

Dangerous Devotions

A Novel/Thesis by

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Submitted for the degree of
MA(Writing)

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Certificate of Authorship/Originality

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

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Ann Penhallurick, 2005

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Ann Penhallurick, January, 2005

Abstract: *Dangerous Devotions*

Dangerous Devotions is a novel of approximately 75,000 words, in the genre of crime fiction. The plot of *Dangerous Devotions* follows the investigation, by barrister Paul Challinor, into an exclusive and very secretive escort agency in Sydney. This agency, which doesn't advertise in the usual ways, has as its workers, women and some men who are in wheelchairs, have amputations or other physical and sensory impairments. The agency services a niche market of people who call themselves 'devotees'.

Prior to commencement of the story a woman working for the escort agency has been nearly killed, and a refuge for women with disability has begun receiving vicious parcels of mutilated dolls. Early in the book, Paul (who is blind) meets, apparently by chance, Julia Prettie, a woman he finds immediately attractive. The potential romance and the obstacles to it form a sub-plot within the story. The story is told from multiple points of view, including those of Sonya and Avril, both agency workers and both women with physical disability. Avril loves her job and the potential for freedom it gives her, while Sonya finds much in it to shame her. In the course of the novel one of the girls is kidnapped. Julia's sister, Jean, also disappears – unbeknownst to Julia at the time - and the plot follows Paul and Julia's attempts to find Avril, as well as the resolution of Jean's disappearance.

Behind the writing of *Dangerous Devotions* is a theoretical exploration of identity and representation: of people with disability in fiction, but also of people in general. Following the work of Paul Eakin, published in the journal, *Narrative*, the concept of the self as a momentary, ever-reconstructing outcome of the individual's neurobiological process is put forward. Identity, conceptualised as a neurobiological process, reduces the reliance on external and social constructions as the determiners of a person. Identity, constantly reforming in the neurones of each individual also challenges the notions of an often static, passive embodiment that informs much disability theory.

While *Dangerous Devotions* has the conventions of the crime genre, it deploys these conventions with subject-matter and characters usually relegated to more formal, 'factual' discourses (medical, sociological, care-giving discourses), and in doing so attempts to both entertain and to, less overtly, usurp and overturn more traditional narrative positions of people with disability as passive, minor characters, 'other' to the main game. *Dangerous Devotions* situates people with disability as the heroes of the story.

EXEGESIS/ SUPPORTING STATEMENT for

Dangerous Devotions

a novel submitted by Ann Penhallurick,

for the award MA(Writing)

University of Technology, Sydney, January, 2005

If your words are not pleasing, hold in half of them.

(Chinese Proverb)¹

To study creative writing is to acknowledge that writing is a craft, a set of skills that can be acquired, or at least honed. It is to throw aside the notion that creative writing is a gift, vested upon one by an outside force, flowing through the brain, the body, to the pen, (an impression I associate with childhood memories of William Wordsworth and clouds of daffodils). Writing must be acknowledged as like the human being her/himself, complex, a mix of fundamental traces and

¹ David Crystal, Hilary Crystal, *Words on Words: Quotations about Language and Languages*, Penquin Books, 2000, p162

environmental nurture – with, in a creative writing course, the emphasis on the gritty, hard-work aspects of the latter.

I was accepted into the MA Writing (by thesis) with a proposal to write an extended narrative non-fiction work. This project centred on a group of people I had known for some years, in my guise as psychologist, disabilities consultant, and communication expert. Each member of this group lives with having intellectual disability and/or mental illness. Particular writing skills would be needed if I were to render their voices, their gestures and other non-verbal communications effectively. At the very least, I would need to be able to identify and analyse the conventions of non-fiction writing well enough that I would not simply produce a piece of ‘disability discourse’, with my subjects as innocent victims of a system they must continually struggle against.

In the first year of my M.A. enrolment, however, most of this group again became clients of my professional practice, due to a major upheaval in their lives. I was presented with an ethical dilemma. Trained as a psychologist, I knew that no matter how well I tried to avoid it, my ‘bias’, my own need to hear what I wanted to hear, or glean what I wanted to write, was likely to affect my interactions with each of these individuals. Instead of an effective psychologist I might well be – as a woman I know with mental illness once so aptly put it – no more than a ‘stealer of stories’.

I applied to change my thesis proposal to a work of fiction, a novel. After various moves, which could be characterised as a drift through classical (third person, historical narrative), a flirtation with jazz (multiple point of view, fragmented melodies), I am submitting for the MA a piece of rock and roll – a crime fiction novel, *Dangerous Devotions*. Yet, oddly enough, this novel is something of the same book I

might have written as a non-fiction author. My heroes are people with disability, their setting is the ordinary and ex-ordinary difficulties faced by ordinary people. They rise out of the chaos. All these narrative elements are the same.

The challenge, though, of shifting from non-fiction which (might) enable identifiable people - whose documented histories and real images could inform and validate the text - to a novel dramatising the lives of people with disability, has been considerable.

Non-fiction, I would argue, by definition, stakes and relies on an implicit set of claims: these people are real, these events are real, the author is no more than a filter for the 'real' – albeit one who organises, reorders, perhaps makes more dramatic by a certain level of skill, or art - but not artifice. By its definition, fiction declares itself a work – a whimsy, a fabrication - of the imagination. This is not to say that fiction has no actual or perceived relation to the real. In fact, reviewers and commentators spend considerable time delving into books and biographies to reveal who the 'real' person behind the fictional creation might be; now and then slander is claimed; authors sometimes admit to – or claim as centrally important – the actual experience they have fictionalised. Yet, to say that readers, and even authors themselves, impute a reality behind fiction is not to say that fiction automatically lays claim to truth or authenticity.

From my point of view, wanting to give centre-stage to individuals who are often silent and/or silenced, non-fiction had the advantage of almost seamlessly, and with apparent validity, giving marginalised people 'a voice'. Fiction, on the other hand, carried with it the potential to be inadequate, partial – in both the sense of 'a

part' or 'prejudiced' - or simply wrong, in its relation to truth. In particular, my many years working in the 'disability sector' made me aware than any attempt at fictional representation of people with disabilities could easily be criticised as 'inauthentic' as I do not have a marked disability myself.

Of course, writing a piece of fiction in which characters with disability appear is not new. Shakespeare's 'fools' immediately spring to mind, as does the peculiar redemptive maiming of Edward Rochester in *Jane Eyre*. Martin Halliwell, in an excellent book released early in 2004, *Images of Idiocy: The Idiot Figure in Modern Fiction and Film*,² identifies the long history of 'fools' and 'idiots' in fiction, referring to Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* (1868), Jacob Wasserman's *Caspar Hauser* (1908), Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1983), films such as *Charly* (1968) – from the short story *Flowers for Algernon* - and 'Rain Man' (1988), to name just a few.

Recently, also, Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* won the 2003 Whitbread Award for fiction. This short novel is told entirely through the mind and perceptions of Christopher, a child at a special school, with a gift for maths and extreme difficulty with empathy. Reviewing the book in the *New York Times* in June 2003, Michiko Kakutani asserted that: 'To get an idea of what Mark Haddon's moving new novel, "The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time," is like, think of "The Sound and the Fury" crossed with "The Catcher in the Rye" and one of Oliver Sacks's real-life stories'.³

Haddon's book is rare, in that the child with autism is the central, guiding consciousness of the book. It is much more common for the person with a disability to be an ancillary character (David Malouf's, Jenny in *The Great World*' (1990) for

² Martin Halliwell, *Images of Idiocy: The Idiot Figure in Modern Fiction and Film*,

³ Michiko Kakutani, *Books of The Times; Math and Physics? A Cinch. People? Incomprehensible*. New York Times, June 13, 2003, p41

example), and/or for the character to work in contrast with the ‘normal’ characters, thus producing and reinforcing what Halliwell refers to as the ‘deeply ingrained cultural convention of associating defects with a lack of virtue or suspect morality’⁴. Indeed, even in one of the few feature-film representations in which people with disability are not single, isolated characters, the remarkable 1932 MGM production *Freaks*, although people with dwarfism and ‘deformities’ are shown in solidarity and strength they, in the end, succumb to evil and depravity.

How did Haddon manage a sympathetic, believable and, in the world’s terms, ‘disabled’, consciousness? Perhaps, quite simply, because Haddon’s Christopher is not an adult. Children commonly connote innocence, although there is also the child as ‘bad seed’. Christopher’s innocence is extreme. So much so that he becomes obsessed with solving the mystery of who killed the dog in the nighttime. As a child, Christopher is allowed a quaintness of perception that, in an adult character, would not readily be acceptable. This is not to say that Christopher is a not a wonderful character. He is, and his spare, direct comments provide an unusual and revealing vision of the world, but as both as a child and as an ‘idiot savant’ this perception is readily read as his own and does not challenge conventions of representation of people with disabilities.

As Anthony Darke, in a PhD thesis published on the internet, points out, quoting Gilman (1988): “... 'it is in the world of representations that we banish our fear of [the Other] (and find) proof that *we* are still whole.. Although some social change has occurred - legal rights, economic advancement *et al* - the archetypal and

⁴ Halliwell, op cit, p17

stereotypical persist even though many have been forcefully challenged’⁵ Haddon’s Christopher is both archetypal and stereotypical.

On the other hand, the novel presented with this dissertation, *Dangerous Devotions*, has little in it that is innocent. The title refers to devotees – the label adopted by people who are sexually attracted to people with amputations, blindness, and other disabilities. Devotees have internet websites which include everything from pleas for recognition, to erotic short stories and explicit pictures. Some devotees become wannabees – taking on often elaborate and intricate pretences of having an amputation or other disability, while some devotees/wannabees go to extreme lengths to have a literal amputation performed on themselves. There is debate about whether devotee-ism is a paraphilia under the categories of the Diagnostics and Statistics Manual (DSMIV) used by psychologists and psychiatrists.

The plot of *Dangerous Devotions* follows the investigation – by barrister Paul Challinor (who is blind) - into an exclusive and very secretive escort agency in Sydney. This agency, which doesn’t advertise in the usual ways, has, as its workers, women, and some men, who are in wheelchairs, have amputations or other physical and sensory impairments. Early in the book, Paul, apparently by chance, meets Julia Prettie, an attractive woman who, it turns out, has a sister with multiple disabilities, including intellectual disability. Prior to commencement of the story a woman working for the escort agency has been nearly killed, and a refuge for women with disability has begun receiving vicious parcels of mutilated dolls. The story is told from multiple points of view, including those of Sonya and Avril, both agency

⁵ Paul Anthony Darke, *The Cinematic Construction of Physical Disability as Identified Through the Application of the Social Model of Disability to Six Indicative Films Made since 1970*, Thesis submitted for PhD in Film Studies, The University of Warwick, 1999, publication copyright .. no page numbers available.

workers and both women with physical disability. Avril loves her job and the potential for freedom it gives her, while Sonya finds much to shame her. In the course of the novel one of the girls is kidnapped. Julia's sister, Jean, also disappears – unbeknownst to her at the time - and the plot follows Paul and Julia's attempts to find Avril, as well as the resolution of Jean's disappearance.

Disability and sexuality, and particularly disability as object or target of sexual fetish, offers considerable challenges to any writer. While filmmaker Peter Greenaway used the camera and thousands of megawatts of electricity to shine his luminescent but opaque light on the subject of the wounded-disabled and/or decomposing body in *A Zed and Two Noughts* (1985), I am a practitioner-writer for whom the power of the image (spoken, written or filmed) to 'provide insight' and perhaps even, as Tobin Siebers says, to make 'changes to the process of representation itself'⁶ must be acknowledged.

When I began writing *Dangerous Devotions* the main character with disability was Jean, and the disability which most impacted on her life was intellectual disability. This posed specific problems in representing internal thought but did not involve the potential disruption of the body-as-other in the text. I felt comfortable in creating a physical image of the character Jean but, as other characters crept in and demanded greater space, and more meaningful voice(s), I was faced with the 'problem' of the 'problematized' body (cf Halliwell above), of the person with physical disability or stigmata.

Disability offers a challenge to the representation of the body
...usually, it means that the disabled body provides insight into
the fact that all bodies are socially constructed).⁷

⁶ Tobin Siebers, *Disability in Theory: From Social Constructionism to the New Realism of the Body*, *American Literary History* 13.4 (2001) p737

⁷ Siebers, op cit, p737

For a time I attempted to engage with the large and growing literature and discourse in the area of the body and disability, some of which I was aware of before I began *Dangerous Devotions*. I found this literature peppered with the binary notions inherent in terms such as disabled/non-disabled, terms which appear and reappear, despite deconstruction in many social constructivist theories of disability, which sees bodily impairment as ‘real’, but disability as both a concept and, more importantly to people’s lives, as a constraint brought about by social practices and beliefs. Disability is constructed in contrast to ability in an ablest society. While much of this theory is interesting and has made a valuable contribution to challenging disabling practices, there was little I could find in it to guide me in the process of writing in the persona of a disabled person.

Then, toward the end of the first draft of *Dangerous Devotions* I came across a journal which helped me reduce or reply to some of my own internal wranglings with what might be called the ethics of representation.

Narrative, which comes out quarterly, has published a number of articles which seek to blend cognitive and neurological studies with less empirical work in interpretative and deconstructive theoretical areas. As a psychologist and applied linguist (speech pathologist) with a degree in English Literature and post-graduate work in cultural theory, I found this bringing together of forces to be extremely attractive. I was particularly interested in an article published in *Narrative* in 2004. The article, ‘What are we reading when we read autobiography’ is written by Paul John Eakin⁸. Eakin, Professor Emeritus at Indiana University, is the author or editor of

⁸ Paul John Eakin, ‘What Are We Reading When We Read Autobiography?’ ,*Narrative* 12.2 (2004) pp121-132

a number of works on autobiography. What he writes, though, concerns more than the individual memoir.

Eakin's article situates the identity of the individual not in the external realms of social and political construction but in the neurobiological self (which Eakin acknowledges as Antonio Damasio's concept). '(S)elf is not some abstract philosophical concept but rather a name for a feeling embedded in the physiological processes necessary for survival. Self then ... is first and last *of* and *about* the body...' ⁹ In Eakin/Damasio's view, then, the self is embodied (in the physiological/neurological processes); at the same time, the self is not dependent on the external appearance of the body. Thus there is an equity of the self, irrespective of external disability. This was a liberating concept to discover.

In Eakin's article, the exploration of Damasio's three-tier model of mental reality (core self, extended consciousness and autobiographical self) brings him back to neurologist and writer Oliver Sacks's claim - 'that each of us constructs and lives a "narrative" and this narrative is us, our identities'¹⁰. In social constructivist theories of disability, the individual is all too often passive, her/his self, if it is considered at all, largely constructed – whether the individual likes it or not – by social forces. Identity, in Eaken/Damasio's formulation, is active – we construct and live our own narratives.

Furthermore, by situating the identity of the person in the neurobiological self (with no Cartesian dualism) there is an implied assertion that the embodiment of identity cannot be denied, circumvented or expressed merely in language. This sites the self as both organic and temporal. It also makes the self available to the person who does not have language – an extremely important and liberating move for people

⁹ Eakin, op cit, p122

¹⁰ Quoted in Eakin, op cit, p121

who cannot speak and/or use language. That is, the self becomes acknowledged in the person with intellectual disability in a manner that many common conceptions of humanity – for example, the human being made separate from the lower orders by access to and use of language – deny. Again, this organic, temporal corporeal self is not an embodied self in the sense that much disability discourse understands it. This self only exists in, and because of, the neurological processes of the brain, processes that cannot be observed, socially valued or devalued by an observer.

Interestingly, too, identity, if it is a product of an individual, internal neurological process, remains ungraspable for anyone outside the particular body – but also for the person in the particular body. For once a moment has been experienced, the precise neurological processes that ‘belonged’ to that moment are past, and cannot be recovered in any exact replica. The memory of the moment – and an experience is a memory within .2 of a second – is stored, not in the neurones that experienced it, but in different neurones, with different connections from the ones that perceived the event. These neurones, with their different associative pathways, will, when (re) excited, stimulate different parts of the brain, different emotions and therefore a slightly different neurobiological self. Eakin, reading Damasio, refers to the ‘movie-in-the-brain’, which ‘engenders a sense of self in the act of knowing’¹¹. That is, there is no essential, immutable self but only the sense of one that occurs in a moment, in any particular ‘act of knowing’.

These notions could, of course, threaten, even enrage the writer/author, particularly of biography. If identity is irretrievably corporeal, the subject necessarily remains ungraspable, unknowable, situated, as s/he is, in a body, which is ‘other’ (in relation to the author), elsewhere and quite possibly turned to dust. Similarly,

¹¹ Eakin, op cit, p128

logically, the neurobiological self could be a threat to the authenticity of autobiography. If each of us is our neurobiological self, then our identity must constantly shift, change, grow (especially in youth) and possibly retreat (after a night of vociferous alcohol imbibing), as we age.

On the other hand, if identity is momentary - and memory unreliable and both are under constant erasure and reconstruction - or at least if we regard them as such - as writers, and as human beings, we may well find a greater freedom. If there is no set self, then we can imagine more freely, leave the ascribing and inscription of 'real', 'reality', 'truth' to the reader - as in Barthes' famous stricture: '...the unity of the text is not in its origin but in its destination. Which is to say that the unity of a text is not in the author but in the reader, or more accurately in the act of reading'¹².

For the project of *Dangerous Devotions*, which represents and writes as more than one person with a disability, the idea that the self is inherent to the neurobiology of the human body is one that reduces surface divisions between human beings. We are not who we are because we have a particular form of the body, nor because we are able to use tools or language, but simply because each and every one of our restless brains (not our minds) is, with or without conscious effort, creating us, each and every moment of the day.

Importantly, however, the concept of neurobiological identity does not deny culture. Although Eakin does not go into this, cognitive sciences, allied to neurobiology, offer well-tested supports for the notions that a person from one culture will have different neurological associations, functional definitions, thoughts and what we could call 'filters' stored in their neurones and dendrites. What we perceive and

¹² Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Image, Music, Text*, Stephen Heath (trans), 1977, p145

how we perceive and what we store and how we store this information is intimately intertwined with our culture. We can have our commonality and our difference, too.

Does any of this matter? Does theorising really have any relation to the creation of an imaginary world? For me, it has done. There is both a poetics and politics of representation. To deal with the poetics I had the excellent tutelage of Glenda Adams, Cathy Cole and others at the University of Technology, Sydney. I also returned to the wisdom of Virginia Woolf who, always determined to further the craft of writing, said (and she is quoted here at some length):

Perhaps the quickest way to understand the elements of what a novelist is doing is not to read but to write: to make your own experiment with the dangers and difficulties of words. Recall, then, some event that has left a distinct impression on you – how at the corner of the street perhaps, you passed two people talking. A tree shook; and electric light danced; the tone of the talk was comic, but also tragic; a whole vision, an entire conception, seemed contained in that moment.

But when you attempt to reconstruct it in words, you will find that it breaks into a thousand conflicting impressions. Some must be subdued; others emphasised; in the process you will lose, probably, all grasp upon the emotion itself. Then turn from your blurred and littered pages to the opening pages of some great novelist – Defoe, Jane Austen, Hardy. Now you will be better able to appreciate their mastery. It is not merely that we are in the presence of a different person – Defoe, Jane Austen or Thomas Hardy – but that we are living in a different world.¹³

Woolf's words were prescient: many times during the process of writing *Dangerous Devotions* I realised that I needed to construct and reconstruct. All too often what, in my mind's eye, seemed so intense, so poignant or so grand, read as nothing more than a set of graphical phonemes stamped onto a page. Over and over, I

¹³ Woolf, Virginia, *The Captain's Death Bed and Other Essays*, 1973, Harvest Books, London

found myself not with a scramble of littered pages but with a single, coherent and solidly boring narrative. I persisted and hope that I have learned.

Eakin's formulation of neurobiological identity complements Woolf, providing a way of looking at, questioning and working positively with, the politics of representation and identity.

In the end, however, the hand that moves the pen is not an innocent one. What I write, who I write 'as', how I express what I have to say; these all involve selections, choices and skills. The more artful the pen becomes, the less innocence it can claim. For me to write well, it has been important to feel comfortable that I am not crossing ethical boundaries, not – as one of my clients with mental illness once put it – 'stealing the stories of others'. To find a voice for each of my characters, I have needed to be able to relax into the selves that people my imaginative world, whether a 'self' has a disability or not. It has been good to think that each of my characters can, simultaneously, exist without me, the author, and yet be a person with whose thought processes I can be intimate, no matter how little physical or environmental commonality I have with them.

As I hand in my novel, *Dangerous Devotions*, I am pleased to have worked through some of the theory and come to a point where I feel good, quite simply good, about what I have written.

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1

It was a desert wind. A broken-glass brilliance, starved of moisture, no subtle eddies, a complete absence of playfulness. With strong, well-practised movements, Paul Challinor climbed from the pool and let the chill rush against his skin for a full sixty seconds before wrapping a towel around his tall frame. He moved towards the glass doors at the back of the house, thinking that he enjoyed the wind. With its lack of manners, it exposed the city, tore at the common conception of Sydney as a warm, sea-trimmed beauty. For the sake of tourism, the winter westerlies were one of the city's better-kept secrets.

Showered and dressed, Paul placed the espresso machine on the heat. There were other secrets he wanted the city, or its inhabitants, to admit to. He waited for the hiss of the coffee before pressing the auto-dial on the kitchen phone for Warren. Warren was very good at asking the right questions of the right people, or at least of those who might know where to look for the answers.

"Don't you ever sleep?" Warren asked, over the mechanical sound of the voice-mail.

Paul said nothing until he heard the recorder click off. He wondered why Warren persisted with the old audio-tape technology; probably gave him a better chance to screen his calls. "I wanted to catch you before you went out. How are you fixed for doing a bit of work for me over the next few days?"

"Surveillance?"

"More or less."

"Depends. I've got enough insurance work to bore the panties off an aging virgin, so if you've got anything interesting I'm the man for you. If it's bread and butter, no can do."

Paul drank some of the coffee. Warren was the most intelligent and reliable private investigator he'd ever worked with, but his turn of phrase was so — well, Warren. "This one's out of the ordinary. A new escort agency. With an unusual twist."

"Dunno if that's possible. Seen one tart and you seen 'em all, doesn't matter what gender. And last time I followed a pimp I ended up with a closer connection to the asphalt than I generally fancy.

Job wasn't for a well-known barrister on the right side of the law like you, boss, but doesn't mean the dangers're any different."

"There's no close personal contact involved. We're still trying to track down the centre of operations - if there is one. There's a van I need you to follow."

"A van? What kinda escort agency has a van, for Christ's sake?"

"One that supplies elegant ladies, and the occasional gentleman, who happen to use wheelchairs."

"You're kidding me."

"I'm not. This agency serves a niche market. Its workers are all people with disabilities - some have amputations, some spinal injury. There're also people with dwarfism, vision impairment. The clients don't like to see themselves as ordinary punters, they like to call themselves devotees."

