets, a couple at Taylor Square. Just around the corner from Oxford, there were two opposite Green Park and half a dozen in Darlinghurst Road. Ian could have called me from any of them.

I parked in Challis Avenue. Ian's block of flats looked peaceful enough. A cat was sitting on a ground floor windowsill. A face peered out from a window three floors up. The only indication that the block was a crime scene was the police patrol car parked in one of the residents' spots and the huddle of whispering neighbours on the footpath opposite.

'Ever seen this before?' a voice asked as I opened the station door and walked through to the reception desk. A detective was showing a young woman a black shoulder bag. The woman's face had the blank, stubborn look kids get when they know they're in trouble. The cop's exasperated tone

wasn't helping. 'No? Then how come this was in with all the other stolen goods?'

I asked for Detective Inspector Mattingly and was told to wait. The young woman moved away from the counter and gathered up her coat and a pile of books.

'Nicola?'

Janice Mattingly led me to an office where a radio was playing quietly in the corner. From time to time the music was interrupted by the crackling voice of a Police radio operator. A can of diet cola sat on the desk. She pointed to it and asked if I wanted one.

I shook my head. 'That stuff kills you.'

'Yeah,' she smiled. 'So I've heard.' She put a cigarette on the edge of her desk, looked at it, but didn't light it. It perched there, unlit, as she talked. It was the same trick Bill had used. I was tempted to tell her that it didn't work.

'I need you to tell me where you were and who you've been with for the last couple of days?' There was a computer on the desk. She clicked the mouse and the screen illuminated. 'Just let me bring up the statement form.'

She guided me through a series of questions, tapping away slowly as I spoke. Occasionally she'd ask me to slow down or repeat what I'd said. She seemed surprised when I told her I'd been participating in the anti-Len Smith protests as part of my commission to mind Ella Davies.

'Okay, that'll do it,' she said when I'd finished. 'We've got your mobile number. Keep the phone switched on.'

She walked out onto the street with me and lit up her cigarette with a sigh. 'You might like to know that we've caught the idiot who made the hoax call about the bomb. It was a teenage boy from Hunter's Hill. He went to one of the poshest schools in the State. Didn't like your lot at all. Thought you needed to be discredited so you'd stop harassing Len Smith.'

'You're kidding?'

She took a long, satisfied drag.

'True. His parents took him in to their local station about an hour ago. He confessed after they found he'd been accessing internet sites that show you how to make a bomb. I suppose we should be relieved that it was only a bomb threat and not the real thing.' She gave me a long, appraising look. 'You thought it was one of those kids you're hanging around with, didn't you? You shouldn't work for people you don't trust.'

The Police Station door opened and the cop I'd seen questioning the young woman stuck his head out. 'Inspector, I think you need to see this.'

He passed what looked like a student card to Janice Mattingly. From where I was standing the photo on it looked a lot like Lee Han. The cop jerked his head towards the door and the young woman beyond, sitting on a wooden bench. 'Reckons she found the bag in a lane at the back of Pitt Street.'

Mattingly turned to go inside.

'Lee Han's bag?' I asked.

She nodded slowly and closed the door. I watched through the glass as she bent over the young woman, took her by the elbow and lead her off.

I went looking for a coffee in The Village, found a table in the sun and gave Ella a call. She sounded like rat shit and I asked her if she was okay.

'I've just been talking to the police,' she said softly. 'They've interviewed Leonie. Where are you? They'll want to talk to you too.'

'I'm in Kings Cross. I've already spoken to them. You won't have heard, but the Police have charged a kid with making the bomb threat. He had nothing to do with Refraction so you can relax. Have you heard about Ian Routley?'

'Jane told me.'

'How's she taking it?'

'Not well. She was going to sue him for defamation after what he wrote about her. She's worried people will think she did it.'

'Jane will be all right. Suing someone is hardly akin to murder.'

Ian Routley's apartment building looked as peaceful as it had an hour earlier. The street gossips had gone but the cop car was still there. Nothing Janice Mattingly or Bill had said indicated whether Ian's death bore any trademarks: a violated body, theft of money or valuables, a sexual encounter just before he died. I'd ring Bill later and check. I also wanted to know more about Ian's short-lived painting career. It explained a lot. There was nothing

more vicious than a failed artist turned critic. Ian's reviews certainly went beyond the bounds of objective analysis. They were cruelly personal.

I could see the parking ticket on the windscreen as I walked up to my car. I put it in the glove box with the ones that were keeping my Van Morrison tapes company, then drove slowly down Victoria Street and onto South Dowling. I passed Daniel Conrad on the corner of Elizabeth and Cleveland. Tooted my horn but he didn't hear me. He just kept talking on his mobile phone and heading up the stairs of a terrace house.

~ *Forty Two* ~

Dad turned up a few minutes after I got home.

'I got this from the Post Office for you the other day,' he said, taking a large envelope from his carry bag. 'I meant to give it to you this morning but I forgot. Don't know what's happening to my memory.'

He sounded so worried I gave him a hug. 'Who scored the winning goal in the Balmain vs Easts game of 1964?'

'Eric Wardle.'

'Who was the Cockatoo Island apprentice of the year in 1959?'

'Liam Oates.'

'When did Ernie last come around?'

'Seven o'clock last night. We watched the ABC news together.'

'See. Your memory's fine.'

With a grin, he dropped the envelope on the table and headed off to the Dry Dock.

Gerry Hopkins had been true to her word. The forensic pathologist's report was waiting in the fax machine. The pages spilled out in white waves -

twenty nine of them. She'd scribbled a little note: *Hope these are useful. I'll set up Cara's computer tonight.*

Two of the findings stood out. Cara Lane had been drugged with Rohypnol – the drug date-rapists commonly use. It immobilises the victims quickly, leaving them powerless against sexual attacks. Cara Lane hadn't been sexually assaulted. She hadn't suffered a violent attack. She'd frozen to death on the hottest summer night in decades. When I'd read the pages through from start to finish, I gathered them up and took them over to Michaela's place. She was gardening in her front yard when I pulled up, a large straw hat shading her face from the western sun.

'I tried to call earlier but you were out,' she said. 'That was terrible news about Ian Routley.'

'Yeah, but it isn't Ian Routley I want to talk about. Cara Lane's sister just faxed this to me.'

I handed her the pages, apologising profusely as I did so. I hated involving her in my cases when she was so busy with her own work, but she was so knowledgeable about medical matters she was always my first port of call when I needed some clarification.

'I'd let you know if I didn't want to help,' she said, walking over to the kitchen table and spreading the pages out in front of her. She read silently, then sighed. 'Please be careful, Nic. Who-ever killed this woman was clearly ruthless. And ...'

'And what?'

'...And as usual, you're in the thick of it.'

'Rohypnol was in her blood,' I said.

'Yes. She had orange juice in her stomach. She hadn't eaten.'

I sat down opposite her. 'It was a boiling hot night, right? Let's say the man she met in the street offered her a drink. If it was drugged, how much Rohypnol would he have needed to knock her out?'

She looked down at the page again. 'She had a very high serum Rohypnol level according to this. I'm not a forensic pathologist but my guess would be anything from 5 to 10 pills in her drink. With that level she'd be asleep very quickly.'

I scratched my head. 'She met some man she knew in Darling Street - that's been confirmed by a witness on the bus. No-one saw them in a pub or cafe together, so let's say she sat with him in Gladstone Park or in his car. He had a cold orange juice for her, spiked with the drug. She drank it all. Went to sleep. He carried her to his car.'

'She weighed seventy kilos. Surely someone would have noticed a man carrying her?'

'No-one's come forward to say they did. So let's say he drove her to a cold storage place. Put her inside.'

Michaela looked doubtful. 'Rohypnol dilates the blood vessels so heat loss is more rapid. The killer may not have known this, of course. He may have put her somewhere thinking she'd be safe and he'd come back and get her when she woke up. She would have frozen to death quickly. The hot

weather may have meant that she was partially dehydrated and that may have diminished her capacity to withstand cold stress.'

'Let's say it was deliberate,' I said. 'They wanted to kill her. They locked her in a cold storage van knowing that she'd die.'

Michaela sighed. 'She would never have regained consciousness, and thankfully, she wouldn't have suffered.' She turned the pages more rapidly, flicked back and read a few sentences out loud. 'Livido reticularis shows Cara Lane was lying on her back when she died. She had frost bite on her lower body, the backs of her calves in particular, probably where her legs had made contact with an icy cold floor. Her finger tips and her palms were badly affected too.'

I picked up a pen and began to scribble on the back of one of the sheets. 'That would explain why she seemed so natural in the photo. The affected parts, her lower body and her palms were hidden or out of sight. Let's say she's kept in cold storage for three days. During that time someone cuts her hair. They bring her out of hiding, arrange her in the park and cover her with flowers.'

Michaela's face had taken on the strained look she gets when cases distress her. 'This is dreadful, Nic,' she said. 'Why would anyone act so ruthlessly?'

I shrugged a *who knows*. 'Cara Lane's hair had been cut. Could a forensic pathologist tell whether it had been done post mortem?'

'I'm no expert on forensic. I suppose they could. But there's nothing here to suggest any changes to her hair.'

'They wouldn't have known how long she normally wore it. And if it looked newly cut, they probably thought she'd just had it done by her hairdresser. What's Cara Lane's blood group?'

'A+. Her ex-husband's the same. The daughter's A+ as well, which you would expect. ...but the son is B+,' she said, surprised.

'He's not her ex-husband's child. That's already been determined. She'd had an affair before she came to Sydney. Her son was a by-product of that.'

'By-product, Nic?' she said, disapprovingly. She folded the pages neatly and handed them back to me. 'With that blood group, he's certainly not his father's son. How have you managed to get so involved in this inquiry? Last time I spoke to you, you were looking after Marge Davies' granddaughter.'

I watched the conflicting emotions pass across her face while I told her what I knew.

'Well, all I can say,' she said, when I'd finished, 'is that you need to be extremely careful. Whoever did this is very well organised. And that indicates a psychopathology that is ruthless and predatory.'

We put the pages away and opened a bottle of wine. Michaela didn't refer to Cara Lane's death again but from time to time she'd sigh and I knew that she was still thinking about her. The wine made us both feel mellow. We talked about Bridget in France. Neither Michaela nor I had had a holiday for ages. We were both starting to think it was time.

'How's your friend with the pony-tail?' she asked.

'He's fine. Still mysterious, though. What about Renato?'

She told me she'd been seeing him every second day. He had sent her flowers and talked about meeting her family.