"Whatever." Paul heard Warren, too, slug some coffee back.

"Boss, I know you might have a personal interest, but brothels aren't illegal any more. Not round here. I know an escort agency's not the same story, but they're a way to get some casual work and people've got to pay their mortgage somehow."

Paul ran his index finger around the rim of the coffee cup. Outside a tree-branch groaned. Should he tell Warren the whole story? A young woman forced from a hotel room, dragged out of her wheelchair, rolled across the sharp late-summer grass into the lake in Parramatta Park. Only surviving because the rigidity of her limbs propped her up in the shallow water long enough for an old man, exercising against arthritis, to find her. The incident had made a column-filler in the daily tabloid, but the fact that she was a sex worker wasn't revealed. The journalist hadn't thought to ask.

Then there were the dolls. Mutilated, maimed and excessively made-up, dressed in silk and satin, and left, small plastic changelings, at the front door of the only refuge in Sydney for disabled women who were the victims of domestic violence. Cards with the words 'whores, sluts, slags, pros, you're dead,' were speared, with strong, thick needles, through the eyes or mouths of the dolls. A definite link with the escort agency hadn't been established, but somebody out there was very angry.

The police had arrested a well-known business-man in connection with the incident in the park and he preferred not to meddle with the police investigations. What he wanted was to uncover the mechanisms which allowed a married, middle-aged man who lived on the North Shore, to have an assignation with a young woman with paraplegia, in

a hotel room in the Western Suburbs, at an exorbitant fee. To find the people who'd promoted a situation so blatantly threatening. "There's more to this, Warren. I've promised confidentiality, so I won't hand over the details now, other than to say one woman has nearly died. The police have that investigation under control." He paused. Their interaction worked on an unspoken trust, Warren would read the silence. "But there's more to it. The agency's not a small back-room operation and it's inflaming passions that have been suppressed for a long time. In a number of ways."

A momentary hollowness, suggesting Warren was biting back questions he wanted to ask. Trust couldn't stamp out curiosity. "Got the picture. If this agency's spreading its wings or digging its claws, and it's causing trouble, how come I never heard of it?" Warren sounded aggrieved.

"They're very discreet. Which is why we need you."

"Discreet means expensive, but I'll bet they're paying the workers like they're convicts off the first fleet."

Good, Paul thought, he'll take the job. Solving murders was something Warren cheerfully left to the police - when he thought they could manage the job - but he was always ready to go straight into bat for the underdog. If he thought the workers were getting a raw deal, he'd dump the insurance companies, at least until it suited him to resurrect them. Paul's father would have liked Warren. Pity Keith Challinor had died so young. "We'd really appreciate it if you could spare a couple of days, they're easily exploited employees," Paul said mildly.

"Yeah. OK, you've got me. But, who's this 'we'? You're not in this with your old missus again, are you?"

"Clare?"

"Yeah, Clare. Listen, boss, you may not've been in the luck lately, but you've never had trouble attracting the chicks; why don't you leave that one for good and proper?"

"I have left her. But Warren..."

"OK, OK. It's none of my business. So what're the details?"

His mobile rang as the hiss of steam indicated Paul's second attempt at coffee - the first had gone cold - was ready. "Clare," he said as he put the phone to his ear.

"You still know when it's me."

"One of the benefits of being blind, sixth sense," he replied, aware that she, of all people, knew he didn't believe anything of the kind. Either about the benefits of being blind, or the extra senses. It was just a pat response, practised when other conversation was best avoided. Who else but she or Warren rang him at this hour of the morning?

"I'm still at home," he said, letting her know that she could speak without his end of the conversation being overheard.

"I've only got a minute. I just rang to let you know I can't make the meeting this morning. I've - well, something's come up. I'm really sorry but I'm going to have to ask you to do it alone."

Her voice was swirling, as if she was unsure of her direction. A few months ago this would have made him wonder about the sub-text. He and Clare had done everything from trekking the Himalayas - not an easy feat for a too-tall blind man and a small, city-bred sighted woman - to setting up the legal rights and advocacy service together. In the end, though, he'd left because he felt the marriage was sapping his pride and his energy. Which wasn't all Clare's fault. She wanted to give and give and give. She couldn't help it if he didn't want to always play the role of recipient. "A pity," was all he said now. His immunity was rising.

"I'm sure you'll manage. You're pretty good at keeping control. Anyway, this particular investigation is more your scene than mine." She changed tone again. "No, I shouldn't've said that, it sounded bitchy and I don't mean to be. Really."

His checked the temperature of the coffee cup. Cooling again. "I've got the forms for the meeting," he said, business-like, "they arrived on Monday. Can you have the rest of the bumpf couriered over? I won't be able to use your power-point presentation, will I? You won't have set it up with sound markers?"

She softened. "I haven't, and I really am sorry. I do understand how much you dislike these meetings...you know I don't want to make it hard for you."

There it was, sharper than any westerly wind, the arrow of sympathy. His lips tensed. Any mention of his disability - still, after all these years - made her back-track, be over-kind. He was reminded of the sugar he'd found in his grandmother's pantry one rainy afternoon when he was a curious kid. The smell, unfamiliar, too-ripe, pulled his attention from the biscuits, chocolate blocks and tins of salty liquorice his grandmother favoured. It was a moist, over-heated summer and the sugar had swelled, splitting its bag,

weeping. When his fingers brushed the damp grains the sensation was repulsive, as he imagined a dead carcass would feel in the first stages of decomposition. The smell was acrid, overpowering, and made him retch. His grandmother had found him, and the mess. There'd been hell to pay.

He passed his hand over his head, murmuring something non-committal to Clare, pleased he didn't have to have lunch with her. His close-cropped hair reminded him of freedom. More than once he'd been told his hair was Byronic in its curl and Clare liked it long. She knew the relationship was over, she said, when he had it cut.

"I'll talk with Mike again soon and see if the police have any more details," Clare was saying. "And I'll follow up with the numbers we got from the web search. It's hard to believe there's so many women prepared to turn themselves into pieces of pornography," she said.

Paul wondered briefly about Mike. Clare wasn't usually so friendly with the police. None of his business, he reminded himself. "Mike's a good contact but, Clare, watch your back. There's big money and some very powerful people involved in this agency, and the incident in the park is enough to tell us that some of them are desperate people."

"You be careful, too," she said, before hanging up.

He drank the cold coffee; at least it could still throw a caffeine punch.

2

Sonya pressed the off-button. Mobile phones were easy for her to use with her single hand and this one was programmed so it only rang out to one number. She fumbled, though, trying to put the phone back into her bag. Before the amputation she'd been left-handed, and now, whenever she wanted to do anything more complicated than pressing a single button, the stump of her left arm - the ugly stump she tried to keep hidden - worked desperately to lift or turn, to pick up, even to write in the delicate script for which she'd once won school prizes. The discomfort made her say words in her head, words that she shouldn't even think. She prayed that God would not hear her. Since she came to Australia there was so much that she did not want God to witness. In Bosnia there was so much she could not understand that God had willed. It made her mind ache far more than her body to think that He could allow such horrors.

"Here, let me help," Avril said, coming up next to her.

Sonya smiled. Avril cheered her, gave her purpose. Avril had soft blonde hair and the face of a cherub. Avril's body was also like a cherub, but not a soft, child-like one, more like a sculpture that twisted out of shape when it fell off the side of an old building. Her head was large while her arms were too short and her shoulders narrow and pinched. Her joints were in the wrong places and her tiny legs arched like those of a very old person with diseased bones, an old person who had been through many wars, many years of half-starvation. Yet Avril treated Sonya as the one who needed support. Sonya admired Avril. She had what Australians called guts.

"Thank you." Sonya paused while Avril fiddled with her bag and phone. "Robin has arranged my regular customer. Avril, is it good idea to go again?"

"Why not? The guy pays extra, doesn't he?"

"Yes, but what he wants is strange."

"D'you think he's dangerous? Like, will he do anything to hurt you?"

Sonya held her stump with her other hand, the intact arm covering her breasts, her dark hair falling over her shoulders. The

client liked to shine a strong light on her broken and maimed side and stare at the scars. Sometimes he touched - almost in the way her family approached the statue of the Blessed Virgin. More than once he'd slavered over the pitiful remains of her arm, the moisture coming from his mouth and from his other parts - the parts that Sonya's mother had taught her never to name. "No. He does not wish to hurt me. That is not problem."

"Then it's OK. Sonnie, it's the only way we're gonna get out here. And we've gotta do that. You're so smart, maybe you still sound a bit funny, but look how good you can write. You know heaps more words than I do - and I'm gonna go places, I tell you, even if I can't think as good as you." Avril handed back Sonya's bag with a smile. "And it's all right, Sonnie, what we do is just a job. I'm working on a regular guy myself. There's one bloke who's getting pretty excited and saying all sorts of crap about love. That's creepy, but I think about the money and the chance to do something different with my life."

Sonya looked at Avril and thought of all the words she couldn't make come out her mouth. English words, and words that went with feelings. It didn't matter whether the emotion-words were in English or her native tongue, they were like a river, a polluted, dying river, filled with refuse, held back by the damn of her own mind. Avril was looking at herself in the mirror, adjusting her clothing, which was tight and, Sonya thought, too expensive: she would never save enough that way.

The door behind them flapped. Hastily, Sonya turned and pretended to wash her single hand, while watching in the mirror, always alert to danger. She and Avril had been making their calls in the women's toilets on the ground floor of the shopping mall for months now. Over the timeshe'd seen enough to convince her that what Avril said was true: they needed a future different from what they were promised in this part of Sydney, where the rich were firstly the drug dealers - the ones with money behind them, who hadn't been caught - and after them, the families on the best pensions, with the most numbers of sharp-featured children.

She waited. The woman who'd just come in was ordinary enough, her thick arms straining as she tried to squeeze too many plastic shopping bags alongside her big body into the cubicle. Some women weren't so predictable. She and Avril had been shoved out of the way more than once. There'd been skinny junkies who'd scored in the shopping centre and didn't care who saw them stick the needle into

their body, so long as it got there, fast. There'd been mothers who'd sworn at them and others who'd sprayed them with soapy water, seeming to think that whatever was wrong with them might be catching. Sometimes the kids teased them – knowing their mothers would never stop them, or because they were kids who were too far gone to care if they got another slap.

“OK. I'll go. I'll be OK.”

“Good one, Sonnie. We'll be apples, as m'dad says.”

Avril turned back to the mirror and Sonya watched her whip a lipstick out of her purse and slash it across her lips in the expert way she had, despite the stiff arms that had to be strained to reach her mouth. “Avril, you are amazing.”

“Am-ay-zing, mate. You still need to get that accent sorted out.”

The keys were where they were always were, on the plain hook Warren'd installed inside the kitchen cabinet. To the untrained eye the three keys were exactly the same. Not even his wife, Karen, knew different. Warren flicked them off the hook, admiring the insignia ring, and dropped them into his pocket.

“See ya,” he yelled to Karen – who was a bloody good sort, unlike many of the women he had to follow in the course of his work. He'd got into investigation through journalism, which was a deviant enough pathway. Although much the same job, Warren reckoned: trailing those with something to hide, splattering stories where they'd do their maximum. Not always for the worst.

He slipped the key into the lock of the Jag. The car was what the magazines called a 'superbly restored, every attention to detail' machine. He'd seen to that himself, spare hour in, low-income weeks out. A good thing, too. Most cars sucked money, this one appreciated almost as well as Sydney real estate, which was saying something. Today the Jag would go with him as far as the garage he rented in an area few people visited. A suburb with zilch transport access but thick with new apartments and town houses, each one with faux stainless-steel kitchens, more bathrooms than bedrooms, and owners desperate to recoup some of their exorbitant repayments by letting out their garages, no questions asked. In his garage were two cars. A big four-wheel-drive number and an innocuous little hatchback. Chosen to be unnoticeable – depending on which part of town he had a job in.

The Jag's engine purred. He knew the description was a cliché, ten years of journalism could hardly let him forget, but it truly did. He hung a soft left and took off down the arterial. He wore a cap when driving the Jag.

The radio announcer was banging on about the government putting taxes into their back pockets. "No taxes, no services, you dickhead," Warren muttered and shut the thing down.

A mobile brothel that did most of its business during the daytime? In expensive hotels, no actual premises and no home visits as far as anyone knew. The boss had impressed this upon him. At first he hadn't picked up why - it'd been early in the morning. Now he thought about it, it was pretty bloody obvious these facts defined the clientele. People who didn't want to disturb the surface of their lives, who had evening engagements - rather than nights out with the boys - and couldn't, or wouldn't, sneak away. Very clever - an agency that provided unique services to the most assiduous family man, the politician or priest, the clever bastard who needed to be seen going home to the wife and kiddies at night and/or getting his mug on the social pages. So long as he had enough money and power to take an extra-long lunch, the guy was home and hosed. As it were.

Out of habit, Warren waved at another Jag driver. They all noticed each other, even when going in opposite directions in six crammed lanes of Parramatta Road traffic. Challinor had told him to concentrate on the western suburbs, round Parramatta, where the standard of hotel was rising quicker than a punter's prick. Warren had a set of addresses where he might pick up the van, and a description of its defining characteristics, which included a particularly neat and discreet wheelchair hoist. He needed to hurry. Couldn't bet on the first address being an ace.

He switched the radio back on. He liked working for Challinor. Called him 'the boss' because he respected him. Mind like a steel trap. Another cliché, which maybe explained why he was a better PI than reporter. It made him shitty to think of Challinor still working with Clare. Not that he minded the woman. She was decorative and a great cook. But he had the feeling that she doted on Challinor's blindness, loved the fact that she could look after him. Besides you could never relax around her, she was too intense. Challinor needed to relax. Driven, yeah; Paul Challinor won the gold for being driven.

Forty minutes and only one false lead later, Warren was behind a white van with a disabled sticker and a back that hinted at the wheelchair inside. Who'd ever suspect it of carrying a truckload of whores? He'd spotted it just as the driver was closing the side door, so all he knew so far was that there were three or four people in the back and a middle aged geezer in dark glasses, a neat shirt and brown trousers doing the driving. It was the end of peak hour and the delivery vans were fighting with mums and dads returning from dropping their kids at school and old buggers setting out for a day at bowls, but he'd stick with it as best he could.

The van trundled along and he was beginning to think they were on a joy ride when it nose-dived down a side street. Warren checked the sign and entered the name of into his voice recorder as he drove past. He knew the area and made an educated guess the van was aiming for the rear entrance of a well-known hotel. Warren did the block and watched. The van was out again within three or four minutes - no wheelchair in this drop-off - and on the road again. What spooked him was that it'd acquired a new sign: 'Stephano's Fine Foods'. As far as Warren could see, the disabled sticker had dropped from the face of the earth. A whole new image.

After another three similar entrances and exits he was whistling. This operation needed a neuroscientist to keep up with the brain behind it. Not only did the sign on the side of the van change, the number plates disappeared, were replaced and then reappeared. Serious money involved. He'd never've been able to keep a hold of any of it if he hadn't had a good gander at the driver in those first few minutes. The hat went on and off but the sunglasses never changed.

The street, hotel and business names were all recorded as he drove around. Challinor would want to check the authenticity of the businesses, whether there were any leads embedded in them. And he'd be able to get back to the hotels later to see if he could suss any info on who checked in, who visited - surely disabled people'd stick out like refugees in hijab - and who paid the bills. He'd need contacts, natch, and he had a few. Threads'd have to be drawn together. Time for a lunch break, then he'd check in with the boss.

3

Acrotomophilia is the term applied by medical professionals to an intense sexual attraction to persons who have an amputation. The word is derived from the Greek: akron, extremity + tomo, a cutting + -philia - word ending meaning love, or erotic and sexual love of a person, thing, or activity. A person who has acrotomophilia may be unattracted to people without amputations (although some cope by fantasising that their partner is, in fact, an amputee).

If Acrotomophilia is in its most extreme form, the person may not become aroused or achieve orgasm with any person who does not have an amputation.

Paul lifted his fingers from the page as the blast of another car horn hit his eardrums. The roads were choked.

"Lucky the bloody wind's died," the cab driver said, stamping on the brake, pulling the car out of the main lanes with a flourish of the rear wheels. Several more horns blasted. "Bugger off," he said, his voice directed to nowhere in particular.

Paul slipped the pages of Braille into his briefcase. The case was really a satchel, which could hang easily from his shoulder, allowing him a free hand when using his cane.

"You know mate, you don't look blind, specially in that coat. You look more like that guy in *The Matrix*, only you're blonde o'course. I hope you don't mind my saying."

Paul smiled half-heartedly. Because of both his height and his blindness he spent a lot of money on clothes. It was worth it for the comfort. He could only hope he looked good - or he could listen to cab drivers, who were always willing to comment. At least it avoided politics. There were a lot of very conservative taxi drivers these days. "You're not the first," he agreed.

On the footpath he stopped, assessing his surroundings. Now the westerly wind had softened, he needed to rely on the sun for direction. He put a hand up, feeling the concentration of heat on his left shoulder. Behind him the restless sounds of the Quay - with its clutter of buskers, passenger ferries, backpackers and busloads of tourists - funnelled up between the old stone buildings and bounced against the glass facades of the 1980s boom-time business centres. He

was glad he was blind in Sydney and not London or New York, where weather or architecture, or both, might defeat him.

The sandstone of the stairs crunched before giving way to the smoother paving of the Museum forecourt. Here talk reverberated and, folding his cane, Paul walked confidently forward. It was a casual café, designed for a quick lunch, so there were no waiters to show him to a table. For a moment he stood and listened intently, searching for a hiatus in the sound. A table to the left, in the sunshine, protected from the wind, attracted him. He was very surprised to find it wasn't empty.

"You startled me," a woman's voice said as he sat down.

He swore under his breath. "I often startle people," he responded aloud. What else was he to say? Besides, he was slightly amused by her tone.

"I'm large enough, you should have noticed me," she continued.

He wanted to smile now, or say something clever. Her voice was good - resonant but not heavy, tinged with irony. As he hesitated, a seagull, bored with scavenging the harbour shores, squawked and plummeted onto the table. She was probably eating, he conjectured, waving the bird away. "I didn't realise the table was taken," he said, unfolding his cane in preparation for leaving. He had no excuse to stay.

The intake of breath was contained but definite. She'd only just noticed the cane.

"Being blind is no excuse for rudeness," she said evenly. "You could have asked."

Someone brave enough to be neither over-polite nor solicitous? Very rare. "A fair comment," he said, the corners of his mouth lifting.

He heard her chair shift back, felt her eyes really look at him for the first time. "Are you always imperturbable?" she asked.

"I'm working on it. Makes life easier, but some people see it as being insensitive."

"Not as a challenge?"

"Not as a challenge, although I might enjoy that," he affirmed. "Are you always this forthright?"

Vocal delivery changes when the speaker smiles. He heard the grin in her voice. Was it a grin a sighted person would call wicked? "I can't claim to have worked on it. I was born rude, my mother always said."

A waitress arrived, radiating annoyance, as if customers should not be allowed. "Your coffee, madam."

"Damn," the woman said, the grin still there in her voice. "Now I'm really proven rude. I cross my heart I was going to cancel the coffee. Not because of your arrival but because it was taking so long and I'd ordered a hamburger and it was the most dishonest thing."

"A dishonest hamburger?"

"Well, the name was a scam. I wanted cheap meat, beetroot, and chips on the side, not a bun sprinkled with griddled herbs and seeds, and dressed with a rocket salad."

"Sounds delicious. Do you mind if I order while you're drinking your coffee? I'm starving."

"Why not? We seem destined."

Paul held out his hand, hoping his phone wouldn't ring, the waitress with the bored nonchalance would take her time with his order and the coffee was good after all. Flirting was supposed to be out of order in the post-feminist world, but it remained essentially extremely enjoyable. "My name's Paul, by the way."

She took his hand, shook it. "I'm Julia and looking at your arm reminds me I ought to go the gym more often." Her skin was fine and her grip firm.

"Good, perhaps we can arrange a time we could train together." He paused. "You see, I was thinking perhaps you were annoyed because I might be trying to pick you up."

"Are you trying to pick me up?" she asked, the laughter back in her voice.

"I wasn't then, I am now. You've already told me you like old-fashioned ways. Perhaps I could buy you another lunch?"

"Old fashioned? Oh, of course, the hamburger. The gull made off with most of it."

His phone rang. Nostalgia never lasted, not with modern communications around. Nodding his apology, he answered. Warren didn't bother with preliminaries. "It's a much better organised operation than the Pentagon, I can tell you. One hand actually seems to know exactly what the other is doing, and nothing leads to a centre."

"There must be a communication network."

"Yep, mobiles, no radios, nothing that can be easily intercepted."

"Anything I need to know right now?"

"You busy?"

"Yes."

"Got you. Just wanna know which way you want me to go. I can stop and ask a few pertinent questions of a few people I know or I keep in the slipstream of van and see if I can suss out who's handing over dough for services rendered. What'd you reckon?"

Paul thought for a moment. The clientele were clearly not the ordinary punters. Not just because of their particular sexual proclivities, but because the agency was not advertising, at least not through the usual channels. Knowing exactly who the clients were and how they'd reached the service, were essential to finding the brains, and the bankroll, behind the operation. But he never liked to direct Warren's operations too closely. "Follow your instincts," he replied. "My hunch is the van for now, but you know what you're doing."

"Got you, boss. Listen I'll email you some info. Names of businesses you gotta check, a few hotels you might want to find owners or managers for. I've got plenty to play with in the next coupla hours. Get back to me when you can."

"Fine. I've got a meeting to go to soon, I won't be too long." Paul put the phone down, listening. Was Julia attending to what he said? The warmth of her body disturbed the air around him. "I've turned the phone off," he said, "are we going to have that lunch?"

"But you have a meeting?"

She was testing him.

"It can wait," he replied.

Julia hesitated. There was the thick scent of a passing group of lunchers in their winter clothing, a gaggle of sounds: perhaps they were people she knew? Did she have a husband, or the more modern 'partner' - of whichever gender? Children perhaps?

"OK," she announced. "I'm happy to pretend to be Alice in another world. For lunch."

Outside the monolith of the CityWest shopping mall, Sonya was feeling good, although she wished she'd brought her coat. The one she had wasn't stylish enough for the agency, but soon she'd buy a new one, of fine Australian merino wool. It'd have deep pockets and big buttons that'd be easy for her to do up. Her earnings were neatly divided into portions; the first for her mother and father. She explained the income with a job she was supposed to have in a library, sorting books onto shelves. Her parents were proud that she

could read English so well and learn the strange practices of the quiet rooms. Sonya thought of the house she would buy them one day. Then they would be even more proud, and so would she.

The second portion of her money - the greater portion - was put into a secret account Avril had organised. Their escape fund, Avril called it, sometimes rubbing the key-card like it was the Aladdin's lamp from the children's story. Sonya didn't want a big house in an expensive suburb, but she did want to study. She wanted to be able to talk on the outside like she could in her head. That would get her out, in her own way.

She was waiting for her next pick-up to her next job. The van was late. Suddenly, a group of school children exploded from the automatic doors. She needed to keep her cool - as Avril would say - so she looked straight at them, kicking at the ground with her foot like she was an impatient mother waiting for her own child. Except she was too young. Big sister; she could pretend to be a big sister stuck out here because her little brother had run away to play the games in one of the electronic stores. Once upon a time she'd wanted to be an actress.

The children passed, a couple of them banging at her with their bags, because there were too many people on the pavement and they had to squeeze. Sonya looked down at the much smaller bag she carried. What was left of her earnings was stowed in there, the notes in a secret compartment behind the lipsticks and eyeliners and rubber things that Jim, who drove the van, called tools of trade. She leaned against the tiled wall. The thickness of notes was comforting. Avril counted her money more often than Sonya. Avril was her best friend, but Sonya imagined that there might be a day when she needed to be separate from her. Avril took risks. Sometimes, like the boy who had been her childhood neighbour, she smelled of danger. The boy had shot three men and one child before he was blown up. Two of the men were his uncles. They were on the wrong side.

Sonya was just about to go inside when she heard a shout behind her. A man had fallen over and was lying on his side. "I can't get up," the man called.

A couple of Muslim women stopped. Sonya watched one of them begin to hold out her hand. The second woman grabbed her friend, calling at her in a high voice. It was pretty clear she was warning her friend not to touch the man. For them, it was a bad thing to touch a man, a stranger, and they would be cursed by such behaviour. The first woman turned and met Sonya in the eyes. 'Help', the

beautiful young woman in the headscarf and thick blanket of clothes seemed to say to her. Sonya moved towards the man. The women faded away, the younger one looking her thanks over her shoulder.

His grasp on her arm was strong and she felt a rush of disgust. Too many men, too much touch. Her eyes narrowed. She'd seen this man before and more than once. In fact, she'd pointed him out to Avril. Spying was what he seemed to be doing.

"Ta," he said, and pulled himself up beside her. He didn't look very hurt.

"OK," she said and began to turn away.

"Could you hold my arm?" he asked.

"I wait for my friend," she said, looking toward the empty parking space, hoping he got the message. Avril was always saying this too. That bloke got the message, she would giggle, whenever she got a good tip or was asked to come back. Sonya wished Avril was there, now, this man was too close and his smell was sickly. It was the smell of a man too anxious, too intent.

"I just need to know where the nearest doctor is."

"OK. I am sorry. I ask." She headed for the door of the centre.

"Don't leave me. I might fall again, don't let me fall."

Sonya couldn't help herself; she stepped back, towards him. The man was smiling at her, looking into her eyes. She closed them; she didn't like his smile. He reached out for her, trying to grab her stump. She felt the movement and smelled his underarms, even though her eyes were closed and he wore a thick jacket. She pulled herself out of his reach: he didn't need help.

"No," she said firmly. "You OK. I go."

The shopping mall swiftly swallowed her and she was thankful of that. Internally she crossed herself. What would she say to Jim, who'd have to drive around a couple of times before he'd realise he needed to pick her up in a different place? Being frightened wasn't much of a reason for using the emergency plan, and Jim would be annoyed. He could make her feel bad and guilty and like she'd made a mess of things, but that was tough because, no matter what, she needed to get away from that man. His touch was still burning on her arm.

Julia Prettie flew down the sandstone steps and onto the footpath, nearly colliding with a group of tourists who were looking in every direction except the one the tour guide was indicating. She

threaded between them as quickly as she could, wondering if they were enjoying themselves as much as she'd just done, throwing a smile at anyone who met her eyes and looking cheerfully at the glimpses of glittering harbour to her right, before making her way into the sunless canyons of the central business district.

At the third set of pedestrian lights she was forced to stop, and stood, telling herself to concentrate, not think of the rather fabulous man she'd just been speaking with. Paul Challinor, the blind barrister. She knew about him. In court he was like a leopard pouncing, it was said. She'd imagined an older man, stooped, hooded, unnervingly silent. The real person was so unexpected. The powerful physical presence, the sensuous, laughing mouth, the graceful movement - almost swashbuckling: a pirate with a coat and sunglasses that a fashion magazine would dub "to die for." Not to mention the cleverness: that was enticing.

The lights changed. Julia reminded herself she'd donned her only suit, polished her nails, even buffed her briefcase, because she was about to go for a job interview that might change her life. She needed to think of the questions that might be asked, the informed answers she must give, the knowledge and connections she must display. She needed to be sensible. Yes, sensible.

Soon she halted again, this time outside a shining, black-faced office block, so sleek and powerful it'd been used as a set in an internationally famous film trilogy. It didn't readily fit as the head office of a charitable organization; although this was a philanthropic group rather than a charity; big business, big bucks. She entered and crossed the polished marble floor, pressing the button for the lift as if she was sure of where she was going and in a hurry to get there. And - she told herself while checking her hair in the mirrored wall of the lift - she did know exactly what she was doing. This was the real world, aid money wasn't coming from governments any longer, and the piddling amounts that did went to so-called infrastructure projects that feathered the nests of the 'donor-country' corporations. Bridge building provided at best indirect benefit to people in need of basics like water, sanitation, literacy, anti-HIV drugs and a life less infested with conflict and strife. The private sector had to contribute and she could help harness resources that'd otherwise go into grander and grander waterfront homes or higher share dividends. Julia straightened her jacket and stepped out of the lift, trying not to raise her eyebrows

at the marble reception desk, the virtually matching young woman behind it.

She was shown to a room rich with the tones of a rug – Persian or near enough – which dominated a kauri-pine floor, although the wood itself was nothing more than a thin surface, a floating floor over the concrete of the new building. Julia picked up *The Financial Review*. No copies of the Oxfam or even Greenpeace magazines here.

“Bit of a crisis.” Oscar – a colleague and drinking companion from her university days – suddenly pushed his head around the door to say to her. “We’ll be right with you as soon as we’ve been on the phone to you-know-who.” He left in an apparent rush.

Julia tapped her fingers against her briefcase. She had no idea who. She was about to ring for the receptionist, to ask politely for information, when Oscar returned.

“So pleased you were able to come. We need some new blood here.” He sat down next to her. “And with your attributes, you’ll have all the old boys swinging from the trees, handing over the cash.” He accompanied this a solid stare at her legs and with the weakly lascivious look she remembered too well from barroom evenings.

Julia edged one foot toward Oscar’s trouser leg, and flicked up the fine fabric as high as possible. “I see you still don’t shave *your* legs,” she said quietly.

“Oo, Julia, you haven’t changed a bit.” Oscar was red under his five o’clock shadow. “Do tell me how dear old Philip is?”

Philip? That brought her up with a shock. What has she been thinking? She was a committed, married woman and she’d just spent her lunchtime completely ignoring that fact. More than ignoring it really.

Oscar was rabbiting on, so the shock mustn’t be showing on her face. “There are times,” he was saying, “when I’m surprised he lets you out of the house. Always got the impression he’d like to keep you in a castle.”

“Me? In a castle? Oscar, what are you talking about?”

Oscar raised an eyebrow in a gesture he used to practise in the mirror that’d hung, smeared and hazy, behind the bar in the university pub. Julia thanked whatever god or grain of common sense was responsible for the fact she’d never had sex with him.

“Well, my dear,” Oscar was saying, “I know you’ve always considered yourself earthy, what with coming from the wrong side of the tracks and digging in with the ideologically sound charitable

sector for all these years. Nevertheless Philip has always treated you like a princess."

It wasn't the time to discuss the ethical pros and cons of working in the various international aid sectors, nor to deal with Oscar's politics of innuendo. "Philip's taken an office in the city," she said.

The fine eyebrows lifted again. "What is his new endeavour then?"

"Oscar," Julia interrupted, indicating her watch, "I have another meeting at 4:30, and I really can't be late."

Then she was being ushered into the interview, which was only a formality, as her acceptance had already been indicated, but which was, for some unaccountable reason, making her wonder what she was doing with her life.

4

Ian wasn't sure how he'd ended up looking after a group of retards. Not that he'd call them that publicly. Liable to get him fired, even though 'people with developmental and intellectual disabilities' took a bloody hour to say. It wasn't as if he didn't like the residents. He was pretty fond of the buggers, 'specially Dave and Graham. Didn't matter that they had big, floppy tongues and bellies to match, they enjoyed a laugh and were pretty cool if he was in a foul mood. Came up and hugged him. That was outside the department's rules too. Any touching was, which made for some weird interactions. Touch was comforting. Nice.

Jean was a bit more complicated. She didn't have Down's Syndrome like the others. Instead of being born disabled, something had happened to her. Brain damage, the details of which were shrouded in mystery. A family secret, it was whispered, but no one really knew for sure. Least of all Jean, with her fine, curly hair, loud giggle and almost complete lack of real speech. She gabbled on, but it was impossible to understand her. She'd gabble in the shower, in the toilet, in her room, anywhere she was private. Doctor assured them she wasn't schizophrenic or whatever. Hard to believe sometimes, it was like she was talking to a mate. Quieter at the table and like bloody frozen waxworks when asked what she meant, or asked to repeat herself or explain or whatever. Looked at you like you was the loony, not her. Jean wasn't as popular with the staff in general - not as tractable as the boys, if the truth be told - but she attached herself to them. She'd attached herself to one in particular, in fact, and that'd led to the bloody trouble they were in now.

He reminded himself he oughta go in. Legal stuff gave him the shits but he'd have to face it soon. Danny, the fool, had put in a complaint against Jean. For harrassment. For pity's sake, the woman didn't have a clue what the word meant. She'd grabbed Danny's crotch, so what? Just 'cause she was retarded didn't mean she wasn't looking for a roll in the hay. Ian was willing to bet a month's pay no one else'd propositioned Danny in years. But it was like that, the disability service world. A Luna Park of moralists who thought if you were retarded you didn't need a good bonk; pockmarked with family

secrets; a sacred citadel for workers who wanted haloes and couldn't get them except by caring for someone who couldn't protest.

Ian crushed his cigarette, before digging it into the dirt mound that passed as a garden. Habit he'd learned when working with maddies, who spent a lot of time looking for the tail-end of fags. Bumpers, they called 'em. That was in the institutions. Places were decimated these days, a few pathetic souls left like old lags at Port Arthur. No more pool tables and discos and hang-about with their mates; stuck in piddling suburban boxes now, no more fun. Not even allowed to smoke in some places. Poor bastards, a bit of a smoke was the last thing to do them harm.

One of the neighbours turned her car awkwardly into the driveway next door. She grimaced at him through the tinted glass. The neighbours hated the staff nearly as much as they hated the residents. Lowered the tone of the area. Ian resisted the desire to give the woman the finger. Instead he dragged his keys from his pocket, preparing to go inside. With the keys came the card he'd been handed the day before at the local area meeting. A suggestion of work, interesting work, with big dollars possible. An attached note warned not to ask too many questions and to forget quite where he got the card. Which was easy enough as he found it in his folder after the tea break at a staff training session and didn't have a clue who put it there. The thought of easy work and more money was attractive, so he replaced the card very carefully in his pocket. He'd ring soon as he had the chance.

They drove down the freeway at exactly the speed limit. Jim always stuck like glue to whatever the sign said, under orders, Sonya guessed, to never attract attention. In Sydney, where people thought it was their duty to break road rules, it had the opposite effect. Cars whooshed either side of them, cutting in to the lane in front of them. Drivers beeped or blasted the horn, flashed their lights, tailgated them. The slight anarchy sometimes worried Sonya. On the other hand it showed a lack of fear, which cheered her.

Today they headed for Darling Harbour. At least that's what it looked like when they drove along the City-West link and over the big new bridge. She liked the bridge, with its simple concrete pylons soaring to the sky. It was like the people - brazen and confident. She wondered if she'd ever be able to describe these things out loud, to say in English what she could say in her head. The man pretending

to fall over in front of her made her think she would practise more. A different kind of job was important.

"I don't like it here," Avril announced as they took the slip road off the bridge. "There's only families and foreigners. Am I doing a job for a foreigner?"

Jim didn't respond.

Avril pulled a mirror from her handbag, carefully checked her makeup, and then offered the mirror to Sonya. "Mind," she said, "the foreigners are better tippers than the Aussies. They're bloody hopeless, doesn't matter what part of town their bloody homes 'rin. Nah, take that back, it's cause they live in them bloody great mansions. Only way they can afford their rates and insurance is to be mean in every bloody way possible. I'm gunna be diff'rent." She looked at Jim, who gave no appearance of listening, before leaning closer to Sonya. "Got a customer wants some private service," she whispered. "Cash in hand, taxi money, and he don't want much, I can tell you. Easy bloody work. Just looks and looks and looks then jerks himself off."

The van swung into a car park. Sonya stopped herself reminding Avril that the men who just looked were the ones they'd been told to be most wary of. They were told the voyeurs could explode in other ways. She thought about the man who fell over in front of her. He was doing too much watching.

"Just Avril," Jim said, sliding the door open.

"See you s'arvo." Avril grinned at Sonya as Jim helped her out. "Just lie back and think of the dollars," she added, laughing.

Sonya's stomach was queasy as she watched Avril go. Keeping Avril safe was not easy when they were separated.

Ten minutes later Jim pulled up outside an apartment building. One of the new ones, with jutting verandas of different sizes and shapes, and roofs that flipped up in the opposite direction so that the rain would run back toward the building, not fall off into the street. Odd, but perhaps the water was collected somehow and used. That would be a good thing.

Jim came to the side of the van.

"Why are we stopping here?"

"S'where y'going."

"This is not hotel."

"Nah. Now Sonnie, don't ask me the ins and outs, if you see what I mean. I jus' follow orders, y'know that."

"There will be phone in room? Reception?"

Jim just shrugged, held out his hand for her to get out of the van.

Sonya hesitated. They'd been promised the work was always in places where they could summon help if need be. This wasn't an ordinary escort agency, they were told over and over again. We expect the clients to behave as well as you girls do, they said; any bad business and there's always back-up. There was no back-up in a private apartment building. Especially not the expensive, thick walled, sealed-door style she was entering now. Privacy was paid for at premium rates in a place like this.

Jim pressed the intercom buzzer and ushered her toward the lift. "Fifth floor. Only one flat to a floor, so you'll be right. I'll be downstairs in an hour and a half. Might be a bit extra for you in this one, I hear." He gently pushed her in as the lift doors opened.

The man who greeted her was tall and well built with a moustache. Not many men, except gay ones, had moustaches these days and this man was quite young. Sonya wondered if it were fake. "Stephen, call me Stephen," he said, and offered her a drink. Very polite, like she was special. Many of them treated her like that, as if she was made out of crystal. It took them ten minutes or so before they showed they wanted to smash her.

"In there you will find a dress I need you to wear. Naturally I am happy to help you with the clasps. You should call me when you are ready as there are quite a lot of them." He put a hand, almost too gently, in the small of her back and propelled her toward a half-open door.

It was a bedroom but it didn't feel lived in. There were no smells and the furniture lacked any except the most carefully chosen ornaments. Even rich people couldn't live without a tiny bit of junk that was just theirs and would never be seen in a magazine. On the bed was a dress. Sonya held her breath. She had seen it before, this dress. Seen it in pictures in her own country and then again when she came to Australia. It was a dress made for a queen. For Queen Elizabeth the first, the Virgin Queen. The dress took up the whole bed and would've cost so much money. Her breathing came out short and rapid now.

There was no sound from the other rooms. Where had the man, Stephen, gone? He wasn't outside the door, she was sure of that, but there could be a spy hole in the room. Or a tiny camera. She knew that some of the clients had clever devices to record what went on. The agency did everything they could to prevent it. Nothing should be given for free. At least that meant there were not men viewing and reviewing her image over and over again but this time she was not in a hotel and the rules were different.

She lifted the dress with her one hand. There was no choice. It was heavy, very heavy. Her own clothes were designed for ease of removal. In this one area, the wishes of the clients and her needs met - they both wanted clothes that came off with one movement of one hand. This dress was determined to make her fully dependent. As quickly as she could, she put it on. Otherwise she would be waiting even longer to know what game the man was playing.

"I am ready," she called, when the bodice was pressed against her breasts and the skirt shivered around her like an animal that might swallow its prey.

Stephen came in. He had a small hook in his hands. "For the clasps, madam," he said, bowing as if she were truly royalty. He indicated that she should turn around and she felt the back of the dress being gradually pulled together. His hands did not touch her skin.

"Now, come." Again he half-bowed, shepherding her to the door with the gesture.

Inside the next room it was dark, with thick blinds obscuring all the daylight and only three candles lit. In the middle of the room was a chair, a huge chair, on a raised platform. There was a small set of stairs to enable her to climb into the chair, which was shaped and decorated as a throne. It made her sweat having to do this.

As soon as she was seated Stephen dashed from the shadows and arranged the dress, lifting and folding and rearranging the skirt. Withdrawing if his hands came too near her skin.

"Now, let there be light." He snapped his fingers and lights came on, fine beams from all parts of the room, including the floor, so that she was illuminated from feet to her head. One bright beam in her eyes. She could see nothing herself. Except that the dress shone blood red and her scars and her stump were glowing.

"Stay!" It was a command. "Do not move. You are a queen and a queen knows the power of stillness. A queen can remain still for many, many hours. As you will learn to do."

An hour and a quarter, she wanted to remind him. That's the rest of what you've paid for, Jim will be back then. He'll ring the bell, come up, bang on the door if I am not waiting for him. He is Australian, he will even break the rules, ring the police if he has to. Or so she hoped.

The man was behind her. She couldn't see him because of the lights and the deep web of darkness they held at bay. She could feel him, and hear the rasping of his breath. This was a sound she recognised. Soon the pace would increase and the rasping would have an edge to it. Like a dog, she thought, a whine like a dog. He would have that soon, they all did.

"Tell me about your injury. Tell me how you obtained it."

This was not an uncommon demand and she had stories that she could recite to suit the occasion. They didn't reflect the truth, although the horror and blood and violence she described were real enough. She began to speak.

"No. Do not give me facts and figures, who did it. I want to know how the ground felt as you fell upon it, how the stones cut into your flesh, what you thought about as you lay beside the putrid meat of corpses, their shit befouling you, how you dragged yourself across fields of spent mortars and cartridges and flesh, knowing that you were bleeding to death, to a place which you thought would offer safety, but where all you could look upon was more defiled bodies, distorted, pierced, broken far worse than your own."

His breathing rate was increasing as he spoke. Sonya heard another sound. Slapping. He was slapping himself. Not his private parts but his head and his arms and his stomach. Beating his own fist into his stomach. Beating and groaning and beating again. Dear Mother of God, she prayed, do not let him kill himself.

"Speak, speak," he screamed.

She spoke, trying to make it up, trying to pretend it hadn't happened to her. But it had. Just like he said, it had happened. Her revulsion, her fear, the disgust she had at her own quiet acceptance, all surfaced and threatened to suffocate her. But she must not move. The slightest twitch of her arm - which she could not readily control - was noticed and he screamed and he beat harder. At himself, so that she was more frightened he would die.

The dress was strangling her. She kept talking, at the same time telling herself to think, to make sense of the mass of this man's perversions. A virgin queen, a lighted throne, the talk of blood, the illumination of her injury, the punishment. Was she to be a sacrifice? Was this the bizarre connection in the man's mind?

Sonya had no idea how long she'd been there. The beating didn't stop, the rasping was growing louder, he was asking her questions, severing her from the sanity she'd maintained so well for so long. Tears were making mud of the makeup on her face and still he persisted and persisted and persisted. What was this like, what was that, don't move, remember you are a queen, commander of the sword, remember the blood that was not yours alone.

She could not go on, the heat of the lights, the weight of the dress, the fear of the darkness, the intensity of the sounds. She would soon sink into a state of semi-consciousness. She had done this before, when her arm was severed. This time she might never fully awaken.

And then, he was there in front of her, the effect of the lights giving him a chest but no head. Clothed, he was still clothed. "Stop," he said, his voice suddenly indescribably soft. "Look." Swiftly he undid his trousers and let them cascade to his feet. "Look," he said again.

Sonya looked. What else could she do? She saw scars, small, healed and hellish. His penis had been cut. And stumped. Scars like her own, a tiny but gaping hole made - by what? a pen knife? - to allow the urine through.

"I was in the peace-keeping force," he said matter-of-fact now. "Your brothers or your relatives or your friends did this to me."

Her impulse was to cross herself but she felt this might be a danger. It was clear this man had no time for the simple rituals of hope.

"You can go now. Our time is up. Go to the bedroom, I will help you out of the dress."

He showed her to the lift. Quietly. "You will come again." It was a statement, not a question. The fear left from Bosnia would never be the same again.

5

By next morning the wind was threatening to settle in like a relative determined to make a long visit. The street crowds were thick, their sounds muffled with extra layers of wool, fake fur and other dense materials that had been closeted away since last winter. The smell of mothballs was strong and the threat, particularly for Paul, of collision was high. He was relieved when he arrived in the warmth of his chambers. He sat back in his chair, enjoying the peace, thinking of his accidental lunch the day before with the attractive Julia Prettie.

After a minute or so he straightened: there was a brief to attend to, and he wanted to speak with Warren first. The meeting with the disability advocates hadn't netted much information; everyone was disclaiming any association with the escort agency. Yet, the probability was that there was a mole or a pimp in the disability networks, someone who was giving over names and addresses of people who might want to earn extra cash, no training required, the body the only essential qualification. It wasn't as if there was a ready identifiable cohort of people with physical disabilities out on the streets, eagerly awaiting recruitment to the sex industry. Paul checked with 'Women Wear Wheels', the group that ran the refuge for battered women with disabilities. Another threat received the night before. This time a Barbie doll with its breasts slashed.

He rang Warren, who was slow to answer. In the background was the sound of children. Warren occasionally mentioned his kids but Warren as a father was an incongruous concept. Paul imagined him with head hunched into shoulders, voice emitting from a studiously unsmiling mouth - not throwing a ball to a bunch of kids. "Are you at home?" he asked.

"Yeah, just getting the kids ready for school, Karen had to go off early. Don't worry, I'll be chipping at the coalface soon."

"I'm not sure down the mine is the place I'd expect to find you, although I guess you're able to use the dark. Speaking of which, did you go out last night, have you heard any rumours on the street?"

"Bitta both. I've been across the bridge and back a half dozen times - those North Shore types are eager little buggers - and to the eastern suburbs more often than a Pommy backpacker. I reckon you're not far off the mark about there being a hornet's nest. Only it might be wasps of the killer variety. I'll tell you in more detail when I haven't got a sticky dragging my sanity away."

"A sticky?"

"A kid under 16. Sticky fingers, no self control. Did'y get those names I emailed you, from the side of the van?"