'Sounds fatal,' I joked.

~ *Forty Three* ~

A removal van was standing in Darling Street outside Cara Lane's flat when I drove home. I parked at the bus stop opposite and watched as Cara's red couches and her bookcases were loaded. A couple of burley removalists were stacking long, flat packages that could have been paintings. In a few more hours everything that remained of Cara Lane's life in Balmain would be on the Hume Highway and heading for Collingwood.

Gerry Hopkins had left a message on my machine. She specified the time in an anxious way and asked that I call her back as soon as I got home. Said she had to take Ben to the pediatrician. I thought I might have missed her, but she picked up on the first ring.

'I checked Cara's computer this morning. I rang you straight away but you were out.' Her voice sounded accusing and I felt compelled to apologise. I waited for her to go on. She didn't.

'Are you all right?' I asked.

'Ben's hanging around. He's been having nightmares since we stayed at the flat. I wish we'd never gone there.' She waited a few more minutes before whispering, 'What are you going to do with any information I give you?'

'It depends. If it looks like it's related to your sister's death, I'm compelled to tell the cops.'

She gave the matter some thought. 'You asked me to check whether Cara had made contact with anyone called Davies, right? Well, she had.'

'Who?' I said.

'There was an email from Ella Davies on 15 February asking Cara to meet her at The London, that's the pub near...'

'I know where the London is,' I said impatiently. 'Did Cara reply?'

'No.'

'Are you sure about that?'

'I went through her *in* and *out* files and the trash. I looked through her letters. The only thing I could find from anyone called Davies was the email from Ella Davies on 13 February asking Cara to meet her on the fifteenth.'

'When Bill Litton came to see you in Melbourne did he ask about Cara's computer or indicate that the police had checked it out while it was still at her flat?'

Ben was crying in the background. Gerry's voice became muffled as though she'd covered the mouthpiece with her hand. 'I've got to go in a minute,' she said when she'd comforted the boy.

'Send the email on to me,' I said, giving her my address.

If the police knew about Ella contacting Cara Lane then that might explain the green Commodore that had been tailing me ever since I'd taken on Jane Davies' case. It would also explain Daniel Conrad. The kids might

have been right in thinking him ASIO, but it was more likely that he was an undercover cop monitoring Ella's moves. But none of it explained why Ella needed to contact Cara. I hadn't seen or heard naything to indicate she knew the woman. And if Ella didn't know her, why had she contacted her out of the blue and asked to meet her?

The letter Dad had delivered was still sitting on the hall table. I'd been too preoccupied with Gerry's fax to open it. It was A4 velum - the type I associate with bad news from my accountant - no stamps but one of the little printout stickers the post office uses in lieu of them. As I tore at the seal a map dropped to the floor at my feet. I picked it up and pulled the rest of the envelope apart.

Ian Routley had sent me a letter. *Nicola. I can't write much. I know you'll work it out. There are people who will stop at nothing to silence people like me. And you too, if you get too close.*

The map was French; an Institut Geographique National, Serie Vert and it covered the region from Toulon to Nice. The scale was 1 cm to 1 km. Ian had highlighted half a dozen villages and towns. Most of them were familiar: Grasse where perfume is made, Cannes with its film festival, Antibes where Picasso painted, Nice which is a nice place for a holiday, but not the others he'd singled out: St Raphael, Brignoles, Pimpinon and Belieu. Judging by the map, the last two were tiny places with equally tiny populations. A question mark sat on the Mediterranean just off-shore of Toulon. An arrow underneath it pointed west and the word *Cassis* was written beside it.

I spread the map out on the lounge-room floor and studied it more closely. It had the tattiness you associate with travel. Some of the words were blurred as though they'd been caught in the rain. There were a couple of red

stains on the edges that could have been wine or blood. If you travelled west and off the map, you'd reach Marseille, St Rémy and Arles where the Romans had built roads and amphitheatres. Jane Davies and Ella had lived in that region once. According to Ella, they'd had picnics by the sea at Cassis. Claude Bruillat and his elusive brother, Raoul lived there still. If what Marge had said was true, their father, Maurice, had led Nazis through the hinterland to hunt the Resistance amongst the limestone crags.

And Bridget was on holiday in the region.

I jumped to my feet and checked Bridget's letters for a phone number at the St Rémy house. She hadn't provided one but she'd given the owner's name. I rang International Directory Assistance. It was three in the morning in France, so I wrote the number they gave me on my note pad to ring at a more social time. Then, I took my atlas off the shelf and looked up the towns Ian had highlighted. There was plenty of information about the bigger towns and cities, and their charms had been well researched and documented. But Pimpinon and Belieu didn't rate a mention. When I rang Bridget, I'd ask her to find out first hand what the towns were like and what they had in common, if anything. Bridget was always keen to help me out and I could think of worse ways than spending a day driving around Provence with a picnic and a bottle of red wine.

I spent the rest of the afternoon staring at the maps. Ian Routley's letter was hardly illuminating. Why had he sent the maps to me and not the police? I didn't know the answer but I was sure about one thing - by forwarding the stuff on to me, he'd drawn me even further into something deadly. And I had a feeling Jane Davies knew what it was.

At five thirty I hid the maps at the back of the pantry and got ready for the Show. I was about to leave, when I heard a knock at the door. Detective Inspector Mattingly and Bill Litton were on the step again. 'I have an appointment. I hope this isn't going to take too long,' I said.

'I need to ask you a few more questions about Ian Routley,' Janice Mattingly said. 'There are lots of things about his death that don't add up. There was no sign of forced entry to his flat. It had been wiped clean of fingerprints. It appears he also had a penchant for paintings of beautiful women because his flat was full of prints and postcards of them. Not landscapes or still life or abstracts. But hundreds of art gallery postcards of naked women.'

'He was an artist,' I said. 'Maybe they were paintings he wanted to emulate.'

She listened to me patiently, then pulled a polaroid photo out of her wallet. Even before she'd handed it to me, the white flowers told me what it was.

'Do you know who this is and where the photo was taken?' she asked, handing it to me.

'Of course,' I said, glancing at Bill. 'It's Cara Lane. I'm sure Bill's told you that I saw the painting in Chippendale. Are you suggesting Ian Routley painted this?'

Bill leaned forward. 'Ian Routley was dating Cara Lane.'

'Cara Lane? You're kidding. If she was dating anyone it was an artist called Luke Redmond. The Wheat..' I said, stupidly. My heart was pumping fast.

'What wheat?'

'The painting in Cara Lane's bedroom of a landscape with wheat and blackbirds. You just said Ian was obsessed with nudes, but if he painted the canvas in her room.. it wasn't a nude...it was a field of wheat. It can't have been him she was dating. It was Luke Redmond.'

Bill picked up the polaroid photo. 'Luke Redmond is starting to sound like a fiction. A pseudonym.'

'He's a painter. He won a prize at the Show.'

'He's a fiction, Nicola. All our investigations about Cara Lane's painting have led us up a blind alley. Perhaps it was Routley playing silly buggers, painting under a phony name, just to get his own back.'

'But if Ian painted that,' I said towards the polaroid, 'someone else must have known the painting so well they could arrange Cara Lane's corpse in a similar way to how she's depicted here....' I stopped and took a deep breath. 'You're not suggesting that Ian Routley killed her?'

Bill didn't answer my question. He just kept looking down at the rug. 'You've been spending a lot of time with Jane Davies and her family. Got any other ideas?'

'Whoa. That's what I call a quantum leap of deduction. Why are you linking the Davies with the painting of Cara Lane?'

'What do you know about Jane's relationship with Ian Routley?'

My mind was racing. Gerry Hopkins hadn't yet sent on Ella's email to Cara....Ian Routley had said or done nothing to indicate that he'd known Cara.... and then there were the maps. 'Jane and Ian had known one another for years. From what I saw, Ian was a pretty abrasive character,' I said. 'Jane's pretty touchy too. They fell out over something. Then he wrote that shocker of a review about Jane Davies' latest exhibition. She was suing him.'

'That's all she's told you?' Janice Mattingly cast another of her questioning looks at Bill. The woman was being so enigmatic it was really pissing me off. Then, suddenly I knew that she had something on Jane.

'Like most artists Jane hated to get bad reviews,' I said. 'Ian crucified her in the press. She was really pissed off about that.'

'How pissed off?'

'White hot angry.'

~ *Forty Five* ~

As soon as they'd gone I rang Gerry Hopkins again. 'Sorry, Nicola,' she said. 'I've been doing the kids' dinner. I just haven't had time. I'll send it as soon as the kids are in bed.' She sounded so harried I didn't push her. Before I rang off I asked if she'd ever heard Cara mention Ian Routley. She paused, then started to whisper. 'Actually, Ben mentioned him yesterday. He recognised his face on the news. That's why he's been having nightmares.'

'Ian Routley hurt him?'

'No. Not at all. The kids loved him. He took them out. McDonalds, the movies. And the zoo, Ben said.'

'You've told Bill Litton this?'

'Of course, as soon as Ben told me.'

'Have you told Bill about Ella Davies' email.'

'No, should I?'

'No,' I sighed. 'Not yet.'

~ *Forty Six* ~

I picked Ella up in Glebe. 'The Police have found Lee Han's bag,' I said. 'Have they spoken to you about it?'

She turned towards me suspiciously. Asked me how I knew. I told her I'd been at the Kings Cross Police Station when it was brought in. That I imagined the police were feeling more confident now of finding Lee.

'Why's that?' she said.

'You work it out. They find a jacket and shoe one day, then they find her bag. Someone must have had the stuff. Who and why? Lee could even be all right and just planting the things herself.'

'Oh, come on, Nicola, that's ridiculous. You don't know Lee. She'd never do anything as stupid as that.'

'Perhaps,' I said. 'But it doesn't explain why no-one has made any contact with the police. There's been no ransom demand. I reckon it's a set up by someone who's getting their jollies from stringing the cops along.'

Ella had been listening intently. 'I don't want to talk about Lee.'

I'll bet you don't, I said to myself. While she stared out of the window, I thought about Ian Routley. I'd learned more about him dead in just two days than from any of my research on his years in the media. A fashion-conscious art critic who took kids to hamburger joints and films. The lover of a woman

who'd been killed. A man with a passion for paintings of naked women. An art critic who wrote articles dripping with vitriol. A murder victim.

A black-edged notice about Ian's death had been attached to the wall next to the paintings in the Arts and Crafts pavilion. It reminded me of Auden's poem, *In Memory of W.B. Yeats*:

Far from his illness

The wolves ran on through the evergreen forests,

The peasant river was untempted by the fashionable quays;

By mourning tongues

The death of the poet was kept from his poems.