"False or untraceable names, possible addresses - that smart mix of real and fake that's difficult to untangle. Later on I'll speak with a mate of mine who may be able to help sort some of them out. There's a couple of shelf companies, which are my job. I know a solicitor who specialises in selling two-dollar companies - for a lot more money than that. I'll give you more details, too, when you've got more time."

"And attention and sanity. Soon as I off-load the little blighters, I'm off to the west again. Later on I've got a meeting with Lexi. Is there anything else you think I should do immediate-like?"

Paul took a few seconds to consider. Gut feelings were the stuff of crime fiction and detectives who couldn't find any evidence, or were too lazy to look. Trouble was that he had one. Or, more realistically, there was a suggestion in the increasing number of mutilated dolls being left on the doorstep that the anger, disgust, or whatever it was that warped the mind from which they originated, was escalating and could soon be out of control. As well as that, the refusal of the police to deal with the agency, their pretence that it was irrelevant to the attempted murder, made it clear that something could, or would, go badly awry before any action was taken by the authorities. "I think what you're doing now is the best bet," he said slowly. "What do you hope Lexi might be able to help with?"

"Could be long odds, but you know how she's out in the field, keeping an eye on the workers. I figure she's the one who'll've heard the goss."

Paul nodded to himself. The world needed more women like Lexi. She'd done her time in the industry and now she protected the street-workers as fiercely as she guarded her own daughter. "Good idea," he replied.

His secretary came in noisily, dropping a pile of papers on his desk. There was another efficient Braille machine in her office but

sometimes she liked to let him know it was extra work for her to use it. He nodded his thanks to her, waiting for her to leave. "Given that, maybe it's possible for you to ask her to, ah, utilise her connections to unearth a couple of workers who might be willing to have a chat with Clare or myself? I realise it'll be delicate."

"Call me Roger Moore."

"Wasn't Bond always blowing up boats or cars?"

"Bond was just cheap trickery. Roger Moore was also 'The Saint'. That's me, here with the wee children. It might take longer than a builder's smoko - and cost around the same - but I'll get you there."

"Thanks, don't know what I'd do without you. I'm going to see Clare soon, so cc any emails here and at home. If you find anything more quickly than expected, you have my mobile number."

'Gottya. Talk to you soon."

Paul turned in his chair to face the brittle sunlight that pierced the window. He took off his dark glasses, letting his retinas detect the very little they could. He had occasional, tantalising breaks in the blankness. He again allowed the memory of Julia Prettie to slip into his consciousness. A seductive voice. Then he set himself to concentrate on the investigation. He would speak with Harry Montague. From the level of activity Warren had already tracked, it was clear there was some very serious money being invested and laundered and Harry Montague was a solicitor who might just - unwillingly - help him find out how.

Snow was reported in the mountains, although it wasn't sticking. Paul dug his head into the wind and wrapped the scarf more securely around his neck, thankful of his dark glasses; at least one part of his face was protected. His knock on Clare's door was hard, to be heard above the bluster.

"You haven't been here for a while," she said, flatly enough to make several interpretations possible.

"No. Can I come in? - the wind's excessive out here."

He felt her reach for him and flinched. She'd never understand that he could find his own way. Particularly into the house in which he had lived for six years.

"How're the renovations?" he asked, walking down the hallway.

"Good, the new bathroom's going in next week. I'll show you where later. Paul, why are you here?"

The question surprised him. She'd suggested they meet at the house, rather than at her office. She was distracted, and his impulse was to ask why, what's wrong, can I help? It was a trap he set for himself, tumbling through the soft leaves of her unspoken needs, back into the painful pit of the relationship. He would avoid it this time. "To talk about your contact and what I've found out so far," he answered prosaically. He moved his hand out to find the couch. Its position had changed. "Where do I sit down?" he asked.

"Right. A metre." A floorboard creaked as she moved to the wicker chair she preferred. He imagined her curling her taut body into it. "I'm sorry, I'd kind of forgotten. You'd better take it from the top."

He sat back on the familiar couch and described what Warren had seen, what traces he'd been able to find of the various names and companies attached to the van. It was difficult to keep talking, with Clare sitting so silently. Not even the wicker of her chair whispered.

"Mike says the guy's going to plead guilty to a lesser charge," she finally volunteered. "He's claiming he accidentally dropped Melanie – that's the young woman's real name this time – out of her chair when he was taking her back to the station. God knows why he thought going that way through the park was going to lead to the station. Anyway, he says that when she fell out and rolled down the hill, he ran. He couldn't bear it. He couldn't bear what he'd done." She moved now; he heard the resistance of the cane. Her tone was bitter. "Apparently he meant he couldn't bear thinking of having had sex with Melanie. Men seem to find sex more shameful than murder."

"Is he going to plead under mental health?"

"You got it. He has a paraphilia, he says, he's not under control. Can't stop himself, has to have women who can't move their lower halves. Has to have a frozen pussy, is what Mike reports."

"Don't know who'll conduct that defence. Do you have any more details of which hotel or of how the meeting was arranged?"

"No. Melanie can't tell them any more than she did at the first interview. She was taken in through a back entrance, and an underground car park, straight up in the service lift. The décor was expensive. The perp says he was dropped off by a friend who gave him a room key, he didn't note the name of the hotel."

"Christ, how ridiculous. I suppose he says the friend arranged it all and now this convenient friend's left the country."

"He has a lot of friends, our perp. In high places, naturally. Mike's getting everything word of mouth and we're lucky to have any of it."

From the house next-door came the sudden sound of a television switched on, the volume too high. The home Paul had shared with Clare was the end of a terrace of mid-Victorian vintage. Not too many gargoyles, a small balcony and a courtyard with space enough to grow herbs and house Clare's exercise bike. The rooms were decent-sized and Paul liked the layout for its orderliness and predictability. The lack of imagination and the noise of the neighbours, who were a gay couple with a part-time child and a fondness for late-night gatherings, were the down sides. Out of habit, he waited for the television to be adjusted - there'd been a problem with their remote control for years.

"Clare, I have to ask, what's going on? I get the feeling you're upset by more than this crime?"

Again, only the slightest of movements. She was really holding herself in - or together. "Oh, Paul, leave it. I'm sorry, I appreciate you asking and I understand I'm being bloody difficult. Call it PMT or hormones."

She rose, offered him a coffee, made no comment on his refusal, went to the kitchen to get one for herself. "Don't worry, I'll be professional and get on with all of this. This agency can't go on, someone will get hurt. I didn't believe that it was that important at first - but what if one of those young women is taken into a room with no disability access and abandoned to some fool with an obsession? She'd be far more trapped than most of us would."

Her distress was stinging and he remembered that he'd loved her sincerity, the strength of her emotions, her willingness to take on a cause with a fervour and dedication he was sure he could never match. An impulse to hold her crossed his mind. He put his fingers to his lips, considering his words, keeping the impulse to himself. Old habits, old loves. Nostalgia didn't satisfy the appetite, he reminded himself. Isn't that what he'd said to Julia?

"I've got Warren onto the job. He's like the proverbial terrier and won't let go until he's really made his mark. As you said, there are incidents of all kinds happening - and Warren's just the person to follow the leads."

"Paul, are you spending another small fortune of your own money on this?"

"Just a reasonable percentage of the outrageous amount I get paid."

"You get paid that because you're so good."

"Thanks. We both know no one else is going to bother with funding this and, if they did, it'd be a bureaucratic nightmare, or have all the usual problems brought about by a well-meaning group stultified with in-fighting. They wouldn't be employing Warren, that's certain."

"Thought it was me who really pushed this kind of advocacy. Now we're - now you're... Shit. Anyway, now you're more dedicated than I am."

It was there again, the swirling uncertainty in her voice. Small uncomfortable movements; the chair, the soft rustle of her clothing. It was cruel perhaps, but he was enjoying a deep sense of release. He could feel sympathy if Clare were sad, despondent, but not if that hurt concerned himself. He thought of Julia: her voice filled with laughter: 'Are you trying to pick me up?' He could never have participated in that conversation six, even three months before. Clare was dimming in his mind, and heart.

As he stood up, he said: "Take care of yourself," trying to have his tone convey something - sympathy, empathy? Nothing more, no regret. "I know I - we all - can trust you."

She left him to walk to the door alone, which was a small acknowledgement of finality.

6

Warren meandered along Darlinghurst Road like any other interstate tourist checking out which strip club he might go to after he'd had a bite to eat. It was an odd story this one about devotees. Warren could only hope Lexi had flashing lights and bells in her head about it. At least know more than he'd been able to find out so far. Lexi'd turned up some good info for Paul before and Warren figured she'd taken a bit of a shine to the boss. It was a left-field thought but maybe a bit of matchmaking'd was in order.

At this time of day the sex-workers were strolling down to the grocers, selecting their fruit and vegetables for the dinner many of them'd cook in a neat little kitchen before starting their evening. School kids were everywhere, some just gawking, others on their way, in a desultory adolescent fashion, to homes in the more salubrious parts of Potts Point or Elizabeth Bay. Warren recognised a couple of them, kids he'd seen peddling poor quality marijuana outside one of the local schools. He eyed them for a few seconds and they melted in among the young men who gathered in groups, their running shoes unlaced, their shirts untucked, with rigid faces and tight arms stuck into pockets. Poor bastards, he thought; if you grew up in the suburbs you couldn't call yourself a man till you'd been to the Cross and shown you could make it. Even with the brothels in the suburbs, even with girls as eager to try as the blokes, not to mention the internet. Weird.

Gradually he made his way to the fountain. Lexi lived nearby but it was worth his PI licence to be seen knocking at her door. The signal was for him to ring a number, not wait for her or her flatmate to answer and to walk one way round the fountain and then back again. Act like he was a bloke trying to decide whether to have a quickie without his wife's permission. It was kinda corny, which appealed to him.

Alexi appeared, her kneecaps frizzled with cold, her top half encased in a short, acrylic leopard-look coat. She waltzed past him, chewing gum, and sat, one leg flung over the other, on the edge of the fountain. Lexi hadn't been on the game for years, she sold connections and meetings and information and provided care for the

women around her, but she sure knew how to play the classic part. Fortunately the great puffball of a fountain wasn't going. If it was, sitting where she was, she'd be auditioning for an underwater shot.

Warren walked away from her, across the grotty paving stones to the narrow strip of sodden grass. Then back again, this time sitting down beside her. She chewed her gum harder, looked him up and down and grinned.

"Wanna walk?" she asked. "I'll shout you a coffee."

They headed down the main drag, in the opposite direction from where she lived. Lexi walked slightly ahead, giving the appearance of leading her client, until they reached the other side of Darlinghurst Road.

"So, how's things, Lex?" Warren asked when he sussed it was cool to catch up with her.

"Pretty good. Tina's doing real good at school. She loves the bloody uniform and made me buy her those leather shoes we used to hate so much. Bata Ponytails, they were in my day, and still are. Don't know what the boys' version was."

"Me neither; didn't come from that sort of family. My kids like school, too, though I reckon Louis'll get himself into trouble later on. Motor mouth, that kid."

Alexi grinned. "It's good to see you, Waz."

"You too."

The coffee shop was buzzing with people who mostly knew each other. Warren and Lexi both lifted an eyebrow in greeting here and there.

"Only place in town I don't have to get a double shot," Warren said, referring to the coffee, which came out with a thick, luscious crema.

"There's others, one or two in less dramatic parts of town."

"Thought you never left the Cross."

"What a boy doesn't know. Anyway, what've you got for me today?"

"I'm looking into a new service in town. A mobile one. Not run locally, s'far as I can work out, but figured you'd be the person to know someone who knows someone. The workers all have - um - pretty unusual credentials. Amputees, chair users, that sort of thing. The clients call themselves devotees."

"You doing this for the sexiest man alive by any chance?"

Warren grinned. "Myself, you mean. Nah, you're on the money."

"Guarantee me a drink with him and I'll do it."

"I've got a possibility in mind, but what do you know about this devotee stuff?"

'Nah, don't bother. He spends too much time working for my taste. I like a man who has a bit of fun. Although, I reckon Paul could have it if he found the right girl - but that's not me. He's a bloke who'd find talking about Descartes relaxing. His girl'd have to have real class and real brains."

"You've got class, Lex. And brains." Warren wasn't trying to be sleazy; he and Lex shared a similar view of the world.

"Yeah, pigs take showers, and Australia is a classless society. It's no problem, I wouldn't want his life any more'n he'd want mine. Gees I need a ciggie, there's bloody laws against everything these days. Everyone says all this shit about flexibility and individuality but you can't breathe without a friggin' law telling you not to."

Warren peered over the head of a junkie who'd fallen asleep bolt upright, through the murky window, to the street. A couple of tables out there shaking in the wind, chairs with shining spots of rain. He hoped Lexi could last without a fag for a few minutes longer.

"Boss's looking for someone he can talk to. One of the workers maybe. Can you put one of your elegant little tentacles out?"

"Sure, anything to be described as elegant. It'll take a bit of time, I reckon. You got any details on this agency?"

"Main business is out of a van and into a smart hotel." He covered a few more details.

She whistled. "Clever. I'll see if I can have a chat with a few of the local girls, see what they've heard and kept under wraps. I'll go from there." She surveyed the people around her. "There's a specialist shop," she added, "which might be connected. It's more under the counter than most around here these days. Double plastic bags, and both of them black. I hear you need a secret password to get hold of some of it. I've taken a peek into the shop a few times, just to get some idea of what's going on. It's a bit like something out of an old Mad magazine. They sell loads of stuff that you could buy in one of those prosthesis shops - callipers for your legs, wheelchairs, crutches, those false arm things that look like they're out of Captain Hook." She stopped and fiddled and patted the pockets in her jacket. "Hey, let's go out and have a ciggie."

"It'd freeze the balls of a brass monkey out there."

"Your wife'll thank me for a quiet night."

The smattering of rain stung his face but it wasn't all that long since he'd joined the ranks of the reformed, so he couldn't complain too much. As they sat down Lexi described bondage equipment specially designed for wheelchairs, jewelled clasps for leg stumps and skin-tight sheaths that held an arm doubled back, apparently giving the elbow the appearance of a badly healed amputation. "Of course, there's clothing too - even sequinned pussy suits for dwarfs, believe it or not."

"Do you know the creeps who run this place?"

"I know a guy who works there. I might be able to find out who runs it, it's never bothered me before."

"What about the clientele?"

"What'd you'd expect, from what I've seen. Maybe a bit older than most, not many pimple-faces. I've seen a couple of chicken-up-the-arse kinda blokes going in. You know, expensive suits, bum cheeks squeezed. It's funny really, these days they can get anything they want through the net, but some of them only seem to get excited when they think they're slumming it among the truly squalid. The local working girls say so anyway."

"Are they doing any massage, escorting or whatever as well?"

"There's the usual range of ads up around the place and I know there some girls and a few of the guys who're into dressing up, but I don't know if they're getting work through the shop. Want me to find out?"

Good, and don't forget what the boss's ordered, someone he can talk to."

Lexi stubbed out her second cigarette, lounged back in her chair, pouted her lips. "Wouldn't want to let the boss down," she said, then laughed and straightened up. "Gotta go. Clarrie's cooking night tonight, but she wants to go out, so I gotta get back to Tina. When I can get my nose out of the homework I'll see what I can turn up. Hey, how come parents have to do so friggin' much these days? My old lady never did this kinda thing."

"Maybe you're just a better ma than your old lady was."

Alexi gave Warren a thumbs-up. "The thing I like about you, Wazza, is you know what really matters to a girl. Be seeing you."

The dark was punctuated by the travelling beams of trucks on the dock. Julia hugged herself away from the man who lay next to her and noted that it was unusual to have so much activity at night. Most

dock work was automated now. She turned as quietly as she could, to better see out of the window, to more effectively distract herself from the nightmare she'd woken from.

Oranges and lemons, say the bells of St Clements. The singsong voice ran over and over in her head. *Here comes the candle to light you to bed, here comes the chopper...* A scream would help, she thought, the sort of scream only a child has the audacity to emit. A scream of pure, unquestioned, undiluted, emotion. All she could do was think.

The body beside her exhaled and shifted, pulling the doona so that her legs were uncovered. The discomfort was good, the chopper retreated, axe still in hand. Julia turned again, making out the outline of her husband. He'd been pleased with himself lately. A new business venture, going very well. Better than working in the law, he said, although now and then she thought he missed the intellectual debate. Philip turned again and she caught the roughness of night breath, the smell of his late night whisky. Not a bad idea, she said to herself, pushing the doona to the side, and slipping out of bed cautiously enough not to wake him.

The worn, smooth cedar of the stairs cupped her feet in their central hollows. Their attic bedroom was an extension and the staircase recycled from a grander home in the eastern suburbs: Philip was proud of it. It was his thing, the renovation. Julia reached the bottom of the stairs and turned right toward the dining room. No whisky. She tried the living room and the kitchen, taking care not to clatter: Philip was a light sleeper. The whisky – they always had a bottle on hand – must be in his study. A floorboard creaked as she passed the base of the stairs and put her hand on the doorknob. She was reminded of her earlier dream. The candle lighting her to bed, the chopper chopping off her head.

7

Harry Montague's new offices were in the better part of town. Harry was not a solicitor who passed briefs to Paul, but his secretary recognised him immediately. The secretary – Brian, as he introduced himself – fussed around in an irritating manner, explaining that Harry wouldn't want to keep Paul waiting, but he was with an important client who'd overstayed her welcome, just a teeny little. Paul couldn't decide whether Brian was worried about professional hierarchies or the fact that an infirm person was sitting in the waiting area.

One reason Harry didn't pass Paul briefs was a simple one – Harry's area was company and corporation law, a field which bored Paul more than television with the sound turned down. The other reason – which would have applied no matter what – was that Harry distrusted him. Like many solicitors – and coppers, court reporters and criminals – Harry saw the law as an adversary that could, if tamed, make him a lot of money. The law as a means of guiding social behaviour made no sense to him at all. So Harry provided services to those who might otherwise have difficulty finding a good lawyer. Which was exactly why Paul was there.

When he was finally shown in, Harry was short on his handshake and quick to return to his seat. He leant back in his chair – Harry was a big man and the stress on the mechanism was audible. Paul guessed Harry would have perfected a way of arranging himself so that the panorama of the city wasn't obscured. An office with a harbour view was a badge of success in Sydney.

"Do you like the new premises?" Harry asked.

"Very nice. Expensive part of town. You seem to forget I can't see the vista."

Harry leaned forward. "Challinor, you can smell it. Or something. We all know that."

Paul didn't demur. "What I want, Harry, is for you to help me find a name."

Harry sipped his coffee. "A small enough request, but why would I want to do it?"

"Because I have a list of names myself. People associated with very special service. A unique escort agency. Your name - "

Paul waited. He was bluffing, but confident. The information so far hadn't led directly to Harry's name. It'd led to companies that had a common source - shelf companies, two dollar companies that'd been set up some years back and sat around in a solicitor's filing cabinet waiting to be utilised. Which seemed to have happened in a recent rush. It wasn't proven yet, but the way the city worked, it was an almost certain bet that Harry had something close and intimate to do with the companies. Although possibly nothing directly to do with the agency. Harry was a very straight kind of gay bloke. Simple tastes, it was said, a wife who didn't mind as long as he paid the extravagant mortgage and the school fees for her one child (previous marriage). Harry would steer away from actually investing in a business that ran too many social, and legal, risks.

"Ah." Harry exhaled. "Rubbish, of course, and why would I worry about this?"

Without a word Paul reached into his jacket, extracted a sheaf of papers from a deep inner pocket. "I printed these off just an hour or so ago. A list of companies, all purchased or set up locally. Shall we say, very locally?"

The chair made the smoothest of sounds as Harry eased forward. The papers were on the desk between them. If blackmail was a word that occurred to Harry, he was both wise and wily enough not to mention it. "They're in bloody Braille, what's that supposed to mean to me?"

"Harry, I'm not interested in you. I'm sure whatever you've done is legal, or near enough. You're too smart to do it differently. It's the movers and shakers behind the agency that I want to stop."

"You're a bloody saint, are you?" Harry scoffed instead of answering.

"Who knows, I might be that boring, it's not relevant. I'm not acting for anyone or on anyone's behalf."

"If you're sure I haven't done anything - which of course I haven't - why are you coming to me?"

"Because you sold the companies. You're probably too self-protective to go any further than that, but you must have referred your buyers on to another legal mind. One who could do a little more for them."

Harry took the pages and noisily tore them into several pieces and placed them in the waste-paper bin. "You're asking me if I know the solicitor? I don't."

"Harry, you can find out. You have links that will be very useful to you. And me."

"Challinor, you're an arrogant bastard. You still haven't told me why the fuck I should do anything for you."

"No particular reason, Harry, other than it's potentially dangerous not to."

The air conditioning hiccupped, showing the strain of working overtime against the wind, as Paul re-entered his own office building.

"I'm getting bored with trying to save the world," he told himself, once inside chambers. Harry Montague was one of his least favourite colleagues but he knew, from Harry's reaction, that they'd have dealings again soon.

Almost as soon as he sat down, Janice buzzed him with a call, saying something about who was on the other end of the line. He didn't take the information in, just pressed the button to activate the speakerphone.

"Paul Challinor speaking."

"Paul, it's Julia Prettie. We met -."

It seemed he was destined to be caught off-guard by her. "How are you?" he asked, as if his brain were pre-programmed for a stultifying politeness.

"Fine." She paused. "I just thought ...Um. Oh, say something, will you? This is so hard."

He picked up the receiver, pulling her voice closer to him, to better gauge her intent. "I'm really pleased... No, that sounds so formal. I see what you mean, it's difficult to know what to say."

"I'd like to see you again."

The heart can't really fly, he reasoned. It's simply a slimy internal organ, which only responds to a very limited set of bodily stimuli, unlikely even to change its beat unless faced with a physical trauma of some magnitude. Or sex. "Good."

There was another momentary silence and he wondered what this indicated. Did she have particular gestures, movements, when she was nervous? Was nervousness a fair description of how she felt right now? Hadn't he said enough? "Julia, I'd really like to see you..."

She spoke over him. "When?" she asked. "When can you make it?"

He ran his free hand over his head, controlled the pleasure in his own voice. "Tomorrow would be great. I'm not in court at all this week." Then he confessed: "I think I've just had a adolescent moment."

Her laugh was sudden, low and generous. "I know what you mean, I have too."

"Julia."

"Let's talk tomorrow. The café? Is around three all right with you? I'm busy all morning."

He could make a show of rustling pages, clicking keys, having to check his diary, but his memory had been polished early in life and he knew there was nothing recorded that he wasn't prepared to change. Besides, she was far too astute to believe any prevarication. "Good. I'll see you there."

Paul sat very still. In some cultures the voice was the essence of the soul, the perfect representation of the inner being. In many religions it was the only true means of communication with God. *In the beginning there was the word.* Voices raised in unison, in harmony, were power. Julia's voice lacked the wariness he often heard in new acquaintances, who often didn't know quite how to interact with a man who couldn't see. As if the outer shell made all the difference. Perhaps it did. Even without seeing he'd found her physical presence an unavoidable attraction. Or distraction. He'd like to know more – much more – of the shape and feel of her. It was one of the boring aspects of being blind; that there was no simple observation, no voyeurism; you could only know a woman's lips, breasts, curve of the elbow, shape of the forehead or upper arm, by touch. It was a wonder, he thought, that more blind men and women weren't wildly promiscuous. Or greater gamblers; there was certainly a lottery in what you got.

Janice buzzed through another call; a colleague was insisting on speaking with him. The breathiness of the lawyer's voice was a contrast to Julia's. He kept the phone on speaker, listened well enough to the irritated tone of a solicitor doing pro bono work she thought was below her level of expertise. He asked her to email him the papers and immediately returned to thinking about Julia. She was so forthright and, at the same time, she was clearly confused by

meeting him. A million things going on in her life, all of which had nothing to do with him?

He stood up, walked around the room, and opened the window. There was none of summer's humidity to trap the fumes in the air, which was crisp and refreshing on his face. Julia's voice held more than confusion. It struck him that she thought he was a threat, was in some way not to be trusted. So, what had inspired her to ring him up and arrange to meet?

Paul returned to his chair, swung around in it. He didn't need to get himself into anything too complicated, no matter how attractive he found Julia. A sensible self-preservation strategy was called for. Better meet her this once, and make that the end of it.

8

Government departments were pretty good at keeping their policies from public consumption, Ian thought, as he filled in yet another form. Sure, they put them on web sites but how many potential clients of the departments dealing with disabilities and social security could find anything out that way? Not to mention the impossibility of the workers or the consumers actually reading the hulking manuals with their pissy department-speak and then being able to use the information or pass it on to those who needed to know. Half his staff was barely literate, for Christ's sake. That included Danny, whose complaint was driving him around the bend and down a ditch.

Sometime soon he'd have to tell Jean's sister about the harassment charge, the parents being dead, or inactive. Come to think of it, he was sure he'd read somewhere the father disappeared years back. Nasty rumours about that father, not that any of the staff'd ever clapped eyes on him.

The door slammed open and Ian looked up to see Jean, half-naked, looking like she was gonna cry. For a moment he just stared, surprised by the best pair of tits he's seen out of *Penthouse* in years. Full, high, perfect.

"Go get some clothes on," he yelled as she made a grab for the papers on the desk, those desirable breasts hardly swinging in the breeze of her movement.

Jean grabbed again, sending papers, folders and large lever-arched files flying toward Ian in one direction, the floor in another. She looked pretty pissed off.

"Holy shit." Ian stayed sitting. It was against the policies to touch Jean, 'specially when she was half-naked. He couldn't stop her destroying the office.

"I found these," a male voice announced from outside the doorway.

One of the casual staff came into view. Ian couldn't even remember his name, although he was pretty sure it started with a 'J'. The staff member held out a clutch of dolls and soft toys, completely

ignoring Jean, who'd plonked herself on the floor and was ripping paper in a satisfied fashion.

"I found these in Jean's room," Justin/Jason/Joshua said angrily. "They're not age-appropriate. Jean is more than thirty. The guidelines say we must support normalisation by selecting age-appropriate activities."

What the fuck? thought Ian. What the fucking fuck? Fortunately Jean wasn't taking any more notice of the casual than he was of her. 'Specially good seeing they were her dolls. The fucking guidelines didn't say that anyway. Not quite. "Personal choice, that's what the guidelines say," he threw back. Choice was the trump card. Choice had replaced normalisation as the mantra.

Jean was obviously impressed with his argument. She was off the floor and lunging for her dolls, scrabbling to get them out of what's-his-name's arms.

"She scratched me!" The dolls fell on the floor.

"What'd you expect? You're keeping her favourite things away from her."

"She shouldn't have them. She shouldn't attack me."

Jean dropped back to the floor, cradling the dolls, beginning one of her long gabbles. She sounded pretty happy.

Ian decided ignoring complaints was the way to go. "Bring her some clothes and then leave her here," he said, "and go do the bathrooms. I gotta ring Jean's sister."

"Why? Will she take the dolls away?"

Bugger. Ian had forgotten that this kid hadn't been told about the accusations against Jean. He was such a puny little bastard, he'd probably agree with them. "Nah, I won't be asking her about them. The matter's confidential," he said.

It was only as Justin/Josh/Jason left that Ian wondered why Jean only had a skirt on. He shrugged; she must have been getting ready for a bath. Funny time of day, though.

"Hey, Paul, over here."

Paul made his way between the rows of aerobic machines to the free weights area. Two or three people verbally acknowledged him and he nodded back, not feeling the need to say more. He'd been coming to this gym for a decade now, since the days when a fashion statement was wearing matching sweatbands on head and arms.

"Serge."

"Well met. Where've you been?"

"Work. A brief. And that project with Clare I told you about." He was going to mention Julia, not yet. Paul pulled the towel from his bag, keeping himself turned at ninety degrees to Serge's voice. He felt a fleeting wonder at what Serge might be doing. How was he standing? Arms folded, feet planted apart? Or hands on hips, his face inquiring? If nothing else he'd stopped working the weights and Paul could feel a distinctly questioning glance.

"Something's on your mind, Challinor. And it's not the project. Or Clare. In fact I don't believe Clare's made you look like that. Not for a long bloody time at least."

"Ever?"

"Now, there's a question. Ever? The great retrospective; was I really in love? Then? With her? Was it all an illusion? For chrissakes, who in their right mind would try to answer that one? It's like any divorce settlement, only leads to claim and counterclaim."

Paul laughed. "Fair enough. But I haven't come to talk about my love life. I need a work out and then a beer. Have you got time for one? There's a favour I want to ask about this project."

The pub was full of young things, out to have a dazzling time, as Serge put it. And so they should, while they could, he said, himself having two sick kids at home. Serge maintained he'd had it with sobriety and the new man.

Paul laughed. "You and Imogen are like Romeo and Juliet without the tragedy," he commented.

"You should have kids, Paul. Bloody hassle they are, but you'd love them."

"A male, immaculate conception, now that'd be a miracle of modern medical science."

"Smart-arse. What're you drinking?"

"Whisky, malt, neat."

"Can't argue with that. Now what's all this about?"

"I've got a hunch, as they say, about real estate."

"Property speculation? Guess all lawyers do it some time."

"Not for myself. What I'm thinking is that an escort agency which is making large amounts of money must have some real estate somewhere. If for no other reason than to explain income to the officials who check this sort of thing."

"So, how do I, an architect employed at the public's expense, help you be super-sleuth?"

"I have a few names of businesses, and small companies, recently registered or activated. I figured you might be able to use your databases to match them up with recent development applications. A DA might lead us to some real people behind the front-names I've currently got. Interestingly, all the businesses claim to be in your part of town."

"You're suggesting that whoever is making up the addresses knows the inner west better than any other part of Sydney?"

"Yep. Likely to live or work there."

"OK, I can follow this reasoning. Anything else?"

"If I give you an address, have you got an easy way to check the rate payer? I know I can do that through the relevant council, but not out of hours, not with any efficiency and not at all cheaply."

"I've got a program and a data base that can do that. Can manage weekends and we can discuss these favours and their returns when we see how much work you're making for me. You'll need to email me some more details with the list of names. Now tell me about this new woman."

The barman arrived with their drinks. They waited while he carefully placed them down, arranging the coaster under Paul's assiduously. "You right there, mate?" the barman asked. Serge reached a hand to Paul's shoulder. "Don't say a word," he cautioned, gesturing the barman - who appeared rooted to the spot - to leave. "So?"

"So, very clever, and correct, as far as it goes. I just met a woman who intrigued me. Amusing, smart."

"Mate, some people have all the luck. We'd better order another. When're you seeing her again?"

"Soon. But I presume she's married."

"You haven't asked? You haven't found that out for a fact? What is going on here? What you going to do about it?"

"Hope, I suppose."

"Now I've heard every bloody thing. How did you meet her?"

Paul smoothed his hand over his head. "She just materialised. You know that I don't usually have trouble working out where people are. I sat down at a table - the café outside the Sydney Museum, you know it? - and there she was. She was - I don't know - sharp, yet not

serious. I've had being serious all the time. But I was thrown by not noticing her."

"Maybe she jumped into the seat, to have a go at chatting you up."

Paul put his drink down. "That's what worries me. What if she did sit down for that reason?"

"You've lost me. No, you haven't, you're talking about that devotee stuff again aren't you? Come on, Paul, I bet this woman – what's her name, by the way? – I bet she didn't even notice you can't see. And even if she did, so what?"

"Julia. When she did realise, she said that blindness was no excuse for rudeness. In the most beautiful voice."

Serge chuckled. 'You'd have loved that.'

"I did, I love being challenged. And voices that come from deep within." He thought for a moment about Serge's voice and how it, too, was a voice with a complex timbre. Not the sort of thing you mentioned to a male mate. "It's likely nothing will come of it."

"Mate, I'll shout you one for the road and expect a report back this time next week."

"You're on. Mind you, I hope it's not you I'm drinking with next time I go out."

"Jesus, what ever happened to male bonding?"

"We're doing it now," Paul laughed, "can't do it every night. The drinks are too expensive."

9

Parramatta was settled in the first moments of the British colony in Australia and remains both the geographic centre of Greater Sydney and a fiercely independent city of itself. Old Government House still stands on a hillock in Parramatta Park, boasting its Francis Greenaway portico and the butler's pantry and other additions built nearly two centuries earlier by Governor Macquarie and his wife, Elizabeth. During the day a few curious Sydney-siders and a few more overseas tourists straggle after the enthusiasts who volunteer as guides in Government House, while joggers and women with too many children use the paths and scratchy grass that run over what was once the farm that poorly fed the near starving colony. At night now, the dealers in drugs, sex and goods that have fallen off the back of a truck ply their trades in the park, just as did their forebears – convict and gaoler alike.

When Sonya's family arrived in Parramatta – another immigrant family in the land of immigrants – Sonya learned this history with interest, while her mother concentrated on warning her against entering the park. To refugees who had long been frightened and had suffered too much, the immense space with its occasional clumps of trees, its unexpected hills and small, deep valleys, its sunlight sliced by the shade of old buildings, could only mean danger. In her teenage years Sonya defiantly wandered there, seeking the happier ghosts and the traces of a quieter past. Thursday was Sonya's day off, and she was determined to go there again.

She entered between the chipped and discoloured sandstone pillars and walked purposefully along the edge of the road. Cars were allowed into the park, although at this time of day the parking areas were largely empty. Sonya was not sure why she was so intent on being there. There was nothing to be gained from finding the place where Melanie had been tipped from her chair and pushed down to the polluted water. She could not help Melanie, nor save the next person. It was her way, though, to confront danger.

On the other side of the narrow road a man walked, his arms pumping, his legs jerking up and down, his eyes flicking over her.

Sonya shuddered. All innocence was gone. The little she had left when her family fled Bosnia had gone with this job in Australia. Not that she blamed her new country or the people in it. In her own land she would be dead or further maimed. She would have been raped more than once and would have nothing to show for it except the scars and the social scorn. Here she was paid and the agency took care of their health and tried to protect them as well as they could.

Jim told her about Melanie. He was not supposed to, but he thought she should know so that she would be more wary and more careful than ever she'd been in the past. How could she be more careful? How could any of them get away from a man turned into a monster?

The information she had only specified a hill and water thick with lily pads. Sonya searched. At first she thought it was impossible, the park was so large. Then, not too far from the main entrance, her attention was caught by a gleam of blue and white. Police tape. She crossed the road, quickly, not looking properly, hearing the squeal of a bicycle tyre as a group of cyclists avoided her, the last one in the pack nearly careering into the others. The tape was stuck on a wooden fence, which was old and had dried into ribbons of splintery wood. One of the sharp pieces had pierced the tape. Sonya plucked it off. She would keep the tape as a reminder that she must give up this horrible work. Very soon. Not tomorrow or the next day, because she could not desert Avril. Until then, the plastic tape would be her talisman against evil. It was a tiny, useless thing, but she had a quiet optimism that refused to be suppressed.

"It's like the early scenes of Hitchcock's *The Birds*," Paul said, aware that the sun was slipping behind the bridge, that soon the end of the day would come. "When the birds are beginning to collect but you don't know they're going to mass and come back. I can't help but listen for the first single flap, the prelude to horror."

"Surely it's not that bad," Julia replied.

"Depends which judge is sitting, who his or her associates are and what the case is," he agreed, "but when the court is assembling itself, gowning up and growling about the nature of the crime, current mortgage rates or the coffee that's supplied, it can be far

more formidable than the quiet face shown to the public. I'm very glad the defendant doesn't have to see us all together."

Julia said nothing.

"I'm sounding pompous, aren't I?"

"A bit like you're making up captions for a museum display. Wordy, but the information's reasonably reliable." She laughed. "Now I'm sounding pompous. It's embarrassing: do you think it's because we're too old to flirt?"

Not at all, he thought, but perhaps we keep coming up against the reality that we shouldn't. "As we are flirting," he said, ignoring his own cynicism, "we should decide where to eat."

He felt her pull her coat closer to her. Rejection? Pleasure? Or both? Paul waited, having nothing to lose except an insipid dignity - which was much less consequential than desire.

"On one condition," she said slowly. Near them, a clatter as café staff began moving tables, the metal legs scraping on the stone. They both waited for the distracting sound to subside. "That we don't tell each other facts. I know what you do for a job and you know what I do, but that's enough for now. Living life by a check list - what part of the city you live in, how much you earn, who your parents were and who your family is connected to, whether there's a gym in your building and/or you have a portfolio of real estate - is boring."

"Opinions?"

"I'm sure you already know who I vote for, and what I think of the current state of the environment."

He smiled. The promise of mystery was enticing, the potential for danger not unattractive to him either. "Excellent. Shall we go somewhere for a drink first? It's too early for a meal, but that waiter will have us fined for loitering soon."

"I feel a little over-dressed in my work clothes," she said, standing up and moving close to him, so that the warmth of their bodies joined and provided a small protection against the encroaching cold.

"Umm," he took her cue and tried to give the impression of looking her up and down. "You look lovely, but I was thinking of a cheap little trattoria. Perhaps they'd be overawed."

She laughed. "I'll have you know that this suit comes from Florence. It's a town in Italy, you may have heard of it."

"You could inform the waiter I suppose." He took her arm properly for the first time, acutely conscious that he would now find

out something of her height, her size, the firmness of her flesh. He needed to know. "Does clothing matter?" he added.

Julia left the question in the air. "We could shop," she said.

Shop? Just like that? He was about to give a flippant reply, then thought better of it. After all, shopping could be fun and life wasn't meant always to be serious. "Great idea, I wouldn't want to go out dancing in this outfit either."

"You have Y chromosomes and you're agreeing to shop? I was only joking. Partly at least - I really would like something more relaxed. I hardly ever wear suits like this one - it's natty, a little *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, and almost impossible to walk in. This morning I had one of those meetings we all have to look professional for."

"I'm happy to shop. Seriously. We don't need to go anywhere too extravagant."

Particularly, he thought, if that means this evening goes on, with no interruptions of home and husbands and a life outside this pleasing bubble. He wondered if and when she would ring someone. And if not, why not? She didn't have the aura of a woman who lived alone, or of one who readily damned the feelings of others.

"I'll have to make a few phone calls later," he said, thinking that this might provoke an admission. He also needed to check with Warren.

She made no response.

10

"Ian," one of the staff called from inside.

'Righto," he replied, thinking of how his father'd driven him nuts using that expression. Righto. Sicko.

In the house there were a few things going on as usual. Graham was sprawled on the couch, his fly undone, watching 'Home and Away'. Dave was walking around slopping a cup of coffee over the tiled floor and Sanjiv was cooking dinner. Jean wasn't in sight, nor was the casual staff member who'd called for him. In the bedroom, he figured, better tell the guy staff weren't allowed to be alone in the bedrooms with a resident. 'Specially not Jean.

He avoided Dave and the coffee, circled around Graham, telling him to do up his fly, and went down the passage to Jean's room.

Justin, or Jason or whosoever was standing in the room, looking frightened. "Where's Jean?" he asked.

How the fuck should he know? Ian wondered. He'd been out having a smoke. "In the kitchen?"

"No."

"Bathroom? Shit, you haven't lost her, have you?"

"We'd better look again."

They filed up the narrow corridor, Ian muttering under his breath. He'd been outside and Jean wasn't there, he'd been inside and she wasn't there either. One of the boy's rooms? The laundry?

"Sanjiv, you seen Jean?"

"No, not for some time."

Ian turned, pulled open the three possible doors, sent Justin-or-whoever to check behind the shower curtain. Jean hated showers and only had baths, but you never knew. Not there. She liked practical jokes, Ian checked the cupboards which couldn't have held her size anyway, but you never knew that either. Dave grunted and came over to help, coffee cup still in hand, innards doing their final cascade. Ian yelled at Sanjiv to clean up the mess, otherwise someone would slip and the bloody tiles were hard. Jean wasn't any fucking where.

The sense of desperation was overpowering. Jean was in his care. He might not be the most dedicated of disability workers, but

losing one of his residents was pretty off-the-planet scary. For a few seconds, or maybe minutes, Ian sat on the couch, the TV still blaring, and thought seriously about crying.

Sanjiv was more sensible, asking Jason - which, it turned out was his name - to go in one direction, while he went in the other. The streets here, he pointed out to Ian, were not very interesting and the houses were all very similar. Jean had probably got out somehow and got lost. She would be noticed. Any change around here was noticed.

Half an hour later, Ian stumbled towards the office. After the house meeting, he'd have to phone Jean's sister and he wasn't looking forward to that. She was bloody gorgeous to look at but too sharp and he hadn't got round to letting her know about Danny's complaint yet. She'd want the low-down on all sorts of stuff. He leant against the filing cabinet. There wasn't much space in the room. A typical house, they called this place. A bloody cardboard box he called it. Brick veneer, low ceilings, cheap pink laminate in the kitchen, a second bathroom that was a cubbyhole off a pokey bedroom. Whenever anyone pissed, the whole household knew. He hated it. And he hated the neighbours and their suburban attitudes. Wanting everybody to be nice all the time, complaining if they heard a swear word or one of the guys having a bellow at one of the others. Boring. There'd be hell to pay when they went knocking on doors looking for Jean. Biggest thing since the council changed bin night.

The rest of the staff quickly filled the office. He'd done a ring around, marshalled all the forces. They were all worried about Jean of course, and as soon as they sorted out what might have gone wrong, they'd ring the police. They were also pretty freaked by the thought of the heads that were going to roll.

He insisted they all give their version of what they knew, tried to isolate exactly when Jean was last seen. She liked to spend a lot of time in her room, so sometimes they didn't have her in sight every moment.

"That's not our fault," Dee ventured.

"It might be construed that it is. It will be construed that way." From outside the cluttered staffroom came the sounds of someone banging hard on a piece of wood or perhaps a wall. "Graham's got himself into a corner, someone better see to him."

No one moved. The pages on the noticeboard fluttered in the small wind produced by the fan heater.

"We've looked after her." Dee was clearly more determined than most. "She didn't always want to be with us, and she's difficult, you know."

Ian held up an official looking sheet of paper. It was a list of instructions, carefully made in dot-point form. "The psychologist said – and it's here, in writing – that Jean should have her down-time interrupted with positive activity every few minutes. And – "

"Rubbish. The woman hates staff being in her face!"

"Will someone please see to Graham? I can't stand the noise any longer."

Sanjiv rose, left the room.

"Why can't you do it yourself, Ian?" Rose asked.

There was no sensible answer so he simply ignored the question. Being house manager of a small group home was a petty power and he knew it. "Did anyone upset her?" he asked.

"You mean other than Danny?"

"Where is Danny?" It was Rose again.

"Stress leave," Ian said, caustic, but with no further explanation. Sometimes he couldn't understand the men of today. Taking stress leave because a woman put her hand on your crotch? Madness.

Dee's eyes glittered. "Shit, Ian, we're not trained for this sort of thing. We gave her as much attention as we could in the time available. What more can anyone expect?"

Ian looked around the circle of staff. Sanjiv nodded in agreement with Dee. A couple of the others looked red-faced. Ian didn't know what to say. None of them were qualified or maybe even all that interested. Staff all had different ideas of what should happen. Fucking normalisation. That bloody word just meant everyone thought their way was right, and then went on and imposed it on the residents. Look at Justin with the dolls. Ian knew plenty of women who still loved their dolls.

"So, none of us are clear about what Jean might've been doing?"

"There were no instructions up," Sanjiv defended his co-workers. "We need instructions on the notice board. Dee and I knew what to do. The casual staff were not so aware. The information was hidden in the file. Which is hidden in the office."

Ian nodded; it was a fair defence. "Not allowed to stick it up," he said. "Privacy and confidentiality and all that. Don't know

how they think we all have time to read files every day." He didn't like to mention that he knew some of the staff wouldn't be able to make head nor tail of the paperwork anyway.

He walked over to the window. The back garden was uninspiring and he thought about the possibility of a weekend away. Camping. He hated camping but what else could he afford? His ex-wife insisted the kids go to a Catholic school and his portion of the fees was what he could've saved for a wicked weekend. Lucky they're not going to Newington or one those seriously posh schools, his wife said, ignoring the fact they could never have afforded a school like that even if they had stayed together.

Maybe, he thought, maybe Dee needs someone to amuse her for a while; she gave out all the right vibes for a girl who might think camping was a romantic choice. He reckoned she'd look good bending over the fire.

"I've got to ring the police," he finally said. "Betta sort out the paperwork first. Who's volunteering to help? How 'bout you Dee?"

The hesitation in her voice was enticing. "I, well, I was going to go back home. But yeah, I could do that."

11

The street vendors were beginning to unravel boxes of imitation Rolex watches, cloths studded with cheap jewellery, incense and T-shirts proclaiming the wearer had participated in various obscene moments on Bondi Beach or at the Opera House. Bunches of British, German and Spanish-speaking tourists collected, discussing where to drink, where to eat, where to sleep, apparently taking no notice of the merchandise. Paul and Julia had decided on Bondi Beach for the pragmatic reason that the shops were always open and there was likely anonymity. They'd made a pact not to ask too many personal questions, not yet, but they'd both admitted that Bondi was not a part of the city they visited regularly.

Everywhere people pushed and shoved and called. Julia described what she saw, speaking as if discovering the joy of words. Paul smiled. It happened occasionally, that his companions found an unexpected pleasure in translating the world, their perception of the world, into words. "It's good here," he commented. "No one gives a stuff that I can't see. Often when I shop people walk around me. I know it's out of some sort of consideration but it feels like I must have a pox on my face. And be contagious. It was a good idea of yours to come here."

"I presume," Julia answered after a few seconds, "it has occurred to you that you are about six-foot-six tall, dressed like a film director, wearing dark glasses and looking like you might own the street we're walking on. Some people might be a little awestruck, you know, not brave enough to go too close."