The paintings, decorated with their ribbons and certificates, didn't seem to know that Ian was dead either.

I checked out the canvasses that had become familiar to me: the nude lying in the bath, the seascape with white boats, a view of the Harbour Bridge from a balcony. *The Wheat Field* wasn't there. The women who sold the exhibition's catalogues were gossiping to one another and occasionally glancing around the hall. I walked over to them and pointed to the empty space. 'What happened to *The Wheat Field*?'

The older woman clicked her tongue. 'Terrible isn't it? It was stolen during the bomb scare. We had to get out in a hurry and we presumed the police would keep an eye on things. They were too busy moving people. You can't trust anyone these days can you? Fancy taking advantage of a situation like that.'

'Was it the only painting stolen?'

The other woman nodded. 'We could have sold that painting half a dozen times. People were always very disappointed when we told them the artist wouldn't part with it.'

'Have you told the artist yet?'

'We haven't, but I'm sure the organisers have.'

'Do you have his phone number?'

'Oh, no dear, and we couldn't give it to you if we did.' She looked over my shoulder. 'That gentleman over there has been asking about it too.' Daniel had joined Ella in front of the paintings. He must have sensed we were talking about him, because he turned towards us and smiled. The woman fluttered a little wave his way. 'He's a charming man. He told me he once met the artist.'

I passed her a five dollar note for one of the catalogues then went to stand beside him in front of the blank space on the wall where the stolen painting had hung. There was no security in sight. I could have reached over the barrier and stolen any painting I'd wanted. On the night of the bomb scare, the pavilion would have been like a serve-yourself buffet. But oddly, the thief had only wanted *The Wheat Field*, by Luke Redmond, whoever he was.

Daniel was talking softly to Ella. He looked smart in a dark red corduroy shirt and black jeans. He'd draped a black jumper over his shoulders. He was *casually elegant* as the fashion magazines would say and very comfortable in his skin. His ponytail was as shiny and well-maintained as a thoroughbred's. He was urbane, witty, good-looking. And he knew an artist who didn't seem to exist.

Ella said she needed to get some money from an ATM. I watched as she crossed the room then turned to Daniel. 'Bad luck about *The Wheat Field*,' I said. 'You never told me you met Luke Redmond. Given that sightings of him are rarer than those of a Tasmanian Tiger, you must be the only person alive who's had the privilege.'

Daniel was watching Ella in the far corner of the hall and he didn't answer straight away. When he spoke his voice was measured, cautious. 'I did some research once in Gilgandra and Dubbo.'

'And Walgett?'

'Yeah, there too.'

'Did you ever meet a woman called Cara Lane?'

He looked down at his hands. The bluish paint stain was still visible but his fingernails looked cleaner. I reached for his left hand and held it. 'And this?' I said, turning the nails towards him. I raised his hand to my lips and Daniel tensed as though I was about to kiss it. I sniffed hard, my lips just above his skin. His hands smelled oily. I'd spent enough time around paintings during the past week to recognise the pernicious smell of artist's oil paint.

'Why are you so interested in Cara Lane's murder?' he said, pulling away.

Ella was pushing her purse back into her bag. She turned and started to walk towards us. I shrugged an answer to the question as she joined us. Someone outside was shouting. I poked the catalogue into my bag and

followed Ella as she went to see what was going on. A crowd had formed by the gate and protesters were shouting abuse. Len Smith and his bodyguards were walking through the cacophony of whistles and chants. Supporters and protesters merged and shouted abuse or praise like an oppositional Greek chorus:

Good on you, Len

You rascist bastard...

We're with you, Len

Resign! Resign!

Len Smith's bodyguards closed in when someone lunged to grab at him. Then the Police joined them and started pushing the protesters back. I was swept along with the crowd, staying as close as I could to Ella. She was sticking as close as she could to Len Smith. Her voice was loud and high pitched. 'You rascist. You fascist.' Sometimes someone would step back or turn and barrel into me. Ella just kept on moving as relentlessly as a tank. From time to time one of the body guards would turn to watch her, arm raised above her head as she shouted and pounded the air with her fist.

Len Smith reached the restaurant where his function was being held, then faced the crowd as though he was going to deliver an address. He raised his hands to silence the noise. His supporters stopped shouting but his detractors didn't. The chant of *fascist, fascist, racist, racist* was taken up until it took on a rhythm of its own. People were raising their arms above their heads in mock Nazi salutes, putting their fingers under their noses to give the impression of a Hitler moustache.

Smith took a microphone from one of the organisers, then with his eyes fixed on the crowd he began to speak. 'Let's stop this division,' he began. 'Let's reach some common ground. Do you support privatisation? The closure of public facilities and banks? He pointed to Peter Watson, then let

his outstretched arm range across the crowd. 'You,' he said to an old man and woman. 'Do you like the way technology is running your life? Do we need more migrants when so many of our own are unemployed. People who can't or won't assimilate. ...'

When the *racist* chant began again Smith waved his arms in a dismissive manner and disappeared inside. The Police started to push the protesters towards an open area while kids watched from doorways and food stalls, their mouths wide open with surprise.

'Are you okay?' I asked Ella as we walked towards the gates. She seemed bristling and preoccupied, her glance darting first to one side and then the other.

'Len Smith has to come out this way. We'll get him then,' she said with a quick look around.

Daniel and Peter were a couple of metres ahead of us. Peter was hyped up. His movements were jerky and I caught the sound of his voice from time to time. When Ella and I joined them, Daniel gave a wry grin. He seemed to have forgotten all about Cara Lane. 'Sick of this place yet?' he said.

'Absolutely,' I replied softly, so Ella wouldn't hear.

'There are a lot of things I'd rather be doing,' he said. 'Movies, concerts, pubs.' He had moved closer and I was uncomfortably aware of his scent. It was musky, primal and it made me want to bury my nose in him. A sharp tug at my sleeve brought me back to my senses. I spun around. A man had grabbed my shoulder bag. I screamed at him to let go and yanked at it furiously. The strap gave way and the man seized the bag and began to run. A couple of people in the crowd attempted to stop him then Ella sprang

forward and locked onto his coat. He tried to shake her off but she clung to him like a terrier. He pushed her to the ground.

I raced over to her as Daniel and Peter disappeared after the thief. 'Are you okay?'

A small crowd had gathered and arms pulled her to her feet. She dusted down her jacket and limped over to a chair. Her jeans were torn and there was a gash on her ankle.

'You need to wash that,' I said.

She brushed my hand away, took a bottle of mineral water from her bag and a wad of tissues. 'I'm all right,' she said, splashing on the water, then patting it clean. 'It's only a graze.'

My bag had my car keys in it, driver's license, purse, credit cards and mobile phone. The keys to my house were in my jeans pocket. That was one consolation, but if the men couldn't catch the bag snatcher I'd be on the phone for hours cancelling cards. When I thanked Ella for trying to save my bag, she blamed the snatching on Len Smith and his followers.

'It was more likely to have been a pickpocket,' I said.

'No,' she said emphatically, her eyes still on the graze, 'I saw one of Len Smith's supporters eyeing you off. When you came out of the Arts and Crafts pavilion he followed you.' She sat back against the seat and closed her eyes.

'You look tired Ella. Why don't you go home?' She remained sitting with her eyes shut. Silent. 'Have you always been so passionate about politics?' I said with a smile.

She opened her eyes and regarded me coolly. 'Of course. Haven't you? Marge taught me all about it, even though I wasn't old enough to vote.'

I took an anxious look at my watch. I wanted my bag back. Daniel and Peter hadn't reappeared. I wanted to get away from the Show, to Rickie in Glebe, then home, so I could call Bridget.

Ella sensed my impatience. 'You said you had a friend on holidays in Provence. Has she been to Cassis?' she asked softly.

As she said the town's name I saw the word scribbled on Ian Routley's map. 'Cassis? No, I don't think so.' The map was safe at home. Could someone have known Ian had sent it to me and thought it was in my bag?

Without warning Ella leaned forward and began to speak so softly I had to tilt my head close to hers so I could hear. 'You know how I told you I went on a picnic with Mum and Ian Routley to Cassis just before we came to live here? That was when I was fourteen and it was the last time I was really happy.' A line of sweat beaded the skin above her top lip. Her eyes flicked across the crowd then back to me. I could feel the pressure of her hand on my arm, her fingers digging into my skin.

'Why? What happened?'

Just as she was about to answer, my name was shouted and she pulled away. Daniel and Peter were jogging towards us. 'Got it,' Daniel said with a

triumphant grin. Looks like your purse is still in there but you'd better check to see if anything else is missing.'

I opened the bag and rummaged through the contents. The art catalogue I'd bought in the pavilion was missing but my mobile phone and car keys were there. I flipped open my purse and checked my credit cards. 'It looks fine. Bit odd to nick a bag and then not take anything. How did you get it?'

Peter Watson was still red-faced and puffing. He indicated Daniel, who was looking as cool as a cucumber. 'Daniel got me to head the bloke off. He followed him through the poultry pavilion and I scooted around the back. Must have given the chooks a hell of a fright. Daniel had the bag by the time I caught him up.'

I turned to Daniel. 'And the man?'

'He threw it down and took off when he realised I was catching him up.'

I went through my bag again. There were five, twenty dollar notes in my purse. A hundred dollars seemed a lot for a bag-snatcher to pass up. 'Thanks,' I said. 'It's odd, don't you think, to take such a risk and not steal some of the money?'

'Oh, I don't know,' Daniel said. 'Maybe you just got lucky.'

~ *Forty Seven* ~

Just before nine, Ella started to act sneaky. A couple of times I saw her pick up her mobile phone and check it for messages. When she caught me watching her she put the phone back in her bag. Leonie Radcliffe arrived and she kept asking Ella if she was all right and suggesting she might need some Savlon and a bandage.

As soon as word got round that Len Smith had left by one of the back gates, Ella asked me to drive her home. I dropped Leonie and Ella outside University Hall, then double parked on Glebe Point Road and watched them in my rear vision mirror. I thought they'd head off somewhere together, but they separated, Leonie walking towards the city, Ella towards her flat. A car pulled out a few spaces behind me and I reversed into the spot. I waited to see if Ella had noticed me but she was too busy standing in the doorway of her building watching Leonie walk up the street. As soon as she was out of sight, Ella went upstairs.

Lee Han might be in there right now, I thought. Having a hot bath, watching TV. The only way to find out was to go up and see, so I followed Ella upstairs. The door to her flat was ajar. I paused for a moment and listened for voices, then with a light knock on the door I walked in. Ella gave me a searching look then tossed her overcoat and bag on the couch. I sat down and watched as she went to the fridge, took out a bottle of water and poured us both a glass.

'I know you're hiding Lee Han,' I said. 'First Lee Han's clothing on the railway track. Then the phone call to the radio station. Then her bag. It's clearly a set up. Even the papers are starting to say so.'

'I don't care what they're saying. I wish you'd leave me alone.'

I opened the bedroom, then the bathroom door. Both rooms were empty. Ella watched me with a wry smile playing around her mouth, then picked up her coat and went to hang it up. I grabbed it off her and went through the pockets. An envelope was inside one of them. I tore it open, expecting to find another of the caches her Uncle Raoul was handing out. Instead, my fingers closed around a strand of long black hair.

'What's this?'

She looked at me dumbly.

'Oh, I see. It's Lee Han's,' I said. 'What were you going to do next? Upset Lee Han's parents even more? Disguise your voice, ring talk-back radio and say where the police would find her hair? I'm implicated in your nasty game. I'm not losing my PI's license because of my association with you and Lee.'

Ella held her hand up. 'Just shut up, okay. Lee is coming out of hiding tomorrow night. I promise everything will be all right.'

'Promise me you won't use Lee's hair in your scam.' I let the hair run through my fingers. It was silky and the light caught the different shades of it: blue, black, little flashes of red. When the realisation came, it felt like a punch to my stomach. I looked from the hair to Ella's white face. 'It's not Lee's hair is it?' I said. 'It's Cara Lane's.'

She nodded slowly. 'Lee found it,' she said, softly. 'That's why she had to hide. She wanted to go to the Police with it. Then she realised that someone had seen her pick it up and that they would come and kill her too.'

'Who saw her?'

She didn't answer and I asked the question again. Ella had no intention of answering me. She seemed mesmerised by the hair lying across the back of my hand.

'So as well as faking someone's abduction, you're withholding evidence in a murder enquiry.' I walked across the room and looked out at Victoria Park. A full moon illuminated the lake and the lilies that grew around its banks. For all I knew someone could have been watching us from the shadows, waiting to grab us, kill us, and cover our bodies with flowers. 'Lee Han knows who killed Cara Lane?'

'Yes.'

Her voice sent a chill up my spine. I turned back to her. 'Answer me honestly. Did *you* ever meet Cara Lane?'

'No.'

'But you arranged to meet her?'

She hesitated briefly. Shook her head. In that second I knew she was lying. 'How can I trust you, when you've been playing me for a fool all this time?'

'You just have to.'

'Tell me what happened in Cassis five years ago?'

I could see some late night revellers from the Lansdowne picking their way through the park. A bus pulled up at the stop below the building, disgorged its passengers, then drove off noisily. Ella's voice was so low I didn't realise she'd begun speaking until the bus was gone. I walked over and sat beside her on the couch. Her voice picked up speed, like a train on a downhill track.

'My mother was friends with Ian Routley back then. He spent a lot of time with us in St Rémy. Mum was painting like crazy for a big European exhibition. Ian used to come and talk to me whenever she wasn't around. I didn't like him at first so I kept out of his way. But after a while I started to like him a lot. He was funny. Then one day he asked if he could paint me.'

'Did he have sex with you?'

She looked up shocked. 'No! He painted me in really stupid poses. Once I had to hold an urn on my shoulder so I looked like an Ingres. He said painters like that made a woman's body look really interesting. He painted another one of me on a beach. I thought the pictures were cool.'

'Naked?'

'Jesus, Nicola. Artists don't jump their models. He just wanted to paint me. Said he could paint me better than Jane could. That he'd capture me at my most interesting age.'

'Did Jane object?'

'Not at first. She thought it was funny. She called his paintings Lewis Carroll art. One day we went on a picnic together to Cassis. He and Jane had a big fight. Ian said she'd better watch out. Jane said he should talk. She reckoned she had enough on him to see him in gaol and she implied that I'd made accusations against him. I was so angry with Jane I wrote to Marge and asked her to let me come and live with her. I didn't tell her why - I just said that I wanted to be in Sydney, with her.'

'But Jane came too.'

'Yeah. She said she was sick of France. She and Ian never stopped fighting after that.'

'That was five years ago. Have you ever told Marge about Ian Routley's paintings?'

'No, why? I was just his model, then.'

'Then?' I asked.

She looked down at the floor. 'Ian rang me up when I turned eighteen. Said he'd been thinking about me. He's seen an article in the paper about the student union. It had my photo. We went out for a drink. He was nice. We talked about France and the paintings. And politics. Dad's family were so right-wing, they'd influenced Jane's views. It was great to talk to Ian about Len Smith. A couple of weeks later, we started to sleep together.'

'And Jane found out,' I said.

'Yeah,' she sighed. 'She was really pissed off. She reckoned I was too young for him. I told her I knew what I was doing. Then she started to threaten Ian. Said told him she was going to destroy him.'

'Who broke it off, Ian or you?'

'He did. He reckoned he didn't want me to get hurt but I think he was scared of Jane.'

'And his reviews were his way of getting his revenge.'

'Yeah. It didn't matter what the other critics thought because lots of people took notice of Ian. He always said horrible things about Jane. Jane hated it. It started to make her sick. She was angry all the time. She lost a heap of weight. She said she was really going to get him.'

'How?'

She shook her head, then sat in silently, as though she'd run out of steam.

'And Cara Lane?' I said, already knowing the answer to the question. Ian had started taking Cara out. Ella's rage at his rejection and Jane's fury about his reviews meant the Davies women had just become prime suspects in her death.

At the mention of Cara's name, Ella's face had taken on the same stubborn look I'd seen on her grandmother's face. Cautious, self-protecting. Oblivious to anything other than the thoughts inside her head. I stood up knowing there was no point in pushing her. I'd pass what information I had to Bill Litton. Let the police take over.

'Stay in tonight, Ella. We'll talk again tomorrow. See to your leg. Get some sleep. Lock and chain your door behind me.'

~ Forty Eight ~

None of what I'd heard from Ella explained Ian Routley's maps. It was almost midnight but I wanted some answers. I rang Jane Davies on my mobile. She wasn't at home. I didn't bother to ring the studio. If Jane was there, I'd surprise her with a visit.

I parked at the end of Glebe Point Road, noting as I reversed that the studio lights were on. I knocked on the studio door softly, then more loudly. Jane didn't answer. I pushed it open cautiously. Jane was standing beside the window, looking out into the dark. The light in the studio reflected her face back at her. She watched me approach, stepping over a couple of canvasses she'd put flat on the floor.

'Hello, Nicola,' she said, turning. 'You're working late.'

'I've just been talking to Ella,' I said.

Her movements were brisk and businesslike. 'Like you, I work all hours. What were you talking to my daughter about?'

'Cassis.'

'Really?' she said slowly. 'Cassis is a wonderful place. So was Ella's childhood. Paris, Provence. All her doting aunts and uncles. It was like a story in a *Madeleine* book.' She picked up one of the canvasses that was stacked against the wall and held it against her body. 'Do you like this?' When I nodded my head, she passed it to me. 'I'm doing a spring clean -

well autumn. I'm still on northern-hemisphere time. You can have it. Call it one of the perks of your job.'

I put it down. 'You asked me to mind Ella, to keep her safe. *Damaged* was the word you used.'

'God, I could give all these paintings wonderful names,' she said, her voice as fast as an express train. 'All of them Marge's favourite sayings. This one could be *don't get your hopes up too high*. Or how about *there are millions worse off than you*. She pulled another painting out of the stack. Here you go - *there's nothing more pitiful than a person who pities themselves*. Or *Busy hands....*'

'*Damaged*, you said. Why didn't you tell me what you really wanted me to do?'

'How about a painting called *Jane's Escape from Marge*? See. Here are the girlfriends seeing me off. They walked from the office, over the Pyrmont Bridge to the terminal with their rolls of paper streamers and stockings tied together. They came down to my cabin, opened a bottle of cheap champagne and we drank it leaning against the bunks until the other passengers arrived. When the boat left they threw stockings with oranges rammed in the toes. There's Marge's face in the crowd, proud that I'm leaving Australia on a Russian ship. She was very impressed by the hammer and sickle on the funnel. Oh, the relief of escaping from her. It took all my self-control not to lean over the rails and scream, 'I'm free at last!'

The last of my patience fled. 'Jane!' I said, moving closer to her. 'Why didn't you tell me that Ian Routley and your daughter were lovers? You didn't want me keeping an eye on Ella's protests at the Show. You wanted me to make sure Ian Routley didn't get too close to her again. Why? What were you afraid he'd tell her?'

Jane put the painting down slowly, her face stony. 'Would you mind leaving now, Nicola. As far as I'm concerned our contract is terminated.'

She saw me to the door, then locked and bolted it behind me. I walked back to my car quickly. Rickie was leaning against it. 'Nasty,' he said. 'You all right?'

'I feel sick.'

'Jane's losing it. What are you going to do? Go to the cops?'

I shook my head. 'Not tonight. There's something I have to do first.'

Rickie sighed. 'Jane talked to Len Smith at two today. I couldn't make much sense of it. She's started talking in code. They're planning something for tomorrow night.'

'I had a good look at the studio again. All the paintings are hers: scenes from her childhood, abstracts, landscapes. There's nothing that looks remotely like a forged masterpiece.'

'Had she twigged to the ball not being on the shelves?'

'Not that I could tell. She seemed totally immersed in her paintings.'

'Tomorrow night's definitely the pick up. Smith's meeting her at the studio at nine thirty.' His face was worried. 'Why don't you go to the cops tonight?'

'Tomorrow,' I said. 'I don't want to do anything that makes Ella and Lee behave recklessly.'

'Recklessly,' Rickie snorted. 'What would you call what they're doing?'

'I call it self-protection. They're behaving desperately because something terrible has happened to both of them. Now, I've got to get home to ring Bridget.'

It seemed ages since Bridget and I had spoken, but she sounded the same as she always did - happy. 'I was just thinking about you, Nic,' she said. 'Yesterday I saw the most gorgeous dress in Cannes. Purple silk. Short and tight with sequins along the hem.'

I laughed. 'Sounds just like me.'