He grinned. "Touché."

"So, tell me why you need to know a good PI?" she asked, continuing their conversation from the taxi.

He knew she wasn't going to accept this was simply because a blind barrister needed a set of eyes. "Much of the advocacy I'm involved in needs behind-the-scenes investigation."

"An unusual way of mainstreaming disability support, isn't it?"

"There's more than a few in the advocacy movement who'd agree with you. One hell of a lot of people are convinced that church

fundraisers are the best way to support people with disability. And that anyone who has an impairment is by nature innocent, not in the least capable of having any dealings with the underworld."

"As if neatly mown lawns are the only reality? "

"Experience speaking?"

Her arm tensed. Always a give-away, he thought. Of exactly what, was the question.

"I'll tell you about it some time. Not now, we're here to enjoy ourselves. Look, here's a decent clothing shop."

They left the shop half an hour later with Julia dressed in comfortable black and her work clothes in the parcels. As they stepped back into the clutter of the tourist strip, Julia dropped her arm from the formal pose and caught his hand: boyfriend and girlfriend. "Where did you learn to shop? I mean, most men don't. Or maybe I'm just being hopelessly gender specific," she said.

"My mother actually. And she would've agreed with your gender specificity. My father was wonderfully academic and domestically incompetent, while my brothers are both the sort American sit-coms are written about - you know, hilarious scenes of them trying to boil an egg in a microwave. My mother wasn't going to let all of us get away with it and, as I had to cling to her skirts a little more than most boys, I was the patsy."

"And a bloody good thing too."

"My mother always did say it would make me attractive to women."

"Where is she now?"

"Julia, I'll tell you in a minute, but you don't have a sense of being watched at all, do you? Over and above the ordinary staring at the blind bloke and the great looking girl?"

"Being watched?"

"Perhaps followed?"

"I have been tempted to look over my shoulder a couple of times. I was assuming that it's just my sense of doing something out of my usual framework. Should I look?"

Paul kept walking. "Might as well. If there's a bag-thief, they might be put off by being observed."

"Can't see any signs of suspicious activity," she reported.

"Good, although anyone doing surveillance will melt fast in this crowd. You're probably right; we're both just out of our usual comfort zone. Let's stop outside a shop, though, and you can check the reflection."

"Why would someone be following us?"

"Good question. Do you have any ideas?"

"I don't have a clue." The frown was in the stiffness of her body against his, the shift in her arm.

"Don't worry about it. My imagination gets the better of me and I'm like any other blind person - I can be over-sensitive to the idea that I'm being watched. I'd better tell you what happened to my mother," he said and went on to briefly describe the accident that had killed her.

Julia apparently decided to accept the distraction. "You were there when she died?"

"No, not quite. I got home a few minutes after it happened. It was just outside our house. My cab pulled up and there was commotion everywhere. Anyway, I'll let you imagine the rest. C'est la guerre." He moved his hand to her shoulder, so that her hair fell upon it. "She was a wonderful woman. Never let the fact I was blind stand in the way of her ambitions for me. Or let me allow it to stand in the way of my own. Even when they didn't match hers, which was often enough the case."

They stopped and Julia described a knot of people staring at a busker, a woman with her entire naked body painted silver, a living, breathing statue. A family Julia had noticed earlier were completely entranced, she said. No one appeared interested in her and Paul in particular.

"We're getting a bit up close and personal, aren't we?" Paul asked as they waited for a space to move through.

"That's OK, isn't it?"

"Fine by me."

"We're about to become a little more so. Here's an attractive looking menswear shop. Now you have to reveal the shape of your body to me. I think a very tight shirt over those pecs will be just the thing."

"Excellent. I much prefer to be noticed for my body than my blindness."

She stopped at the entrance to the shop. "And so the fabulous coat, the style, etcetera. It all makes sense."

He motioned her to go inside first. "My taste is not entirely defined by a wish to be visually attractive, while vision impaired."

"Perhaps not, but it's very smart thinking. Now we should finish this shopping, I'm beginning to curdle with hunger."

Ian drove the van in under the carport. He needed to have another go at contacting Jean's sister before he went off-shift, but the police weren't too concerned. It was logical to think she wasn't far away.

"Graham and Dave are safely ensconced in the bowling club foyer," he said to Sanjiv as he handed over the keys. "Marty's keeping an eye on them. Pickup's in two hours and you know how the rec. staff insist on us being on time."

Sanjiv's hand closed over the keys. "I thought that as there was nobody in for dinner, I might go out again and look for Jean. If that is correct procedure?"

"Bugger procedure, mate. Sure, whatever. Good idea. Just keep the mobile with you. Be better for the police to speak with you rather than the casual staff."

Ian threw his stuff into the old duffle bag he carried. It was kind of his thing, an emblem of an earlier, freer life. And now and then it started a conversation.

"I have tried to ring her sister again," Sanjiv said. "There was no response. Should we ring another member of the family?"

"There's only the sister, mate. Mother dead, father pissed off. No other rels."

"Her husband, Jean's brother-in-law?"

"We've got orders, you know that. No contact with the brother in law."

Sanjiv swallowed. "It is possible that we do not have such information in the files. Families have many disputes with which we need not involve ourselves. Would it not be better to speak with Ms Prettie's husband if it is possible?"

Ian knew that Sanjiv was telling him he'd checked the files and there was nothing written down. So they were not only in the clear if they rang Philip Prettie - no, Philip Jones was his name - they were duty-bound to do so. Bugger. "Yeah, right, don't you think the police will do it?"

"That would not look efficient on our part, would it?"

"All right, I'll do it before I go."

Sanjiv handed over a phone number with a smile. Not a bad bastard. He and Ian respected each other. Ian might look like a drop-kick, but he was bloody well organised and Sanjiv knew it. A couple of minutes later he got off the phone. "Hubbie's not available, but

I've left a message. Not our problem, now. The husband can follow up. Listen, San, we'll find Jean before it matters. OK?"

"Of course. Jean must be very sad, being lost."

Ian raised an eyebrow, said nothing. He was out of there anyway. Picking Dee up at Bondi, outside the Pavilion, and from there going on down to Coogee for a meal and to hear some music at the pub. He had the old Holden; she lived nearby - she wouldn't tell him quite where. He was just going to cruise by the Pav, wave and pick her up. No need for the rest of the staff to see what was going on. Not yet.

It was pretty hairy crossing town at that time of day. Ian had to get all the way in on the freeway and then join the distributor, lob off, thread through Darlo where the streets, half of them not much wider than the original dunny lanes, were chocka with cars and trucks and bikes. Least the backpackers and the alkies and the street workers weren't much in evidence yet. In fact the footpaths were remarkably free of debris of the human variety, though saddled with an extravaganza of other pieces of crap. He was gonna be late. Ian wasn't keen on being late, it was one the quirks of his nature that got him jobs like managing a group home. He drummed his hands on the wheel, looked at his watch, swore more than once.

Finally he squeezed out onto Oxford Street and lane-hopped through Paddo, over the expressway, before sweeping down to the beach. He was proud of the Holden's performance, but Dee wasn't in evidence outside the Pavilion. He cruised past a couple of times and was just about to assume that she'd pissed off when a gleaming new Beamer pulled in front of him and, dangerously, stopped. He slammed on the brakes and the Holden, bless it, ground to a halt. He hated to imagine the cost if he'd run into the back of the bastard. Then he was stuck, with the traffic everywhere. Four people in the fancy car and it looked like three of them getting out. Slowly. Ian drummed the wheel again and whistled and looked around for Dee.

He nearly spat chips. There, waiting for the pedestrian lights, was Jean's currently uncontactable sister, Julia Prettie. She was standing against the backdrop of Bondi beach, as if she didn't have a care in the world. What was more interesting was the fact she was with some outrageously good-looking bastard. Who was very bloody close to her side. Ian couldn't believe his eyes. He couldn't believe them even more when he looked closely. Julia, the most dedicated, determined relative of a retard he'd ever met, was looking up at the

guy in a way that Ian could only describe to himself as naked. It was one wild look. He wished he'd inspired it in someone recently. At any time, come to think of it.

He gripped the steering wheel, peered through the windscreen. How come the guy wasn't returning the look? He sure would if he had the chance. There was something pretty strange in the way the bloke wasn't responding, the way she stood there, looking at him so openly with such lust.

A knock on the window and Ian turned. Yep, it was Dee. He signalled to her to get in, leaning over when he realised he'd forgotten to lift the lock and she was pulling at the door handle and it was going to fall off.

"Hi," she said and he grunted something in return. Not rudely, it was just that he was concentrating on the other couple. They'd linked arms now and were moving off. Then he saw what it was about the bloke, the hesitancy, the failure to catch that shining beam on his face. The bastard was blind.

The car in front finally moved, but for a second or two Ian didn't put the Holden into gear. He was dumbstruck. He turned to Dee and was about to point, when suddenly he thought he wouldn't. Dee and he were hardly an item yet and he didn't know for sure in which direction her loyalties might go. And he thought it might just be useful to have the little piece of information he now held. For sure as hell that bloke was not her husband.

"You're late," he said to Dee.

"No, you are. I was here on time. I went and bought a drink when you weren't here. It was only by accident I saw you."

Ian released the tight clench on the wheel, shoved the car into gear. He liked a woman who didn't stick around for a bloke. Not one like him. Maybe this was gonna turn out all right after all.

"Didn't see any one you know, did you?" he asked, putting the indicator on to turn right.

"No, should I have?"

"Nup. Just making conversation. I reckon we're gonna have a good night."

"Bull's balls," Warren muttered, pressing redial. Was Challinor out climbing Mount Kosciusko or what? Sort of thing he might do on a Thursday bloody evening, specially seeing how cold it was. Warren pressed himself in against a doorway. He'd come back to the Cross after having dinner with Karen and the kids, dressed in a leather bomber jacket he'd scored in an op-shop a few weeks back. Not his style at all but near enough to what he might have worn if his life had taken a few different turnings. Meant he could shrug himself into the persona at the same time as the cheap leather and polyester lining.

No answer, again. He'd left one message, he wasn't leaving any more. Warren pushed himself out of the doorway like he'd been in there having a leak and wandered back out on to the street. Time to have a sortie into the sweet little shop Lexi'd given him the lead on.

Sex shops were hardly shy in this part of town. In fact, they pulsed with neon and, as often as not, shouted their presence with some pretty sick kinda sounds. Warren walked by half a dozen of them, leering lightly but not getting in too close. He did a lot of work in this area and needed to keep himself as one of the great unseen, relevant only in their guise as consumers. The shop he was heading for fronted one of the side lanes. It clung to an air of decrepitude and isolation, the sort of place he remembered from when he was a teenager, when sex, specially any out-of-the-ordinary sex, was something that happened secretly in a back bedroom, not on the billboards, televisions, cinema and computer screens of the suburbs.

He popped some gum into his mouth and sauntered in. Quiet, no musac, guy behind the counter on a stool. Warren grinned internally; the beauty of the place was its nostalgia. These devotees must be old codgers. Or maybe young ones who wanted to feel they were doing something so illicit they might in a B-grade movie. Sure looked like a film set.

"Mate of mine," he said, when he'd done the usual number - looking embarrassed, checking over his shoulder, then apparently

immersing himself in the excitement of the goods on display. He leaned on the counter so that the brim of his cap shaded his face.

The fellow behind the counter, thin, stooped, uninterested, shrugged. "We all have mates," he eventually emitted.

"We all have needs," Warren countered, having learned the lines Lexi had given him. Crappy old secret code stuff.

"Too true."

"And I'm told, reliably, you can help me out."

The stoop of the shoulders increased as the fellow turned back to the computer screen, pursing his lips, fiddling with the mouse. Two or three minutes passed. Warren held his ground.

"Hundred," the fellow said, flashing half-a-second of eye contact.

"Hundred?" Warren kept his head down, it was possible there was a hidden CCTV or the like. This kind of business took precautions.

"Yep, DVD, read only. Exclusive, can't forward 'em, so no one can give you good ones like these either."

Gold-tipped shoes needed for this indulgence, Warren thought, sliding a couple of fifties from his pocket. Never kept money in his wallet or in any one place on his person.

He took the plastic bag with its slimline DVD and moved back to the shelves, having another good gander. There weren't many other customers and they looked ordinary enough guys. That was the trouble with perverts, the leery looking ones weren't half as much trouble as the businessmen, all neat and tidy and very mean underneath. He noted faces, clothing, the state of the hands, rings, as the customers reached out to inspect items like one-legged fanny-less tights, lacy bras guaranteed to enhance the talents of those with the most severe scoliosis. Another thing about perverts, Warren thought more cheerfully, is that you always catch them in the end because they can't resist temptation.

He stayed long enough for two middle-aged men to come in and, after casting their eyes over the shop, approach the counter. This time nothing was said, but money changed hands. Serious money, if the colour of it was anything to go by. The interesting thing was that these guys didn't get given a CD or a DVD in a hijacked plastic bag, they just got a card.

Warren swallowed; he had a bad need to cough. A card? A name, an address? Or a receipt for money that was being deposited for services not available on the premises? Very smart, he thought. Make sure all transactions are fragmented so that the chances of tracing

who is using the service are very, very low. He hadn't been offered a card, or anything like it, so how were the preferred customers recognised? He figured Challinor would manage to put all the bits together. With a bitta help from Lexi, who could make the asphalt spill its secrets.

The men left, with a whoosh of warm woollen coats and the scent of expensive aftershave. Warren decided not to try to follow them, he'd be too obvious. It was tempting, though, because he guessed they would go home now and place their respectable butts on a chair for the final drink of the evening, before climbing into bed with their wives. Tomorrow, or the next day, they'd delight themselves with an assignation in a hotel. With a very special lady, or perhaps a very special young man.

Warren watched for a few more minutes. No new customers. He'd seen as much as he could in one session and soon he might be approached, either because he looked suspicious or because the assumption was made that he was truly part of the same club. Warren slipped down the aisle, avoiding a young bloke who'd just come in and was letting the cold air through the door like he had some right to the place. He wanted to get a good gander at the guy but he couldn't stop now, there was nothing near the door to give him the excuse. The old shoelace routine went out when the fairies left the bottom of the garden and spread their bums on Oxford Street.

He did pretend to have a hard time with the door, and the wind made sure this wasn't completely untrue. Gave him the chance to watch the guy in the reflection. Nice coat, shiny shoes, neat tan leather briefcase. Not the sort of outfit you'd still be in at this time of night, not unless you'd had dinner straight after work. This guy hadn't smelt of food or alcohol or smoke. Maybe worked a special kind of night shift. Warren kept going, no other course for it. Tomorrow night he might pay another little visit, and this time of night might be a good one. That briefcase looked to him like it had meaning.

Lexi rang as soon as he was out in the laneway. "You talked to Paul yet?" she asked.

He hadn't, but he figured he would soon. Warren also figured Paul wouldn't want to miss out on the opportunity to meet a couple of the girls. It was a miracle Lex had found some who'd talk in such a short time. She wasn't saying how she'd performed the magic, but it wasn't likely she'd do it again, not so fast. He decided to take a punt. "Yeah, it'll be cool with the boss," he said, thinking the guy he was masquerading as would've been proud of this show of bravado.

"OK, cause I've gotta get back to the contact now. He'll be set to go?"

Warren pulled into a cafe. A couple of tables out on the street, empty, on the sight line he needed for the shop. He dragged out a packet of cigarettes, dropped it on the table. Wasn't even tempted to smoke any more, but they helped him look the part.

"Lexi, trust me."

"Wazza, I do. Same time, I don't want to lay anyone on the line for nothing. These girls mustn't be sure what they're doing is the right thing, or they wouldn't agree to talk. They'll be jumpy, and vulnerable."

"You can't come along with them?"

"Gees, Warren. They're meeting in Parramatta for Christ's sake. Might as well be the moon. 'Cept the pollution's worse and the drugs are heavier."

A purposeful step was coming toward him, from the direction of the shop. Out of the corner of his eye he clocked the guy with the briefcase, heading his way. "Gotta go, Lex, it'll be cool, OK."

"That's was fun." Julia said as they dodged late-night groups of young men and similarly raucous flocks of birds. "I think it's the gulls that are spying on us," she added. "I'm sure that's the same one that stole my lunch the other day."

They moved off the Esplanade and headed toward the beach. It was a foolhardy thing to do, but the wind had dropped and they were both warm from the hours of eating and talking and drinking. As yet there'd be no discussion of how the evening would end.

"Christ, the phone," Paul said. "I knew I shouldn't turn it back on."

"You gotta be in Parramatta on time," Warren said, cursorily explaining the arrangement Lexi had set up.

"It's past midnight."

"You could've answered your phone earlier."

"I'll be there."

"Clare's coming too, I could get through to her."

Payback? Fair enough. Finding two young women willing to talk about their participation in the agency was a coup that shouldn't be ignored. Trust Warren to bring it off. Or Lexi.

"Are you going to tell me more about this?" Julia asked, when he'd finished speaking.

"It's too late to talk shop, don't you think?"

She was quiet for a moment and he was reminded of the confusion he detected in her voice when she rang the day before. Her words were ordinary but her voice was cloaked with caution when she spoke. "OK, let's sit down - there's a set of stairs nearby. They'll do."

The waves sucked and slapped. A couple nearby snorted with desire, junkies muttered as they wavered along the edge of the corso, avoiding the uneven surface of the beach. They reached the steps and lowered themselves. His whole body registered the simple touch of their shoulders. They'd ranged across all sorts of common ground over the hours together and he felt he was beginning to know her; at the same time each of them was holding a lot back. Julia described the dogs, their owners nowhere apparent, the bag lady settling to sleep in one of the small shelters on the grass behind them. "You pick up at least half of what can be seen without the slightest need of me, don't you?" she asked, the smile in her voice. He'd found she had a good command of irony and a dislike of tiptoeing around subjects many thought of as out of bounds.

"Maybe more sometimes, less other times. But it's good to know we're sharing a world. Mine could be very different from yours otherwise."

Grains of sand scattered as Julia kicked off her shoes. "Do two people ever share a world?"

Paul smiled. "That could be too deep a question for this time of night."

"True."

He was about to ask what she wanted to do now when he heard her take a breath. Not too deep, but both his instinct and experience detected a confession of some sort was about to come. He waited. Confessions implied a level of intimacy and that idea pleased him.

"Paul, you know you've been hinting that you think I've got some experience of the 'disability world'? Well, I guess I should tell you about my sister, Jean." Her voice curled and hesitated, as if it were another wave, just before the moment of breaking. "Jean is my younger sister. She has intellectual disability, tactile hypersensitivity, poor hearing, reasonable sight. And a great sense of humour. Lovely hair and eyes."

"Ah." He waited. She said nothing more. "So, that's why you were resistant to sharing your lunch table with a blind man. You had to do all the trying for sister, fill in all the gaps, make amends?"

"Yes, you're right." The wave of her voice broke. "I had to try for her and to clean for her and to think for her and to amuse my father for her so that he wouldn't notice how much was wrong. And I had to keep her out of the house and amuse her and keep her quiet when all she wanted to do was bash things. And giggle or scream – Jean is not a person who responds in shades of grey."

The arm and shoulder against him was tense. "Go on," he said.

"No, it's been much worse for you."

"Rubbish, I've had – I have – a great life. There's always someone worse off, anyway. You know that, you care about it in your job. So, what was the hardest part of having to live with your sister?"

He could hear her scraping a layer of sand back and forward across the step. "The hardest thing was trying not to love her," she said eventually. "The other kids called her retard or spazzie, idiot, half-wit, you know the sort of things kids say. I can't tell you how many times I cringed in my room, making sure I only left home as the school bell rang, so I didn't have to face them in the playground any longer than I had to. I'd stick my fingers down my throat so I vomited. I'd do something at school that put me on detention – anything to get out of taking her to the park or the shops, when the other kids were looking. I guess I should be ashamed but that's just the way it was."

Particles of sand fell on him as she flicked it off the step.

"In the end, though, I loved her so much it was the guilt of my own wholeness that drove me crazy. Her face would light up whenever I came into the room, and she listened to me when there was no one else to; she was my confidant. And all the time I knew she didn't understand what I was saying, not literally, but it didn't matter because her love was so complete. I couldn't look in the mirror and see myself because what I saw was all she missed out on."

Julia stood up quickly, so that he was thrown off-balance. "I need to walk."

She strode away from him, the squeal of the sand confusing. The strain of listening for her direction took too much of his energy: at that moment, he hated his blindness, and his lack of insight. This was why, all evening, she'd drawn close one minute, then veered sharply away, as if shielding herself. She'd lived her life with the grit and grime of surviving against the odds of impairment, against the stares and comments of those who found the disabled body to be, at best, a subject for pity, more often an object of disgust. He'd

already gathered she'd grown up in the tougher suburbs, that her childhood was not a soft and sheltering one. It was all very well to talk about pride and inclusion and rights, but the real world was not as simple as that kind of talk made it out to be. 'Specially when you were the sibling: that was an onerous position.

"I can't reach you there," he said, testing the void around him.

Julia returned, but her voice was edgy now, trying to provoke distance. What the hell, she asked, what the hell was she doing there on Bondi beach with a stranger who'd picked her up in a cafe? Whom she'd picked up too, like they were teenagers in a bar. She hadn't spent so many hours in the company of any one person for God knew how long. She hated bleeding hearts and sob stories. There was nothing that could be done about Jean or their childhood or their dead mother and long ago disappeared father. Who cared and why the fuck should she cry?

"You've got to take some responsibility for this," she said and her body collapsed against his. "Just don't say you're sorry. I hate sorry. I hate it, hate it. Do you understand?"

"I'm not sorry. Not at all."

Twenty minutes later, Paul scooped sand with one hand. He held the grains, enjoying their coolness, then letting them run slowly back to the ground. "I've booked a room. In a hotel," he said quietly.

"You booked a room? If I may ask, why?"

"I take it you're not being disingenuous? You're asking why don't I offer to take you to my home, rather than whether I'm asking you to share the room with me?"

"Is there someone waiting for you? Did I guess wrongly?"

"No one. My assumption is that there is a husband or partner waiting for you, though. I thought it might be easier to stay in an anonymous hotel room."

"So I will feel less like I am betraying him?"

"Yes, and so you might be able to say, more or less truthfully, where you slept the night. If that is what you decide to do."

"You're too smart, possibly for your own good. Where are we going? Who still has reception at this time of night?"

Paul reached down, found her shoes. "Do you need to let your husband know you're not coming home?"

"I've left a message. I didn't want him to think I'd been in an accident and be distraught. No doubt he'll be a little histrionic anyway. He can be quite camp at times."

"Do you mind? About him being distraught, that is."

She remained close to him, no agitation in her body. "Of course I do. Although I think it's fair to say we haven't been close for a long time. I don't get the feeling he's very involved in the relationship any more. Otherwise, no matter how attractive I found you, I'd be loyal."