We talked for a while about her travels, the people she'd met and the sights she'd seen. Her holiday sounded sun drenched and full of fun - and a long way from the clandestine meetings in dark alleys and political protests that had been occupying my time. 'When this case is over,' I told her, 'I'm going somewhere with a beach. Byron Bay. Port Douglas. Bali. I'm going to sit in the sun and let the sand run between my toes and forget all about politics and crime.'

When I explained what I wanted her to do, she reassured me that it was no trouble at all. She'd hired a Peugeot 306 cabriolet and had been making the most of it on drives around the coast. I spread Ian Routley's map out on the coffee table and waited while she did the same with hers, then we planned the route she'd take: down the peage to Draguignan and St Maxime, then along the coast towards Cogolin. The D559 would take her close to Belieu and Pimpinon.

'What exactly am I looking for?'

'Art galleries, art dealers. My hunch is that all this has got something to do with stolen art. Ask the local Gendarmes if there have been any art thefts in the region, especially during the years up to 1992. Tell them you're a writer doing research for a book.'

'Yeah, sure,' she laughed. 'Have you heard my French?'

Hearing her laughter made me realise just how much I needed her back. 'If you look as good as you do in that photo you sent, the last thing the cops are going to be concentrating on is your accent.'

~ *Forty Nine* ~

I tossed and turned till three. At one stage I dreamed my body was wound round and round with hair. It pinned my arms to my side and hobbled my legs. I screamed silently while a man with a hole in his throat advanced towards me with a scalpel in his outstretched hand. When sleep became too unpleasant I switched on the light and got up. Then I took Cara Lane's hair and laid it on the bed. Who would shorten their victim's hair? A fetishist? Someone into perverse sexual rituals? And why? As a way to gain power over the victim, to show her that worse was to come?

Bill had been cagey when I'd asked him about Ian Routley's relationship with Cara. I presumed he thought Ian Routley had killed her. But the man seen kissing Cara Lane had been ordinary. That ruled out Ian out as far as I was concerned. His distinctive bald head, his clothing, the way in which he walked, were anything but ordinary. Even an unobservant witness couldn't have missed him, unless Ian had worn a wig and diverged from his usual way of dressing and that seemed unlikely.

Despite all the reports about Cara Lane's life, she was clearly a woman who did more in her spare time than Bill and his colleagues had first thought. She had Ian Routley as a lover, for a start. She had a job that required discretion and long hours. She'd acquired a painting by a mysterious artist and she'd hung it above her bed. It appeared she'd been killed by someone who knew her.

Cara Lane may well have had more than one lover. What independent woman was ever going to find a man with all the qualities she wanted?

Some women kept a stable of male friends. A partner for movies and shows. Someone just for sex. Another who was a wine and food gourmet and knew all the latest restaurants. An intellectual with whom you could debate the arts and politics. Ian Routley must have met most of Cara's selection criteria. He was urbane, well-known, clever, a flash dresser, a gourmand. And he happened to like painting women without their clothes.

But Cara Lane must also have met heaps of other men. Colleagues in the Attorney General's Department. The ones she met at Birchgrove school functions. On the strata committee for her flat. There would have been fathers she met in the park while she played with her kids. Get to know someone well enough and you kissed them on the lips, as Annie Lennox sang, *like lovers do*.

The net the police had cast around Cara Lane was getting tighter. Jane Davies hated Ian Routley. He was dead. Ella had contacted Cara Lane. Cara was dead too. The Davies women were a pretty deadly bunch. Drop dead beautiful and deadly to be around.

At nine I made some breakfast then booted up the computer and surfed the internet. Scrolled through a register of art stolen from French Jews by the Nazis. The IRA had been at it too. When Rickie came over at ten and I showed him the sites I'd book marked. He scrolled through the list with me.

'Ella has book marked some of these sites.' I pointed to the screen. 'That one, and that. I've got a couple of theories. The first is that Jane is painting a copy for Len Smith that can be sold on the international market. She can copy other artists. She told me that when I first met her. Said she did the Bronzino with all her art school chums and that it inspired her portrait of Marge. So

she either copies an existing work or something in a particular artist's style. Then she passes it over to a dealer who sells it on.'

Rickie wasn't sure. 'But who'd be stupid enough to fall for that? If you're right, she's got a stash of forged paintings somewhere that she distributes whenever she needs money. Art auctions are closely monitored. A 'new' Vermeer, Monet or Bronzino would be very suss.'

'It's just a hunch,' I said. 'But let's just say it's possible. What does Jane need the money for?'

'Her lifestyle? Her habit? Maybe she's on drugs. They don't come cheap. And what about Ella?' he said.

'It's more likely to be for Len Smith's Forum? She's clearly a supporter, her contribution must be worth a lot to them. Marge Davies was worried about that *Four Corners* program. Maybe she thought it would spill the beans about her daughter. And don't forget the conversation you overheard between Ella and me. Ian Routley had some kind of hold over Jane long before he got involved with her daughter. When the Davies came back to Australia, Ian came back too. It seems the two of them have been threatening one another ever since.'

'Blackmail?' Rickie said, screwing up his face. 'The cops would have checked his bank accounts by now. From what the papers have said, he didn't have a flash lifestyle.' He thought for a moment. 'You still haven't told me how you think Jane would get a painting out of the country. What about Customs?'

'What about them? She wouldn't go through Customs. We know Len Smith is in this with her. Let's say he uses his share of the profits for his

party. He has contacts all over the world. As a politician, he can probably carry a canvas onto a plane with impunity.'

'Okay,' he said, 'the next big question is *where*. We know there's no safe at the studio. If it's not there, the other logical place is her house. What did Len Smith say about the painting of Ella she's got on her walls? Is Ella as beautiful as she always was, then something about Jane's painting skills. The safe could be behind that painting or somewhere in the house.'

'Sounds like a long shot,' I said.

'Desperate times need desperate remedies. Are you going with Ella to the Show tonight?'

'Yeah,' I said. 'From six thirty on. It finishes tonight and Len Smith is planning a parting gesture of solidarity with his supporters. I presume he won't do anything too provocative, given that he's got to get to Glebe by nine thirty.'

'So we try to lure Jane Davies out of the house this evening.'

'How?'

'Ring her from the Show and tell her that Ella wants to meet her in a cafe.'

'It wouldn't work.'

'What about Marge? How much can you involve her?'

'I don't trust her either.'

'How about you ring Jane from the Show at seven? Tell her you're at Marge's place. That Ella nipped off and you thought she might be at Marge's. When you got there you found Marge had fallen and hurt herself. Tell her you need her over there straight away.'

'Give me a break.'

'Hear me out. As soon as you've spoken to Jane, I'll take Marge's phone out of the system. It will give an engaged signal. Jane will ring Marge straight away to check. If Marge's phone is engaged, she'll get worried and go over there.'

'Rickie, she lives ten minutes away at the most. You won't even have had time to get the painting off the wall. As soon as she realises it's a hoax she'll come screaming back to Glebe, baying for my blood. If she finds you in the house...'

'You'll have to get Marge out of the house too. Ring her at six thirty. Tell her Ella's sick and needs her Gran.'

'This is starting to sound like a Comedia dell'Arte farce,' I laughed.

Rickie's face was serious. 'I know it's risky, Nic, but it's the only chance we've got. Ring the old lady first. She'll get a taxi. When I've heard her book that, I'll take out her phone. When she's on her way, I'll ring your mobile, then you ring Jane. When Jane gets to Marge's house there'll be no answer. She'll try Marge's doors and windows, check with the neighbours. If you're lucky she'll go looking for her at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital. That should give me at least forty five minutes, maybe an hour.'

'Jane will guess. She'll ring Ella on her mobile to check. She'll know something's up. She'll warn Len Smith.'

'Borrow Ella's phone. Say your battery is flat. Switch it off. Look, I know it's high risk, but what other choice do we have?'

~ Fifty ~

Rickie stayed outside Ella's flat all day. I called her to let her know he was there. She sounded groggy and said she'd taken a sleeping pill. She was staying in to work on her essay.

I felt pretty lousy setting up Marge and Jane. Marge would be frantic with anxiety if she thought something had happened to Ella. Like Gerry Hopkins she'd weathered a fair bit of worry in her life without me adding to it. I didn't want to do anything that would tip off Jane or Len Smith. All round, Rickie had come up with a crazy strategy. I just hoped it would work.

I made another call to Gerry Hopkins and told her Ella's email hadn't arrived.

'I tried to send it a couple of times,' she said impatiently. 'Your emails keep bouncing back.'

I got her to read it to me again. *'Meet me at the London at six. There's something you need to know.'*

'Do you know what she means?' she asked.

'I'll tell you about it tomorrow,' I said.

I had a theory about what Ella had intended to do when she met Cara Lane. She was angry and hurt about Ian's rejection. So she'd decided to tell Cara about her relationship with him. Suggest he'd gone to Cara on the

rebound. She might even have intended telling Cara about the paintings he'd done of her in France. Innocent as she'd made them sound to me, what parent wouldn't worry about her daughter if an artist wanted to paint her naked and in suggestive poses? Whether Ella intended destroying the relationship or not, her confessions would probably have caused Cara to question him.

I drove to the Balmain Police station to see Bill Litton. He was out and the constable at the desk had no idea for how long. His mobile was switched off too. I asked for some note paper, then I sat down and wrote Bill a letter, telling him everything that I knew. I left the letter with the package containing Cara's hair and Ian's maps. I was feeling fatalistic. If something happened to me, at least Bill had everything he needed.

I headed down Darling Street to Gladstone Park and found a parking space outside Balmain Hospital, then I stood in the shade of one of the park's palm trees and looked across at the hospital. People carrying flowers were going in to visit friends. When I'd grown sick of watching them, I walked towards the bowling club. The place where Cara Lane had been found still looked disturbed. In their search for evidence, the crime scene team had scraped up all the leaves, they'd dug deep into the soil and probed the roots of the Port Jackson figs above it. The scoured earth looked like a limb that has been shaven in preparation for surgery: incongruously tidy, not belonging to the fecund mass of grass, leaves and trees around it.

New owners had moved in to Cara's flat. A folding clothes-line full of baby things was perched against the balcony rails. There were empty removalists' boxes as well, neatly folded and piled up in the balcony's corner. Another family was starting the cycle of games on Gladstone Park's swings and ferry trips into the city. The balcony looked lighter and more exposed than when I'd stood inside the flat looking out. It took a few seconds

before I realised why. Without it's leaves, it was much easier to see just how close the branches of the liquid amber came to the flat's balcony.