"What does your husband do?"

"Why do you want know what he does?"

"It's not entirely personal, but still a little revealing. Like doing up the zip on a woman's dress."

"That's quite an image. My husband makes money. Share trading, that sort of thing."

"Ah."

"You don't approve?"

"No, just a little surprised. Not the usual combination with a passionately committed international aid worker. Then, you don't quite have the style of an aid worker."

"Fundraiser, administrator. And you're allowed to wear lipstick, these days, it's not all hessian and self-flagellation," she corrected. "He was different once," she added and fell silent.

Paul reached down and felt for her feet, lifted them one at a time, put on the shoes for her. "I'll have to check my messages when we get to the hotel, or on the way there, and I may be rung again early in the morning." He'd told her a little about the investigation. He hesitated and decided not to say more. There were more interesting things to consider now. "Warren doesn't like to waste time."

"Sad, but it's that kind of world. We need to find a cab."

13

Julia's husband, Philip, sat on the couch, phone in hand. "Colin," he said, "do you remember the weekend we all went to Merimbula?"

Colin's sleep-soaked voice was slow. "Who the hell is this?"

"It's Philip, Philip Prettie-Jones. My wife has disappeared from the face of the earth. That's why I'm ringing you at two am, so don't bother asking."

"Your wife doesn't disappear. She's probably gone to Melbourne or Canberra or somewhere for a meeting and stayed over. You've forgotten."

"I am drunk now but was not so when I made all the appropriate checks. She left a message but it was not truthful."

"You always were so frigging precise when you were drunk. Now, I'm tired and grumpy and my wife is snoring. So, go away Philip, go to bed."

"And Jean's disappeared too." He regarded the phone, wondering how it was that a disconnected phone felt empty. The voice had no substance, surely.

Philip continued to sit on the sofa, folding and unfolding the corner of the doona he'd dragged out from the spare room with no attention to the fact it might pick up dust from the unswept floor. Philip hated dust, but not enough to have a cleaner. Cleaners were nosy, they were spies, ready to pounce on any piece of nylon clothing or cheap shampoo that might show he was no different from them.

Why didn't Julia come home, didn't she know he missed her? Perhaps he should try her phone again. Or the police. Not that the police had believed him either. "How long did you say your wife's been missing?" the telephone voice had asked. No police stations to visit any more: it would have been good to be able to bang on a door, have an interested face open it. Over the phone they'd felt free to laugh, snigger really. When he told them about Jean being lost as well they passed him on to someone or other who asked a few pissy questions about family feuds and the like, and recorded some details. He dreaded having to ring them again in the morning. However, he

would if he had to. Of course he could pull a few strings, speak with people with more power, but well, he didn't want them to know.

Philip threw the doona back, collected his glass and made for the kitchen. "Might as well put it on," he said, gesturing to the dishwasher. Then try her mobile again. When he did, there was no answer. He hung up: he was buggered if he were going to leave a message. He dialled a number scribbled by the phone. Didn't have any idea whose it was.

Another murky middle-of-the-night voice. "Ian speaking. Is there a problem?"

"Is my wife in bed with you?"

A pause. As if the guy was checking the woman beside him to make sure.

Philip decided to be helpful. "She's tallish and dark, good looking, mid-thirties."

"Nah. Sorry."

"That's OK. Tell me, did I have you worried for a minute?"

"Yep. But she's blonde, always has been as far as I know. Northern European."

"Good arse?"

"Great."

"That's excellent. Sorry to disturb you."

A new glass was called for. He padded back to the dining room for a crystal one, eschewing the quaint blue-glass tumblers Julia had bought for the kitchen. This was beginning to be more enjoyable.

Colin was in their phone book under "D" for Derby. He'd already tried the Alcots, the Alaverezs, Barbara, Dave Beatty, a number of Cs. "D" meant there were many more names to come. Hundreds. He was being selective, only ringing those who might have some clue, might think of a possibility he hadn't canvassed. His suspicion was that Colin and Julia might have had an affair. A brief one. He was a handsome bastard, the old Colin, and witty, well paid and well connected. The three ws. What more could she want? That weekend in Merimbula, they'd been all over each other. At least with their eyes. Julia was far too wise to touch another man in public. On the beach, though, he'd seen her; she had a thing about beaches. They made her let loose in a strange sort of way.

He settled himself back under the comfort of the doona, the phone book and the cordless phone by his side. Who else might she have had sex with? Who else might she have confided in? Were they one and the same? Would he murder anyone who had done both – the sex and

the confiding? Philip was pondering this question and his answer - the sad thing, he said to himself, was that he really didn't have any idea what he would do - when the phone rang.

"Julia!"

"Don't be too hopeful, Mr Prettie-Jones. Your wife has been looking for trouble and it seems she's found it."

"What are you talking about? Is Julia all right?" Philip couldn't make sense of what was happening.

"I've been asked to pass on the message to you. That message is a warning to you to take better care of the company your wife keeps. She could cause you inconvenience. A great deal of inconvenience."

The voice - an ordinary male voice - finished speaking. Philip was again left with the empty phone in his hand. This time, though, it wasn't the alcohol that was making his hand tremble.

14

The dolls left on the doorstep of the Ashfield refuge the next morning were beheaded. One of the children, daughter of a deaf woman, found them and opened her mouth and screamed so loudly that the windows rattled in their ancient frames. The mother, alerted by one of the other women, dragged her daughter back inside and held her as close as she could. Her mother, too, framed horror and emitted sounds without words. It was too much.

"Wazza, I want you to listen to me, I want your full attention."

Warren reached out, checking the other side of the bed. Karen was up, there was no evidence of domestic tempest, the kids must've gone to school. What time was it and who the hell was on the phone?

"Warren, it's Lexi."

"OK, listening." He sat up, feeling the weight of his own arse dragging. Last night'd been long. The stylish geezer who'd been in the shop'd stopped by his cafe table. One of those shadowy moments that made him think a desk job would be easier on him, and the family. Although getting him to a nine to five routine be like squeezing a lemon to get whisky.

"What you have to do, Waz, is to be careful. Real careful. And tell that gorgeous employer of yours the same. Cause what I hear out on the street is that there's some big money involved here. And big money is not the same as your common garden-variety dirty money. It has a different set of connections."

Yep, the coat the bloke'd been wearing would've caused inflation if it'd been cash thrown into the economy. "Any idea who or where this big money comes from? I ran into a guy last night. Young, swanky dresser, dropped into the little shop you mentioned for a short time, then came out and waltzed straight up to me."

"Shit, Warren."

"All he said was: 'be careful'. Just like you, come to think of it, but I tell you I felt like a crab being dropped into the boiling

pot. Weird thing is I dunno for sure whether he wasn't being kind and warning me 'cause he thought I might be a fellow traveller. I'd been in the shop buying some, ah, goods."

Lexi was silent for a minute and he got the idea that kindness and fellow spirit weren't descriptions she was favouring. Warren wasn't absolutely convinced either way, though, which was an odd situation. He prided himself on being able to spot a villain buried six foot under, and while this guy was bad, all right, whether his intentions to Warren were evil or not wasn't clear.

"One thing the geezer's right about is that you need to be careful. Look, I don't know who the main players are and I'm maybe not going to try to find out. Carrie's telling me that we've got other work that's safer. And you know that means - we're outta there."

Carrie was usually more gung-ho even than Lexi, so if she weren't willing to put a toe in the water there was some real serious talk on the street. "Any full-on action? Likely to be anyone laid out on a shelf in the Glebe morgue?" he asked.

"I don't think it's that simple. Hasn't gone that far either, yet. And I don't want to be involved in making that happen any faster than necessary. Besides, from what I hear the girls and boys are being treated OK at this stage, if you don't mind a bit of real kinky stuff. So maybe they don't need me too much."

"What's giving Carrie a case of the old reverse-Ricketts?"

"Dunno. She's closer to some of the out-of-area workers than I am. You know, the girls who do the pricey escort work. And some of them have the jitters."

Warren was desperate to get out of bed, go to the bog, see what bloody time it was. The clock was turned off, for some bloody reason.

"So, you reckon this agency's not one of the usual businesses expanding their interests?"

"No way."

"And the money behind the op? Comes from an unusual source?"

"Yep. We're used to the turf wars. Someone different's protecting this operation"

"Interesting."

"Yeah, mate, fascinating. Look, I gotta go. Got a meeting of the women's cooperative to run."

"Fair enough, I can see where you're coming from," he said. "You've done one fine job getting those girls to agree to chat. Couldn't ask for better than that."

"Ta, Waz, invoice's in the post, as they say. I'll keep it in mind and let you know if anything turns up. I'd just prefer not to be too active on this one. Got Tina to consider after all."

"See y'mate."

He flicked the phone onto the bed and threw the covers back over it. "Got Tina to consider," Warren repeated as he headed for the bathroom. Lexi really did think this was a brew. He needed to get hold of Paul - who clearly had something else on his mind right now. Which might be a good thing for him. Or might not. Inconvenient either way, as there was no one in the world like the boss for putting info together and coming up with one beautiful solution.

Paul knew things about sex that Julia didn't know, or had forgotten. He understood the power of temptation, knew how to slowly slip clothing over the body, making each movement into the suggestion of further delight. He knew how to treat one sense as perfect and complete in itself, to woo one part of the body at a time, so that, in this too, each moment was a promise of more to come. He touched her hair, her face, her neck, her belly, her thighs, her feet, beginning so lightly that it was as if rose petals were resting against her, delving more deeply as excitement grew. He spoke to her, and she felt the words and voice entering her body and, it seemed, her soul. And he laid himself open to her touch, encouraging the erotic, avoiding the mundane of the erogenous.

He turned her gently and held her from behind, one hand hard against her breasts, the other wakening every other cell of skin she possessed. "You have tantalised me all this long night," he whispered, "now it's my turn." He cupped her buttocks and slipped his hand deep between her legs. She was becoming desperate for his kiss. "Wait." He circled her, touched first the curve, then the fullness, then the nipples of her breasts with his lips. Gentle, gentle, harder, gentle.

Julia felt a terrible power. The seductress, the wicked heroine. She was incredibly desirable. And desiring. Possibilities, fantasies, were available. She found herself moving in ways she had only imagined, confident that their bodies would follow each other. Liquid.

"We could do this for hours," she said, reaching for him, taking control, bringing his mouth to hers.

"That was an excellent distraction," Paul said. "You know, I can see the sunlight this morning. Some days a little more light gets in than others."

"Is that another metaphor?" She rolled off him, curling into the curve of his body.

"Perhaps it is. But it's late and any minute I have to leave here. I have an investigation I'm committed to."

"Why are you so committed?"

"Much the same reason as you, I suspect - someone has to be."

"What are you going to do after the interviews?"

"I'm trying to trace a lawyer, the person who set up the legal side of the business. The operation is so well-crafted, so superbly convoluted that I think it's the legal aspects, or person, who'll lead us to the key players."

"Don't you trust your own profession?"

He was out of the bed, reaching for his clothes, for the new shirt they'd bought the night before. He smoothed the fabric with his hand and Julia felt again the thrill of those hands on her body. He had such passion.

"It has to be a solicitor with good knowledge of the disability laws and agreements," he was saying, doing up the shirt-buttons.

"A solicitor with knowledge of the disability laws and agreements?" Julia repeated, hearing her own voice echo.

"Yes, why? Do you think you know someone?"

She pulled up the covers. "No. I don't think so."

He waited for her to say more. "Julia, I've really got to go. I suspect you too were expected somewhere at least a short time ago." He moved over toward the bed again.

She closed her own eyes then. "I don't know, I've got a few things to think about it." Her body tightened, she willed him not to touch. He was so hard to resist.

"You'll ring me?"

"I guess so. Soon."

"All right," he said, then added: "Julia, I don't give in easily." She wondered if he were reading her thoughts.

15

The winter mist was well and truly lifted by the time Ian said goodbye to Dee. It'd been a pretty good night so he did it as lingeringly as possible, given she was on the B shift and had to go and he didn't have anything decent in the flat to eat and was desperate to get to the Seven-Eleven to buy a roll or a packet of frozen croissants.

"Are you sure you don't want a lift to the station?" he asked again, really meaning it, as she stood on the doorstep turned to go, her bag over her shoulder and her pert bottom turned toward him in a way he found particularly enticing.

"I like to walk," she replied. "Keeps me fit."

"A good thing, too." He resisted the desire to pinch her bum. "Guess I'll see you later, then."

"Guess so."

And then she was off, didn't kiss him goodbye which kind of excited him. She wasn't going to fall swooning into his arms. That had a certain style and saved a lot of angst, at least in the short term. Down the track you never knew. Lucky he was on afternoon shift, he reflected, collecting his keys and wallet from the bedside table. He'd go out, buy some supplies, have breakfast before he rang in to see what was happening with Jean. Not much was all he could figure, given he hadn't heard a word. Not a thing he could do about it.

An hour, two coffees and a bowl of cereal later, Ian took himself for a walk along the beach. It was peak hour for prams, which reminded him of when his own kids were little. It'd been good walking them down the street in their baby carriages, all the old ladies stopping and goo-ing at them. He'd done a lot of that side of the parenting, being less often fully employed than his wife. His ex-wife. She was a pushy bugger but he still kinda missed her. Old habits die hard, he said to himself.

"Hang on." He suddenly stopped, nearly colliding with an inattentive young Labrador. "Didn't some bastard ring me in the

middle of the night?" It wasn't a dream, he was dead sure of that. They didn't even drink all that much. So, a bloke who couldn't find his wife had rung him, Ian McIntosh, in the middle of the night. Thinking he might be with the wife.

He bent down, looking for a stick to throw at the over-sized mutt that was now yelping around, trying to make friends. He chucked a plastic bottle instead. It didn't travel well, too light, wobbled around in the air in a silly bloody way. The dog didn't seem to mind. The bottle reminded him that he'd got up and had a glass of water after that guy rang him. About the missing wife. The dark haired woman. Good looking, he'd said.

The guy had used his name. Something odd was going down here. He kicked away the bottle, now covered in saliva. The dog chased it, came back for more. Ian tried a can this time, no more successful. Decided to use a bit of sand for ballast, although he wasn't sure that was the right word for something that needed to fly. It worked, and the can sailed through the air, making a neat arc, coming down with an acceptable thump.

The dog scurried off. Someone must have called it. Ungrateful bastard, Ian thought, staring out at the sea. Then it hit him. He'd never spoken directly to the bugger, not even yesterday, but he'd lay his life the bloke with the poncy voice and the misplaced spouse was none other than Philip Jones, Jean's brother-in-law. And his wife was none other than Julia Prettie, whom he'd seen lusting after a blind bloke down at the Pav.

Jesus Christ, he said to himself, remembering Julia Prettie's look and also how shit-house he'd felt when his wife ran off with that other bloke. At least she'd told him before taking off and staying out all night. Philip PJ must be feeling pretty bloody small right now, he said to himself. Gotta help the bloke out, at least to find the woman. He headed for home and was cheerful when he punched in the numbers for Philip.

"Mr Prettie-Jones', he said formally, "I believe you may have rung me during the night, looking for your wife."

"Did you lie to me?" Philip snapped.

"No. Listen, I've rung to see if I can help."

He could hear Philip's confusion and realised that it was a damn stupid way of introducing the issue, that he was making bugger-all sense. "Sorry, look, it's Ian here. I manage Jean's group home. She hasn't been found."

"Yes. I talked with someone called Dee a short time ago. Sorry, did I wake you inconveniently? I didn't recognise the name and number. Near our kitchen phone, in the middle of the night. I was a little inebriated. Worried of course."

"I know, it's not a problem." He bit back the 'mate'. He did feel quite matey at the moment, but Philip PJ would have no idea why. "Look, it's just that I – it's a bit difficult – but I think I saw your wife last night. Not in the night and not by myself. When I was picking up, ah, my girlfriend. The blonde," he added, placating.

"Of course, the blonde," Philip's voice was precise.

"She was good," Ian offered.

"Excellent. Now, my wife. How could you have seen her?"

"Is she back?"

"No. As we are being honest, I would have to say I don't have any idea where she is."

"I saw her outside Bondi Pavilion. About six, maybe six-thirty."

"Bondi? We never go to there. Are you sure?"

Ian thought to himself that this was worse than getting a tooth pulled, worse even than getting one filled.

"Yeah, it was her. She's unmistakable. She was with a bloke."

"A bloke?"

"Sorry, wrong description. With a very well dressed man, thirty-five or thereabouts. Blind. At least I think so, he seemed to have one of those canes."

Philip's intake of breath was like a wind down the phone. "Tell me," he said very slowly, "a little more of what this man looked like."

"He sure made an impression," Ian admitted. "Tall. Very tall. Maybe six-six. Light coloured hair. Don't think he was bald, just fair with a real close crop. Leather coat. Must've cost a mint."

"I'm sorry. I have to ask again. Are you sure it was my wife who was with this man?"

The way he said 'this man' made Ian think Philip was more interested in the bloke than Julia, but who was he to say how a jealous husband should react? If he'd done more of a number, showed that he truthfully felt knifed in the bloody guts, maybe his own wife wouldn't have left after all. It seemed from what she said, as she packed his bags and threw them at him, that she'd been looking for some real demonstration of affection.

"Yeah," he said, "it was your wife, and if you want my advice, go after her. I made the mistake of letting mine go."

"Thanks, I'll give it some thought. Is there anything else you noticed that I should know about?"

"Sorry, I was just stopped waiting for my girlfriend, like I said." What was he, some sort of frigging detective? "Now I've gotta get to work, Mr Prettie. Good luck."

Ian sat down when the call was finished. He wouldn't like to be Julia Prettie right now. Her much-loved sister missing, her husband not giving a fuck about that, but right up his own bum about Julia being with a blind bloke who looked like a movie star. She sure was gonna get a shock or two when she turned her mobile back on. If her husband didn't get to her first. Ian swore to himself. Philip's response made the hair on his back stand up. He hadn't meant trouble.

16

There was a square window in Sonya's room, which looked over the roof of the old house next door, to the apartment towers that cluttered the Parramatta skyline. Sometimes she would lean out the window, pretending she was Rapunzel, the fairy-tale girl with the long, long hair she'd read about when she first came to this country. Not that she was hoping to be rescued by a prince; she could look after herself and be all the better for it, but the idea of a landscape uncomplicated by people and buildings and warring factions was appealing. It was boring, always having to worry. Her mother had long hair like Rapunzel's and sometimes Sonya would brush it. Her mother's hair was like a river running down her back.

Soon she would find time to clean the window, to make it sparkle and shine. Doing the outside was difficult but it wasn't such a big piece of glass and she could twist and lean to reach nearly all of it. Cleaning was a good activity; its ordinariness and its success – something old made much newer – chased the demons. Yes, it was always possible to have a good day.

When she went into the kitchen, Sonya's mother narrowed her eyes and asked Sonya how it was she was working the late-shift that day, why she could not stay home and help with the clean and shop and baking like a good daughter. "I give you money," Sonya defended herself, knowing that no amount of cash would convince her family that ties and obligations and traditions weren't far more important. Her mother went on with her cooking.

"I have to go now. Ciao," Sonya said and kissed her mother's cheek, running from the flat before she was asked why she talked like an Italian girl and didn't she know they were not good girls, Italian girls, and wore their blouses too tight and had too much showing?

She walked along the bristling nature strip, passed one tall block of flats after another. Red-red bricks with white painted windows or orange-red with aluminium frames; now and then a pale brick which she knew was called blonde. Blonde was the hair of Marilyn Monroe, not the colour of a flat-faced building full of unhappy people. Although apparently Marilyn was unhappy too.

Melanie wanted to look like Marilyn Monroe. She had her hair bleached and special dresses made, which were longer than Marilyn's so they hid the way her legs were folded in the chair. It was what happened to Melanie, as well as having to go to the lonely apartment building, that'd convinced Sonya to talk with the people who were trying to make the agency safer. She was on her way to meet with them now. And there was Avril, kicking the sign like she always did, at the bus stop they'd been meeting at since school. It was a wonder the pole hadn't collapsed on her by now.

"Heeya, Sonnie," Avril called, but she didn't sound as cheerful as usual. "Do we have to go to this crummy meeting?" she asked, as soon as Sonya was near enough. "What if one of us says the wrong thing and they do on us? What if they're really police or the welfare trying to get us to blab? We could be in serious trouble."

"We tell them false name. They don't know us. We just give them information."

"Why the hell should we bother?"

"Because Melanie is in hospital."

"Yeah, right, she made a mistake. It doesn't concern us."

"Avril, you do not think that way. I know that."

They turned left, into the dingy back streets. Not the part of town either of them preferred.

"Yeah, OK, we can talk to them." Avril finally conceded. "Hey, Sonnie, let's tell 'em our real names are false names and that'll trick 'em. Make it easier for us, too." Avril laughed and Sonya felt her heart sing a little. It was good to have Avril as her best friend.

"It's getting worse." Marcia, from 'Women Wear Wheels', didn't beat about the bush. "We didn't get out in time to get rid of the dolls this morning and the kid who found them's still shitting herself. And I'm not being metaphorical. The women are starting to panic."

Internally Paul groaned. What was he supposed to do? It was first thing in the morning, or thereabouts, he was on his way to an interview, and he was a barrister, not a policeman. 'Women Wear Wheels' refused to go to the police, arguing that the residents of the refuge would be more freaked by the boys and girls in blue than just about anyone except their husbands. He'd organised a security firm to drive by and keep an eye on the premises for the past week

and they'd sighted nothing. He earned well but he couldn't afford full-on, twenty-four-hour surveillance.

"Marcia, the bottom line is that, for immediate protection, you need to either get a group of women who can sit outside all night – under cover of course – or report this. I've got a PI trying to find the source of the whole problem, and I can organise a few more drive-bys of your place but, unless you've got complete overnight observation, there's little hope."

She was saying more, most of it in anger, but he was beyond really caring. He fiddled with the papers on his desk. He'd called in to his chambers because they were near the hotel and he needed to collect some paperwork. What he really wanted to think about why Julia had she so suddenly closed down this morning. So much warmth, then suddenly it was like swimming in the Arctic. His barrister's mind was suspicious and he didn't like that.

"Paul," Marcia was still talking. "Why have we been targeted?"

His attention came back to the problem at hand. This was a good question and one they hadn't properly discussed. One of the possibilities was that the perpetrator was a disaffected staff member but there wasn't the time for that complicated one now. "There's always chance – someone with a devotee-style fetish who passes by your place often enough to see the women coming and going and notices every one has a disability. There's clearly a lot of anger involved. Could be self-hatred – you know, some fool who thinks he's being punished or is going mad because he finds women with disabilities attractive. Might have manufactured the idea that the house was set up to taunt him with the blatant sexuality of the women he sees there."

"But you still think it's likely to be that it's the partner or husband of one of our current clients, don't you?"

"Well, particularly if there's a bloke who's obsessed with disability and feels he can't love a woman who doesn't have that disability. He'd be utterly betrayed by his wife leaving him."