~ Fifty One ~

I arrived at Ella's at six thirty. As she opened the door she said she wasn't going to the Show. I didn't bother to ask why. The answer was written all over her face. She was pale and her eyes were ringed with shadows. Her shoulders drooped and she seemed to have lost all the energy she possessed.

'Great,' I replied. 'Now we can get Lee out of hiding.'

I walked into her flat and looked around. She was watching an old noir movie on pay TV. *Double Indemnity*. I looked at Barbara Stanwick's bleached blonde hair. Whoever said blonde women had more fun? 'How about some coffee?' I asked.

When she was in the kitchen I pulled the phone connection out, then searched desperately around for her mobile. It was sitting on the kitchen table. 'Lee is coming out of hiding tonight, isn't she?' I asked, sidling up to it. Ella was preoccupied with her coffee machine and she didn't answer. I switched off the mobile and slipped it into my pocket.

We watched the movie together in silence while we drank the coffee. Rickie and I needed to be in position by nine thirty. Provided Jane wasn't too spooked by the abortive trip to Marge's place, she would be getting ready soon to meet Len Smith and hand over one of her forgeries.

'Can we get Lee soon?' I said.

Ella stared at the TV as though the movie held all of life's secrets, and I heard my voice begin to rise. 'Think of her mother then. She's probably close to cracking up by now.'

She turned to me slowly. 'I don't give a fuck about Lee's mother, or mine.'

As soon as the credits started to roll she flicked the TV off, got up and walked over to the sink. She rinsed our coffee mugs, then picked up a clear plastic carry bag that contained a carton of long life milk, a loaf of bread, some candles in a cellophane pack. 'We need one more night,' she said.

When she started hunting for her mobile I started to talk. 'I know what you did when you found out Ian was seeing Cara Lane. You heard Cara had a daughter. You emailed her and asked her to meet you at *The London*. You wanted to tell her what had happened to you. What did Cara say? Was she horrified that you'd had an affair with a man who had been coming on to you since you were a kid? Did she not believe you? Did she tell Ian and did he threaten you?'

My questions had the desired effect. Ella pulled on her coat. 'He didn't come on to me,' she said angrily opening the flat's door as though she was desperate to get away. 'He waited till I was eighteen.' She headed down the stairs and I followed her to the foyer. Watched as she walked to a bike that was chained in a corner. She slung her bag across the handle-bars, then she wheeled the bike into the street.

I was so incensed I grabbed her by the jacket and spun her around. 'Listen to me, Ella. I know you didn't kill Cara. No-one thinks you did. But it's getting too dangerous. At least tell me who Lee is hiding from.'

'You wouldn't believe me.'

'Try me.'

'Len Smith.'

I laughed. 'Don't fuck me around.'

'See,' she said, close to tears.

I held my hands up in a gesture of supplication. 'Okay. I'm sorry. Where is she hiding?'

She paused as though she wasn't going to tell me, then shrugged. 'Lee's okay. She's at Jane's studio.'

I felt as though she'd thrown a bucket of iced water in my face. She turned to straddle the bike, fitted the helmet and adjusted the strap under her chin, then she pushed away from the kerb. With a quick look back at me, she cycled onto Glebe Point Road, the bike's tail-light flickering on and off.

'Shit,' I cursed, running back to my car. It took an age to start. When the choke kicked in I did a *U*-turn and followed her. I could see her up ahead, standing in the pedals and pushing the bike up the road, past the Valhalla, to Wigram Road, then down the hill towards the bay and Jubilee Park.

I pulled out my mobile phone, switched it on and keyed in Rickie's number.

His voice was tense. 'Jane's hopping mad,' he said.

'Are you okay?'

'I'm fine. I got a good forty minutes in the house. It was a waste of time. There was nothing behind the painting of Ella, or any of the others, but solid, double brick walls. The kitchen's the same, the bedrooms, bathroom.'

'Where are you now?'

'On my way to meet you, as arranged. Where the hell are you?'

'We've got a problem. Ella's hidden Lee Han in her mother's studio for the night. If we don't get them out of there, they're going to find themselves face to face with Len Smith.'

Rickie swore and said he'd see me soon. I rang Bill Litton and told him to come around to Jane's studio. 'Did you get my package? Well, I've found Lee Han. She can tell you all that happened to Cara Lane. But there are complications, Jane Davies is involved in an art scam of some kind. It's got something to do with funding Len Smith's Forum. Just come to Jane's studio, fast.'

~ Fifty Two ~

Ella had cycled down to the building's lower entrance. I parked, turned off the lights and took a quick look around. The area was quiet and Jane's studio was in darkness. I tried the street door. It was locked, but I took Rickie's advice and put my shoulder to it. I pushed at it once, then twice, hard, till the lock gave way and I was inside.

It was almost nine. There was still time to get Ella and Lee out. I opened the studio door and walked in slowly. Ella was crouching down on the floor, talking to Lee Han in the rabbit hole Rickie and I had found. The place was lit by a couple of candles arranged along the window-sill. Ella had a lighted taper in her hand and was reaching into the alcove in the wall, passing it to her friend.

Lee started when she saw me and cried out anxiously.

'It's all right,' I said, crouching beside Ella. 'Get out of there, now. I promise you'll be safe. But you have to get away from here.'

Lee looked from me to Ella. When Ella nodded she crept forward slowly on her hands and knees. I stood up and waited while she got up and dusted herself down. She seemed to be taking an eternity.

'Come on,' I said, touching them both on their shoulders. 'I'll tell you everything, but we have to get going.'

Ella was still defiant. 'Tell us now.'

I glanced at Lee. She looked tired, and very frightened.

'Jane Davies is meeting Len Smith here soon. I believe Jane has been involved in art fraud and some of the money she's made has been funding Len Smith's Forum.'

'Bullshit,' Ella said.

'It's true. And if we don't get out of here fast, we aren't going to be able to prove anything.'

Lee Han was leaning against the window and breathing in short, rapid bursts. She seemed close to hyperventilating. She reached across and touched Ella on the shoulder. 'I'm frightened, El. Please, let's go outside. I don't want to see Len Smith or your mother.' She moved towards the door. 'Come on.'

Ella spun towards her. 'Why are you afraid of my mother?'

Lee looked pleadingly at her. 'Please, just come on.'

Ella didn't move. 'Why are you frightened of my mother?' she shouted.

'You know what happened to Cara Lane, don't you?' I said taking Lee's arm. 'There was something you couldn't tell Ella.'

Lee's body was rigid. She looked to where Ella was standing with the candle. Across the bay, the container wharves were still at work and spotlights illuminated tiny workers and cranes manouvering containers onto trucks.

She nodded slowly. 'I heard Jane talking to Len Smith about Cara Lane.'

I turned Lee's body around till she was facing the bay and pointed towards the window and the water beyond it. 'They stored Cara Lane across there, in a refrigerated container, didn't they?'

Lee nodded again. Ella turned and looked across the water too. 'Don't be stupid, Lee,' she said.

I glanced down at my watch. Time was running on. 'Outside,' I said, grabbing Lee by the arm and pulling her towards the door. I watched as she raced along the corridor then I turned back to Ella. She stood looking across towards the container terminal. Silently she picked up one of the candles. With a spring as agile as a cat's she'd reached up to the shelves above her head and pulled down a bottle of turpentine. Before I could stop her she'd snapped open the lid and tossed the contents onto the floor. As the liquid spread, she raised the candle above her head and flung it into the room. There was a whoosh as the flame met the turpentine.

'What the hell have you done?' I screamed.

A fire alarm started to clang above my head, so loudly my ear drums felt as though they'd burst. The building was filling with smoke and I yanked my tee-shirt up across my nose, grabbed at Ella's jacket and pulled her into the street. Gasping for breath, I bent double at the waist and watched Ella run across to Lee. Then I ran back and grabbed as many canvasses as I could. I pulled them away from the flames and towards the door. When they were safely outside I ran back and repeated the process. My face and hands felt singed and my lungs were thick with smoke. Two police patrol cars screeched up. Then Bill Litton was beside me.

'What the hell's going on?' he shouted.

I pointed to where Lee and Ella were hiding behind a skip. With a curse Bill strode over to them.

I looked around desperately for Rickie. A crowd of local residents had already gathered in the street. They parted as the fire engines arrived. The police tried to hold the people back but they kept creeping forward, exclaiming whenever an explosion came from inside the building. Ella and Lee were talking wildly to Bill Litton. My hands were starting to hurt. Rickie was watching from the shadows down by the water. He saw me looking, raised his shoulders in a gesture that said, *well, that's fucked it, better luck next time.*

My legs felt so shaky I had trouble walking over to him. 'Do you think they'll get the fire under control?' I said.

'It looks like it, but there are a lot of chemicals in there.' He put an arm around my shoulder and turned my body, just as I'd done with Lee, so that I was facing the Bay. A little tin boat was chugging across the water from the docks. It was too far away to see who was in it, but I could just make out a lone figure huddled in the prow. The fire engines' lights were flashing, turning the pall of smoke that hung above the water red and sulphurous. The boat's engine was cut and it bobbed off-shore for a few minutes, then the engine started again and the boat turned and went back to where it had come from.

'There goes Len Smith,' I said.

A dark green Commodore pulled up with a screech and two men jumped out. One of them was Daniel Conrad. He looked towards the upper story and then at Ella. 'Who lit this? You? Your mother?' he shouted across at her.

'It was an accident,' I said, walking over to them. 'She knocked over a candle.'

Daniel said something to his partner and the two of them rushed towards the studio. The flames seemed to have taken hold of the building. The street doors had been forced open and the firefighters were spraying the area with foam. There was a crash above our heads and a voice called, *you'll need to get clear*. Daniel and a firefighter were at an open window. They shouted for other people to join them, formed a human chain, and began passing Jane's canvasses into the street.

'Your parents are on the way. Don't go anywhere. I'll need to talk to you tonight,' Bill Litton said to Lee.

Ella leaned heavily against me and I put my arm around her. Scattered across the ground in front of us were some of the canvasses I'd rescued: the landscape of Black Wattle Bay, the strange, frenetic picnic at Doll's Point and the poppy dappled landscapes of Provence.

'Do you know what are they?' I asked her.

'They're just Jane's paintings.' She kept her eyes fixed on the human chain that was moving pictures along, dozens of them, till the area around us was patch-worked with canvasses. 'I didn't mean to cause any trouble for Cara Lane,' she said softly. 'Lee and I saw her in Victoria Park with Ian. I told Lee about Ian and me. Lee said she knew Cara - she didn't work with her but

said she'd seen her picture on the work web site. That's how I got her email address. I never met her at *The London*. She wouldn't. I sent her some more emails telling her it was really important. Then she got angry and wrote me a long letter about the laws relating to email harassment and stalking. I only wanted to help.'

I gave her a hug. 'I know you did, Ella. What did you find when you climbed into her flat?'

She looked at me, shocked. 'How did you find out?'

I shrugged. 'Call it a calculated guess.'

'I was so angry,' she sighed. 'I wished I hadn't sent the stupid email. I kept imagining they were laughing at my expense so I followed Ian to Cara's place. When they went out with the kids, I climbed onto her balcony. It was so hot she'd left the balcony doors open with a piece of dowel to stop anyone from sliding them open. It was easy to get in. I wasn't going to hurt her or steal anything.'

'But you saw the painting over her bed?'

She nodded. 'At first I thought it was one of Jane's. Then I thought Ian had done it for her. It wasn't in his usual style. I don't know why but that really upset me. It was as if he'd moved on from all the paintings he'd done with me. I took it off the wall thinking I'd smash it.'

Daniel was lifting another canvas onto the pile. Sparks were flying in the air around him and the whole area stunk of paint. 'What did you find?' I asked, my eyes not leaving him as he leaned out from the shattered window, calling down to his colleagues.

'A tape recorder. A tiny one like the kind inside an answering machine. It really freaked me out. I put the painting straight back and got out as quickly as I could.'

'You told someone about it.'

'No, I didn't.'

'Yes you did. Who was it?'

She looked around wildly.

'It was Jane, wasn't it?' I said. 'And then Cara was killed.'

There was a high-pitched scream and we turned to watch the crowd part as Jane Davies pushed her way through them. 'My paintings! What on earth is going on!'

A police officer caught hold of her. 'We have them all, ma'am.'

Daniel had come outside. His face was blackened with soot and his clothes were singed. He cast a quick, contemptuous look at Jane and picked up a painting from the pile. 'Move these people away. Keep the water and foam off the paintings for heaven's sake.'

A large canvas was the last to come out. When it was laid on the ground Daniel and his off-sider bent low over it, a hail of sparks making haloes around their heads. They lifted the canvas carefully. 'Quick,' Daniel shouted. 'We need some help over here. Don't tear it for heaven's sake.'

The flashing red lights of the fire engines licked across Jane Davies' naked body. 'Gently!' Daniel admonished. He brushed a spark away from the painting, caressing the canvas as though it were human skin. The men shuffled away with it, Daniel as protective as a parent. Some wag in the crowd wolf whistled when they saw it and a ripple of laughter followed.

Bill had taken Ella and Lee over to the police car. I stayed watching Daniel bustling around, counting the canvasses as they were loaded into a Paddy wagon.

'I'll see you in Cleveland Street,' he called to the driver as the van took off. Then he walked across to Jane. 'Your daughter, Ms Davies, is over there.'

Jane's face was stony. 'I can see that.'

'Aren't you going to ask how she managed to get here before you?'

Jane regarded us silently as Daniel spoke.

'She was hiding her mate, Lee Han in there. They accidentally set the place alight.'

'Oh, Ella,' Jane said. 'Do you realise what you've done? She turned to Daniel. 'Where have you taken my paintings?'

They're with the Commercial Crime Unit in Cleveland Street. They'll be perfectly safe there.'

My arm was still around Ella. She seemed tiny underneath her leather jacket. 'Want to come home with me for a while?' I asked.

'That's not possible, Nicola,' Daniel said. 'Ella and Lee are coming to the station with me.'

Ella turned to Daniel, defiant again. 'We always knew you were the flic.'

Daniel took an ID out of his coat pocket. 'I'm actually with Art Fraud.' He turned to Jane. 'And that's why your mother is coming with me, too.'

~ Fifty Three ~

When I'd given Bill Litton my statement, I waited in the corridor while the police interviewed Lee Han and her parents. Ella sat on the bench beside me. From time to time she was overcome by fits of shivering. 'Are you cold?' I asked, but she didn't answer. 'Are you hungry? Would you like a drink?'

Marge Davies arrived at the station with Angus Goodyear in tow. She looked at me as though she was seeing me for the first time. 'Leave my granddaughter alone,' she said when she heard me asking Ella what help she needed. 'You're not family.'

It felt like a blow to my stomach. 'Family?' I said, breathless with rage.

'My family,' Marge said, '... and I'm going to protect them.'

~ *Fifty Four* ~

By the time I drove past the Balmain Town Hall and turned into Rowntree Street I was so tired I could hardly keep my eyes open. My clothes smelled burned and smokey. There was an oily smell about my skin too: paint, paraffin, paint thinner, glaze, as though I'd stepped straight out of one of Jane's canvasses. I stripped as I climbed the stairs, opened the bathroom door and walked straight into the shower. The hot water did little to relax me but at least the smell was gone. I pulled on a tee-shirt, a pair of knickers and my dressing gown, then went downstairs and curled up on the couch.

I knew I wasn't going to get any sleep that night. Whenever I closed my eyes I saw flames illuminating Ella Davies' face and kept hearing the tinnie with Len Smith at the helm, putt-putting its way back to its berth in White Bay. The images were still plaguing me when Daniel Conrad arrived at two o'clock. 'I thought you'd still be up,' he said when I opened the front door.

I offered him a drink and we talked softly, nursing balloons of brandy.

'Oh, well,' he said. 'It's all over. I just wish those kids had come straight to us.'

'They're young,' I said. 'They were frightened. Ella held herself personally responsible for what happened to Cara Lane. Then Lee...'

Daniel didn't let me finish. 'Sorry, Nicola. I'm not with you on that one. They were idiots.'

'Well, you must be feeling pretty pleased with yourself,' I said. 'You've cracked Jane's art forgery. The hollow balls are probably used as smuggling tools... And you know who killed Cara Lane.'

'We knew that all along.'

'She worked with you, didn't she?' I asked.

'I thought you'd work that out,' he smiled. 'Yeah, she did, until Ella inadvertently set events in train. Cara helped us expose one of the biggest international art scams since the war. We'd been monitoring Jane Davies' activities for the past three years. It was all working itself out - especially her increasingly public support for Len Smith's Forum. Cara made it a whole new ball-game after she met Ian at a gallery and fell for the bloke. Through her we were able to get a full history of the Davies/Bruillat involvement with the neo-nazi movement in France and here.'

'Marge Davies knew that Jane had helped the National Front when she was in France,' I said. 'She told Michaela and me about her son-in-law's family.'

'Nasty people. After the war they helped build the network of organisations that sprang up to get nazis out of Europe to Argentina, South Africa, Spain and Portugal and, sadly, to Australia.'

'And Jane did forgeries for them to help raise money for Len Smith's Forum. I'd always presumed businesses were backing him. Conservatives with lots of money and suspect ideologies.'

Daniel shook his head. 'It was far bigger than that. Ian Routley certainly underestimated it. For him it was just about painting and Jane's

success. He didn't like her politics but he had no idea about the extent of her activities. When Ella let slip about the tape recorder on the back of the painting to her mother, Jane did her own investigations. Once she'd let her cohorts know that Ian and Cara were involved with one another, they had to be killed.' He leaned back in his chair and yawned. His voice sounded gruff from shouting and exposure to smoke.

'Ian struck me as the sort of man who'd let Jane know he was prepared to expose *her*,' I said. 'The *Four Corners* program must have made her nervous.'

'With good reason. And Marge too. She moved hell and high water to keep it from going to air.'

'Tell me about Cara Lane,' I said softly.

He smiled. 'She was very nice. And an astute woman. She'd been researching legislation to curb trafficking in stolen art. You probably saw that documentary on SBS a few months ago about how some of the most reputable art auction houses in the world have been implicated in the movement of forgeries and stolen paintings. Governments know that nothing's going to change unless all countries work together to stop it. Cara was researching a policy paper on the problem. We worked together on strategies for that. When she got involved with Ian she used the relationship for all it was worth. His knowledge of painting and art movements. His connections. His time in France and his contact with the Bruillats.'

'You make it sound as though she just was going out with him so she could get him to talk.'

He shook his head. 'She really cared about him. Personally I disliked everything I saw of the bloke, but there's no accounting for taste.'

'And Ian's killers make him sweat for two months before killing him to make sure he hadn't left a paper trail. Did he really paint that portrait of Cara Lane.. or was it a Luke Redmond?'

Daniel grinned again. There were little speckles of ash in the corners of his eyes. 'Ian painted Cara in the same style of one of his favourite painters, Dante Gabriel Rossetti.'

'So Cara's killer arranged her body to implicate Ian in her death. And if Ian wasn't arrested as a suspect, he'd certainly know that they were on to him and that his days were numbered,' I said. 'He certainly knew they were after him. He rang me. He was going to tell me all about it, I'm sure, before he was killed. And he sent me some maps. I presumed the killers didn't know I had them or they'd have gone for me. But the bag snatcher at the Show...'

'They knew, Nicola. We've had you under surveillance ever since you took on Jane Davies' case. Your phone, your emails, your car. The robotic voice on the phone was Peter Watson. Stupid kid. He's been a real pest.'

'In all of this I can only see Ella, so fragile, and Lee desperate because she saw something in Jane's studio.'

'Lee is lucky to be alive. What started as a prank - an Asian girl gone missing at a time when Len Smith's Forum had whipped up anti-Asian feelings - nearly ended in her death. She was hiding in Jane's studio when she heard Jane Davies and Len Smith talking about Cara's body. The killer

had cut her hair to send to Ian – a kind of *you're next* message – but Lee found the hair and took off.'

'You still haven't said who killed Cara Lane? Was it one of Len Smith's henchmen?'

'Smith's talking to the police now. We'll know more after that. Organisation's like his have no trouble in attracting low life. It was probably some thug with posters of Hitler on his wall and a big collection of Nazi memorabilia.'

I told him I doubted it. The crime scene had been too clean. A thug wouldn't have been that tidy. Wouldn't have gone to all the trouble to drug her, to remove any clues, then arrange her body so lovingly. 'And the man who kissed her?'

He shrugged again. 'It may well have been someone she knew. No-one's come forward so that's looking less likely.'

'But on the lips,' I said and found my eyes had wandered to his.

'We'll find out. We won't rest till we do.'

Neither of us felt like talking after that. We were both gazing silently at the brandy in the bottom of our glasses when the phone rang, once, then the fax machine kicked in. I went over and tore off the sheet.

'It's from my girlfriend in France,' I said. 'I asked her to check something for me. I had a hunch about Jane Davies' connections in those provincial towns.'

He stood up and read Bridget's hand written letter over my shoulder. 'When is she leaving France?' His voice was so edgy I turned with surprise.

'She's due back in two weeks. Why?'

'She needs to leave straight away.'

Fear was burning my stomach. 'I only asked her to check out some of towns that were on the map Ian Routley sent me.'

He flicked the pages with his thumb. 'It's clear from what she's written here that she's been asking questions in those towns.' He looked at my face. 'Don't worry. We'll have her in a safe house before you can blink and we'll fly her home as soon as we can get her on a flight.' He folded the faxed pages and put them in his wallet. 'Go to bed. You need some sleep.'

I walked with him to his car and waited as he opened the door and put the keys into the ignition. The WRX started with a roar that must have jolted my neighbours from their sleep. He stood up, leaned forward and kissed me on the lips. When he ran a finger down my jaw-bone, I felt as though he'd applied an electric charge.

'Thanks,' he said again.

I touched his fingers. The dark blue stain was back. 'What is that stuff - woad?' I laughed.

'You were spot on. It's oil paint.'

'And you're the mysterious Luke Redmond?'

I waited for him to kiss me one more time. For a moment I thought he would, then, with a nod he turned and eased himself into the driver's seat.

'There's something more you need to know. Meet me at the Art Gallery in the morning. Ten o'clock. Give them this.' He passed me a card and his lips grazed my fingers as I took it. 'If Dan-i-el's card won't get you in, ask for *Luc*,' he said.

~ Fifty Five ~

I caught the 441 from Grove Street. It got me to the Art Gallery by a quarter to ten. I showed Daniel's card to the woman on the front desk. She ushered me downstairs to the conservators' rooms where paintings slouched against the walls like drinkers against a bar or, stripped from their frames, spread limply along the restorers' tables. The glow from a reading lamp spilled across an early Australian landscape that a young woman was painstakingly cleaning.

Jane Davies' naked body was spread out along a restorer's table like butter along a baguette. The canvas had frayed and torn on the upper left hand corner and a conservator called Rachel examined it with a frown. Jane's skin seemed alive in the soft light. And there was the glass of wine at her side and the little sheaf of wheat in the corner.

'Pity,' Rachel said with a sigh. 'It's a very fine painting. Probably the best the artist's ever done.' She looked at her watch and gave an apologetic smile. 'Bear with me. The others will be here in a minute.'

I watched the traffic outside slowing to enter the Woolloomooloo toll gates. A couple of Frigates were visible at the Garden Island Dockyard. I strained to catch their names in case Dad knew them from his days on Cockatoo Island but they were too far away.

When I heard footsteps I turned to watch a man and woman approach. Rachel went forward to meet them. 'Raymond Deloitte of Interpol and Christine Sloane from the Restorations section of the Art Gallery of New

South Wales,' she murmured in introduction. I shook their hands. She was about to lock the door behind them when Daniel strode down the room.

'Just a sec,' he called and she stood back to let him pass. 'How's it going, Nic?' He turned to the others. 'I invited Nicola here to see the lady in question set free.' He indicated Jane's reclining form. 'She's a bad one, that's for sure. But as the Frogs say, *cherchez la femme*.' I said I thought the naked woman in front of us was beautiful but Daniel wasn't having it. 'She's bad, Nicola,' he said, 'bad in more ways than one.'

Rachel turned and asked Christine Sloane to help her. They lifted the canvas gently, exposing part of the underside.

'We've had it x-rayed and I'm confident about its authenticity,' Daniel said.

Christine Sloane took a white coat from Rachel and a pair of cotton gloves. 'Turn on that lamp will you?'

Daniel and I stood with our backs to the walls as they worked. They began in the corner by the sheaf of wheat. A cotton bud dipped in solvent slowly spirited the wheat away. Gently the bud moved, centimetre by centimetre, along the canvas. A signature emerged and followed the probing bud like a drift of white foam behind a sailing ship.

Daniel leaned forward and spoke softly. 'Is it him?'

When she spoke, Christine Sloane's voice was reverential. 'Francisco Jose ´de Goya y Lucientes, 1746 to 1828.' Tears had filled her eyes and she stepped back from the table to wipe them away. 'It was stolen from the

Marseille home of Leon Weiner in 1972. Now it's going to be released to the world again. Sadly, Mr Weiner died in 1986 so he won't get to see it.'

'Why would someone like Jane who loved great art paint over the top of it? I thought art was stolen to sell or made its way into private collections?'

Daniel snorted. 'You've seen too many James Bond films, Nicola. Just because Dr No had a stolen Goya doesn't mean art is nicked on demand for wealthy connoisseurs. It's much more random than that. The thieves hide them in safe houses for decades if necessary. Some just disappear forever.'

'Hide them in towns like Pimpinion and Belier?' I asked.

'Yeah, amongst others in France. And there's Italy, Argentina, Ireland ... and Australia.'

Rachel stood up straight and stretched her back.

'He's right. A lot of art disappeared during the holocaust and the owners' families are still trying to relocate it. The Mafia, the IRA and other terrorist groups steal art to raise funds for their causes. We know that Ms Davies had connections with extreme Right groups in Europe and Australia so at this stage we're presuming she acted as a courier and minder for the work until they had need to recall it. She knew what she was doing. She preserved the stolen painting under a new layer of canvas, and painted over it. With others, like this one, she undercoated and sealed the original, then painted directly onto it.'

The solvent was working its way slowly along Jane's buttocks. Her skin darkened and shrivelled as though shrinking away from it. I almost expected

a white skeleton to replace the skin as it dissolved but the folds of what looked like a silk dress slowly began to appear.

Daniel nudged me in the ribs. He nodded towards the wall and the small painting that was resting with its back to us. 'Know what that is?' he asked. When I shook my head he bent down and turned the painting around.

'The Field of Wheat,' I said.

Daniel nodded. 'I painted it. We hoped when Ian saw it at the Show he'd make the connection with Cara's painting and contact the police. It was looking good when he awarded it the prize. He was killed before he could talk to us...or you.'

'Poor Ella,' I said. 'I spent most of last night wondering why Jane Davies commissioned me to mind her. I presumed it was to keep her safe. To make sure she wasn't roughed up at the demonstrations. Now I realise it was to feed her information about what Ella knew about Lee Han and Cara's death. And once I'd met Ian, what he was saying about her.'

Daniel's face looked dreamy as he watched the women working painstakingly on the canvas. The painted skin wasn't very deep. The solvent ate it away, exposing more and more of the fabric underneath. It had made Jane Davies' look like a victim of war, burned by napalm or chemical warfare.

'At one stage,' I said softly, 'I thought Cara's boyfriend might have been Luke Redmond. But now I know Redmond didn't exist, who fathered her son? Surely it wasn't Ian or...?'

Daniel shook his head. Blushed. He laughed when I said, 'You?'

'No, but thanks for the compliment. That's another secret that Cara Lane will keep. Come on,' he said. 'This is going to take a long, long time. Let's go downstairs to the cafe.'

He opened the door, waited while I passed through it and keyed in a locking code. 'This will be kept from the media. We want that painting back in Europe and under lock and key before word of its recovery gets out. Interpol is still following a number of leads in Argentina and we don't want to jeopardise their operation over there.'

When I didn't reply he asked what I was thinking.'

'Seeing the way Jane Davies' skin came off like that reminded me of *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*,' I said.

We sat at a table in the sun overlooking the Domain. 'Those canvases are only the tip of the iceberg. Jane started painting over stolen art in the early seventies. She's been at it ever since. There's a network of thieves and painters out there, in half the countries on the planet. Catching them will keep international agencies on their toes for years.'

'It still doesn't explain why Jane decided to participate. Surely it wasn't just because of her politics,' I said.

'Who knows? Maybe she loved her husband so much she did it for him. When the marriage went sour she was too far in to escape. When she got back here, she transferred her energies to Len Smith. Anyway, the money can't have been bad. She's certainly lived well for the last twenty years.' He took a postcard from his pocket and passed it to me. 'Want to see what Goya's lady looks like?'

The woman in the painting was tall and angular. Her hair was intricately plaited and strung with pearls. A lace mantilla rose above her head like a spider's web. Her dress was heavily beaded and made of turquoise silk. She was facing the artist, but her body was turned slightly to the left. It gave the impression of apprehension, as though her beauty was dangerous and she might dash away from it, and the artist, at any minute.

'God, she's beautiful,' I said.

He sighed and put the postcard in his pocket with a satisfied little pat. 'It says volumes about Ian that he didn't go to the police straight after Cara died. Might have saved a lot of heartache if he had.'

'And his own life. What will happen to Jane Davies now?'

'She's being held at Mullawa Women's Prison. Her lawyer's applied for bail. We've set it high. With her connections there's every chance she'd do a disappearing act.'

'Jane will hate it out there.'

'I've heard they have art classes,' he grinned.

'Today's the last day of the Royal Easter Show,' I said. 'It's always a lot of fun. They dismantle the fruit displays and sell the fruit cheap and give away sacks of manure.'

'Sounds wonderful,' he said, 'but I've got two tickets to a concert at the Opera House tonight.' He reached out and took my hand. 'So?' he said, blushing deep red. 'Do you want to come with me?'

EPILOGUE

The ferry passes under the Harbour Bridge. He is standing so close the weave of his jacket is abrasive to my skin. He points at the girders and the red light flashing high on top of the span. We turn towards the city, past the Opera House and the crowds on its steps, to the ferry wharves cluttered with shops.

‘Apparently, there used to be a building over there,’ he says, ‘with a phoenix on the top. A neon sign flashing on and off. A phoenix rising from its fire and flying up into the sky.’

We look at the buildings and the offices still lit up.

‘No phoenix now. Pity, this city needs something redemptive like that.’

‘Do you know Kenneth Slessor’s poem, Five Bells?’ I ask.

He’s so close I can feel his breath on my face. The five o’clock shadow that is already stubbling his cheek like a field of new-mown wheat.

*....And ships far off asleep, and Harbour buoys
Tossing their fireballs wearily each to each,
And tried to hear your voice but all I heard
Was a boat’s whistle, and the scraping squeal
Of seabird’s voices far away, and bells,
Five bells. Five bells coldly ringing out.*

It was written as a tribute to a friend. I wish I could write something as beautiful as that for mine.’

His eyes are as green as a Tasmanian tiger cat's. He says something in French. Smiles when I tell him I don't understand.

'Do you understand this?' he asks, kissing me.

~ The End ~