"Like I said, I've checked on all the partners of the current residents. None of them in the region or fit the pattern. You could be right about a chance sighting – our whereabouts is well-protected and the women only get to us through a series of intermediaries but the 'front' of being a physiotherapy centre isn't going to con a regular passer-by for ever."

"It could be someone from some time back. Or, given the timing, it could have a link with the escort agency. If it's anyone who's

used that service – and therefore has what he considers proof that women with disabilities are whores – then they must have money. Can you go through the records and identify any possibilities?”

“I’ll try to find the time.”

“What about formally interviewing each of the current residents. It’s surprising – as I’m sure you know – how much more people give over when they are in a formal situation.”

“I hope you’re meaning more like counselling than court-room.”

“Of course.”

Having a task to do placated Marcia for the time being. She was an energetic person and although at times she was too sanctimonious, Paul liked her for her staying power and for the occasional laughter that suddenly bubbled out of her. Marcia was generous in her own, often loud, way. They discussed some details of how best to identify suspects and she rang off.

Paul needed to get to Parramatta. He wondered what it was that suddenly frightened Julia off. She’d been fey on and off, but the swift change was a product of the moment, and, he suspected, of the words spoken. Was it the brief discussion about the lawyer? If so, what did it mean?

The hotel room was sumptuous, with a view over the gleaming water to the sheen of the Opera House and down the harbour to the wooded slopes of the zoo and the small national park. A view he would never see. He was so pragmatic about his blindness, pointing it out when she needed to understand a detail, letting her enjoy embellishing the visual world for him, seducing her with the power of words and touch. Julia held up her hands in front of her, marvelling that she could see them. For ten seconds she would allow herself to feel a searing agony at his lack of sight. He would want no more, he’d hate too much sympathy. The ten seconds passed very slowly.

She reached for the coffee, which she assumed he’d had sent up when he left. She’d told him about Jean, too. Not the whole story, but more than she’d managed since Philip. She did not want to think of Philip.

The phone beside the bed rang. It was room service, asking if she would like breakfast sent up, the dining room was closing soon. No, she said politely. A few seconds later, she leapt out of bed. “Bugger it,” she said aloud. “Fear is boring and hopelessly

unattractive." She rummaged through her bag; where was her wallet, where was his card? She didn't know his mobile number.

Julia left her own phone – switched off the day before – in her bag and used the hotel handset. "It's Julia," she said, when Paul answered. "I want to come with you."

The taxi cleared the city and headed up the slipway to the Anzac Bridge. Paul had one arm on the vinyl clad armrest. He was not feeling entirely easy. Why had Julia been so insistent on coming with him? Romance? Perhaps: but they were hardly teenagers out taking recreational drugs all night, sleepily and ostentatiously showing a presence, hand in hand, at lectures sometime the next day. Her stated reasons were Jean, the desire to understand the agency and spending time with him. It was a risk, which he decided to take head-on, but a risk none-the-less.

She said nothing as they swung across the arc of the bridge. He suspected she lived nearby. The Balmain Peninsula, the narrow hilly streets of Rozelle and the wider, tree-lined ones of Annandale and Leichhardt were populated by a few aging Italian women, the occasional remnant dock worker who'd been unemployed as long as he'd been alive, and, much more plentifully, by families and academics, artists, writers with left-wing tendencies. Definitely the part of town a woman who spent her life working raising money for wells in Africa and education programs in New Guinea villages might live. Their agreement to maintain a little mystery was fine, but soon he'd begin asking a few direct questions.

They crested the hill and headed down the Western Distributor. Julia shifted on the seat and Paul felt her gaze on him.

"Who are these young women?" she asked.

"I don't know any more than you do."

She was quiet for a minute. "Paul," she finally said, "I don't want to make them feel bad about what they're doing. I know all that stuff about power, but what about people with disabilities who want to have sex? We don't live in an ideal world so most of the time it's not easy to find partners." In her mind's eye she saw Jean. Jean as an adolescent, straining her beautiful eyes every time a man walked passed, Jean at home, rubbing herself against her clothes, the bed, the furniture. Her mother crying, her father beating, beating. "Don't people have the right to decide for themselves?"

"I can't see anything wrong with a person with a disability employing a gigolo."

"Then someone's still being a prostitute, so what's the difference? And prostitution's one of the oldest jobs around - surely it's better than no job at all?" They pulled up, too quickly, at traffic lights. Julia ignored the implied reprimand in the driver's behaviour. "We have the most peculiar morality - like it's OK to sell your hands to massage a back, feet, hands, even the whole body. Which is pretty intimate, when you think about it. It's OK to pay to stimulate the aural sense, the visual sense, the tactile, smell - the olfactory sense. You can pay, or be paid, to stick just about anything in someone's mouth. Except your prick or your cunt."

The taxi driver coughed and turned the radio up.

She turned to look out the window. The glass echoed her voice slightly. "Why do we have this precious line around sex? So that we can make more money out of defining perversity? So that we can relegate some women to being wicked? Do we need whores so we can have nice women?"

She leaned toward Paul. "The driver doesn't approve, but I'm not going to apologise. There's too much pretence about sexuality and disability, 'specially intellectual disability. All this talk of normalisation - all that seems to mean is that everyone with disability should be nice, always nice, and always child-like. We really haven't given up the theory of the holy innocents."

"Do you ever resile from the positions you believe in?"

"Only if I'm convinced by another argument, or find another way of looking at the problem," she agreed. "Paul. *Have I say the wrong thing? From your point of view, am I being insensitive?*"

"To be honest I was more interested in the passion in your voice. So I'm not sure who's being insensitive."

The taxi wrenched suddenly to the left, throwing Paul against Julia, Julia heavily against the door. She gasped and they both took a moment to right themselves.

"I'll give him the benefit of the doubt and think he only saw the sign at the last moment," Julia said, as they were emptied out on a narrow street with uneven curbing and a disconcerting absence of sound. The driver was clearly eager to get rid of them: he wrote the receipt rapidly and refused the proffered tip.

They linked arms. "Are you sure you want to go through with this?" Paul asked, running his hand down the back of her hair,

cupping her head for a moment. "I worry about the potential for trouble."

"I'm a big girl now. Who does your ex-wife think I am by the way? You did get through to her?"

"My new girlfriend. I'm training you up to be a disability rights activist."

"Paul!"

"What was I supposed to tell her? That we'd talked half the night and had fabulous sex the other half, so now we're checking each other out over the next day? Seriously, I thought it best to say that I was interested in you and that you were interested in the issue. That's true enough; I didn't go into any more details. OK?"

"Shit."

"Number 206. Did I say?"

"Arrogant. That the other description I've heard of you."

"It's accurate."

The tiles on the foyer floor were scratched and grated with dirt under their feet. The fire exit stairs were locked. Paul disliked lifts; the lack of air, the looming closeness of the walls disorientated him, but there was no choice.

"Hi, Paul's told me all about you," they heard Clare say almost before they were in the door. She was speaking in a bright voice, the sort of tone used by someone not at all sure of their ground. Julia noted her lipstick had just been renewed.

"Clare, it's good to see you," Paul said.

"Avril and Sonya are waiting," was all she replied. "They're both nervous and particularly scared someone will tell their parents. Mind you, they're both in their twenties, it's just that they've had to stay living at home."

"Clare, I'd like to do this one with Julia, if that's OK," Paul said, as Clare began explaining the equipment that'd been set up for the interview. "Aren't we expecting someone called Pete soon? Julia hasn't any background so I thought it'd be best if she and I spoke with the girls and you can see Pete and not keep him hanging around." He felt mean but it was the best way to organise the morning.

"Paul, perhaps Clare and I should go in with the young woman and you wait for Pete?" Julia said, with false innocence.

"Great idea."

"Just what we need, female solidarity."

"It is." Julia's voice was emphatic.

Clare was almost giggling. "It's OK, Paul, you and Julia go in. I'm fine. Like I said, the tape's ready. And," she added, "life goes on."

Avril put the magazine down. "This is really out of date, just check the colours on that model," she said, pointing derisively at the front cover. "Sonnie, let's go, it's dumb to talk to these people. Nothin's gunna happen to us."

"Please, Avril, I can hear them. Only one minute. Please."

"What're you so scared of?"

Sonya fiddled with the hem of her skirt. It was good material, much finer than her mother could afford. "You know," she said.

"No, I don't Sonnie, not really. There's bad luck everywhere. Melanie just got a huge dose of it. Look at what happened to that kid in Year 9, like he got sucked through the blowhole at Kiama and the surf wasn't even real high. I know I haven't lived your life but I reckon it's all gonna be OK. Shit, I think they're coming."

The man was very tall and very handsome, Sonya thought, and really different from the people who lived around here. She watched, fascinated, as he took off his coat and introduced himself and the lady and found some chairs, offering Julia the one next to his. How did he know where things were when he was blind?

The magazine fell off the couch. "Wow," Avril said. After she gasped, Avril kept quiet. Australians were funny like that. They said that they didn't have classes like they do in Europe, yet Avril seemed to think these people were very important.

When they asked, Sonya told them about Bosnia, not so much about the killings, because she thought they'd know about that. She told them about the closing of the schools and the lack of clothing and how they had to rip sheets to make bandages and after a while they had to hunt for paper and soak it to make a kind of poultice – the lady knew the word – for wounds. Avril refused to discuss her background, just saying she was an ordinary Aussie, and insisting her family didn't know, must never know, and would kill her if they found out. Which could well be the truth: Sonya was fairly sure her father would kill her too. Sonya told them she and Avril had met at high school and had searched for work together for years and now had plans of working long enough to save the deposit for a flat. After that,

Avril had ambitions of better things, although Sonya wasn't clear what these were.

"How do you feel about the work itself?" Julia asked.

Avril adjusted her high, lace-up boots. The boots were gorgeous, and this year's fashion; yet they reminded Sonya of the callipers children in her home country would sometimes be forced to wear. The boots were new: she must ask Avril if a customer had bought them for her. The clients liked to dress Avril's tiny legs. It was very strange, all of it.

Avril finished with her boots. It's no more nasty than the way my mother and my father behave sometimes," she said. "Shit, I didn't mean they did anything, like, well, you know, they're OK."

Sonya couldn't agree with this estimation of the work. "It is, Avril, it is. Sometime it is terrible. They take photographs of my - my wound. Which is very ugly but that is all they look at. Sometime, I have to lie on my tummy and move my arm so." Sonya turned and thrust her severed arm up behind her so that, even with its winter covering, her arm appeared like a large and unpleasantly headed penis. "They like this," she said.

"Gees Sonya, who cares? Where else can we earn as much as this? When I walk down the street now I don't give a stuff when people stare at me, and they goggle I can tell you, 'cause I know that I'm going to get away soon. I'm gunna get to a better part of town and live in my own house, with furniture out of the catalogues and whatever I bloody well like to wear and eat and drink. The best the good girls will get is a bloke drinking a bloody beer in front of cable TV. Like my old man."

"How do you get paid?" Paul asked.

"An envelope arrives at the end of each week. We have a post office box," Sonya informed him. "It was got for us by employer."

"Cash?"

"It is wrap well, so the lady doesn't know. Nobody steal our money, they don't know it is in envelope."

"And you are paid well?"

They both nodded emphatically.

"Do you know who sends the envelopes? Can you show me one of them?"

Avril's lips pursed and she turned her head to stare at the cheap print of a tiger on the beige painted wall. Sonya looked at her, wondering if she perhaps did know some secrets. "Before we start we have interview in the city," Sonya offered.

"Do you know where in the city you went for the interview?"

Sonya swallowed. "No. They give us blind-fold. We are scared."

"It *is* frightening in the dark," Paul agreed mildly. "Did you see once you got there? Can you remember what sort of place you were in – were you in an apartment or an office, for example?"

"A beautiful office," Avril broke in. "Like the one I'll have one day. We went up in a lift and then there it was, with lovely carpet and a view. You could even see the Opera House. We had a dress fitting, they gave us great clothes." She swung her legs. "We can get more when we need them," she added triumphantly."

"You've got expensive taste, Avril," Paul said.

"Sure have." Avril was pleased, she was liking the man, Paul, and watching him, tipping her head from one side to the other, turning her neck as if she could see around and behind him. "Hey, I've never thought of it before but it must be shit not being able to see. They put that blindfold on us loads of the time. It's some sort of soft material and doesn't hurt and you can see a bit of light but there's a strap with a thingie, which doesn't come undone. Must be worse for you, like. Permanent. I'd hate that."

"Thanks. It's not so bad and I'm lucky in lots of other ways." Paul leaned forward, his arms resting on his knees. "I'm worried you don't know where you're being taken. How do you feel about that?"

Avril was relaxed now, responding to the opportunity to show herself as brave and resourceful. She detailed information about the travel arrangements, the fact that most of the work was in the day time, the customers really wanted to see them properly, although sometimes the rooms were darkened. Sonya couldn't get a word in. Avril told them that once she'd been placed on a sort of throne in the middle of a room. That was pretty cool until a spotlight was turned on and then she was too hot and felt scared cause she couldn't see into the room around her. Another secret coming out, Sonya thought, feeling a soft sweat under her arms. She hadn't mentioned the man with the throne to Avril. Was it the same man? Was this a good thing? Perhaps he would not want her back too often. Him beating himself, his wounded body. Avril didn't say anything about that. Sonya thought it was a very strange and very unfair way to respond to his wound, to want to wound others.

Avril told them, too, what the drivers were like. They always wore glasses and a hat and were called Jim, even though there were three of them. One Jim had a beard and the others didn't, although

they all seemed old to them, thirty or more. One Jim was nice, the other two didn't say anything, just swore at the traffic sometimes.

She was beginning to describe the van when Sonya interrupted, explaining that there was another driver, not for them, but a man who picked up the clients. "Yeah." Avril grinned. "He's got a crush on me. Won't get him anywhere, hasn't got what I'm looking for."

Sometimes, Sonya thought, Avril was embarrassing. She went on hastily. Two different cars collected them - one wheelchair equipped van, the other one just like a taxi, with a fake meter inside. That one didn't come very often, it mostly did the North Shore run. It meant, Avril explained, taking over from Sonya again, that they could stop in taxi ranks or wheelchair-access parks near the shopping centre they were collected from and dropped back to. All pretty smart, in her estimation. The girls all got themselves to the shopping centre, so they could pretend to their parents they had regular jobs. All that was, except one. "She's a bit of a retard," asserted Avril.

"Oh no," Julia said softly.

Sonya could see that the lady's heart was very troubled by this information. The man put his hand on the lady's arm. "We take her to her home some days. She have big house, she is happy." Sonya wanted to reassure Julia.

"Yeah," Avril offered cheerfully, "she says 'he love me, he gonna marry me,' about all her customers. That girl's sure gonna have a big wedding. There'll be about fifty grooms." Avril giggled.

"You take her home? Without your blindfolds on?"

"No cover on our eyes."

"Why don't they cover your eyes then?"

"I think it is because the retarded girl scream when there is blindfold. On me, on her, on Avril. She is happy other time." Sonya smiled wanly, proffering the explanation to Julia rather than Paul.

"Do you think you could help us find this house again? And, do you know who lives there? Are her parents there?"

Avril's glance flicked from one to the other. Sonya waited for her to speak but she clearly didn't want to give such specific information. She was afraid she would lose her job. Sonya didn't want to get either of them into trouble, either, but she knew there was evil in the world, that would slice your arm and your leg, your chest and rip out your heart. She didn't know if it truly was possible to prevent evil, or to stop it when it'd started. It was worth trying.

"We'll just look at a map and talk. It's all strictly confidential, I promise," Paul assured them.

Avril knew the city better than Sonya and eventually explained that the house was in one of the new suburbs, among the enormous mansions with five bathrooms and four bedrooms. There used to be bush, but there were no trees now and only one road in and one road out. This road system always worried Sonya. Avril traced her finger along the lines of the map. All the roads inside the estate were curvy, and joined up to each other, which made it hard to be sure which was the right one, but it was near the lake. A fake lake which was only half-built and all muddy. The girl didn't seem to have any parents, the house was run by staff, they'd been inside once and it had a little sign. She lived with two other women with Down's Syndrome.

"They've got a pool in the back yard, too. I'm gonna have one of them as well."

With this announcement Avril folded her arms over her breasts. Sonya rolled a tissue into a ball in her hand. Small shreds of the tissue fell on the floor. She could see Avril had had enough.

"You're good friends, aren't you?" Julia eventually asked, looking sad and encouraging at the same time. "That's really important. Stick with each other. And thanks for today." She stood up and, before the blind man got up, leant over and handed Sonya a card with a phone number on it. Sonya was puzzled when Julia put her fingers to her lips, but she decided to take the card and keep it.

"Yes," she said. "We are mates."

Good friends, mates. Was friendship enough to let them survive? In a way, Sonya thought, there is war everywhere. Even in Sydney with its sunshine and its confusion of people from all over the world. Not like the old battles she'd learned about in school where the soldiers arrived with their weapons and their armour and their valets or whatever they were called and the women came with the bread and the drinks and the children were safe. Today's wars didn't have to be started by the king or the queen or the dukes. Today's wars could be held by anybody who thought it was OK to step on someone else to get what they wanted. It was simple, but that was evil.

18

Philip replaced his phone on its charger. He did it with extreme care, as if he were frightened of breaking something precious. He stood, lightly tapping the back of the phone.

Julia had been seen with Paul Challinor. The description was perfect. The man was unique. Philip slammed his hand down on the table, making the vase shiver, the petals of the roses fall. He hated roses, why had she brought them into the house? They were so pedestrian.

The police had been no help. Now they wanted to link Julia's desertion with Jean's disappearance. Perhaps they were right. Perhaps she really had gone completely mad. Had snatched Jean and run away. It didn't make sense because Jean had faded into thin air before Julia had been seen with Challinor. And Jean had a history of what the group home liked to call absconding. Taking herself out of the stupid place with its petty rules and the staff's passion for tidiness. A tidiness he appreciated, being obsessively neat himself, but which he was generous enough to realise was not a priority for Jean. So Jean pissed off when it got too much. Good on her. Besides, if Julia wanted to remove her, she didn't need to be clandestine. He deleted that theory from his list. So, Julia must still be with Challinor and simply hadn't had the decency to let him know. Was she never coming home again? No, that was too extreme.

Philip paced, told himself to sit down, breathe deeply, and collect himself. He had to think. He paced more, roamed the lower floor, the brighter areas upstairs, lifting objects, smashing a few, kicking anything that was in his way. He was enjoying the disarray. If Julia could behave uncharacteristically, surely he could too. Was it simply the most vicious betrayal of all time? Was it more convoluted?

He returned to the dining room, carefully lifted the vase of roses from the table and threw it against the far wall. He retained the control not to throw it too hard, he didn't need to bleed himself. Literally speaking. He enjoyed the scoring of the wall, the small rents the glass made in the blue Julia had chosen. French blue,

that summer we had in Paris; that's what she'd said. Sweetly. Was she seeing Paul then? What did Julia actually know? The flower-water seeped down, forming a putrid pool that would soon break its meniscus and creep over to the rug. Which he had selected, from a large range, especially for this room, to complement the blue. Their blue.

It was rare for Philip to feel utterly confused. He had no idea what to do. Not yet. That's what he must keep in mind, that he would solve the puzzle. Very soon.

He sat down, orientating his body so that he could see the front door, which was open to the brilliant, bedevilling day. He couldn't imagine she'd come home, not after supping with Challinor, but the possibility must be accounted for. Every possibility must be considered. He knew now who'd rung him in the middle of the night, and why. Julia seen with Challinor could only look extremely threatening. She might have documents, for example. If she didn't have them she might well know how to access them. He didn't lock all his filing cabinets all the time. He hadn't seen it as an imperative. After all he loved her. Or had done until a very few minutes ago.

He got up, went to the kitchen and stood looking through the window onto the exuberance of the back garden. Right now he hated that garden. It was Julia's domain and she kept it dishevelled, refusing to remodel it in the much more ordered and fashionable Italian look. The excess worked, he knew that, it was lush, overgrown, enticing and full of promise. So now he hated it with the passion it called for. Smashing his hand through the window might feel good, he thought, but in the end it would be tiresome, and now that the first wild energy of anger had left him, it was easy enough not to bother.

Philip unscrewed the base of the espresso pot, found the coffee, measured it and patted it down. The question was, how did Challinor and Julia meet? That was pretty much a core issue, to use public service speak. He hadn't detected any change in Julia's demeanour. She hadn't been any more anxious or unhappy than she'd been for years. Distant, yes, but that wasn't new. He was the first to acknowledge their relationship hadn't been what it should be for a long time. Philip's hands squeezed the edge of the sculptured stone bench. It still meant something to him. The love and the hurt, they both meant a lot. Perhaps it could be said they defined him.

Still, it wasn't likely Julia would have an affair; they both valued loyalty. Challinor must have found her. How? Why? And why the hell had she gone along with it? Philip thought back to her phone

message. She'd sounded almost melancholy, saying something about principles. Odd. She'd been referring to their past, their own past, when they'd worked together in the student union, radical movements, that sort of youthful thing. Was she with Challinor then?

The more he thought about it, the only sensible explanation was that Challinor had targeted Julia, found who she was, had her followed, approached her in some way – of course she would feel obliged to speak with someone disabled, given her background – and was now using her to gain information. Valuable information. Was it going too far to conjecture that Julia was being held under duress? The man was a maverick, capable of just about anything. Not to mention all those years in court; he'd been born with the skill to act, and he'd honed it on the most demanding of stages.

He picked up the kitchen phone. "Ian, sorry to disturb you again. It's Philip Prettie-Jones. Could you just run me through again what you saw in Bondi the other night?"

"Look, I was just leaving for work. Ring me back in five, will you. I'll just let them know I'll be a bit late."

When he rang again Ian repeated what he'd told him before, speaking so carefully and haltingly Philip decided he must have written down the details. He told himself not to be paranoid, that there was nothing in this for Ian, whoever he was. He kept his voice as chummy as he could without resorting to too many colloquialisms.

"Did you, ah, did you notice anything about their interaction? Could you see whether Julia was being coerced? In some way?"

"You want the truth?"

"Yes."

"Then you're a mug, mate. She looked like she wanted to fuck the arse off him. Sorry, but that's the way it was."

Philip murmured a few more questions and hung up. He might need to call in a couple of favours with friends, after all. Finding Julia might not be desirable, but it was imperative. To hell with telling her about Jean, she could find that out for herself.

The sweat under his arms collected before running down inside his shirt. And it wasn't even hot. Ian was getting pretty worried about Julia Prettie. It'd been one big mistake to 'fess up to her husband. Right now, he'd been called in to the house to deal with the police, who were big and burly and completely confused by Dave and Graham who were throwing their floppy bodies around with the

excitement of seeing two men in uniform in their own house. "Knew we should've brought a female officer," Ian heard one of the coppers say. Funny how everyone thought women were biologically destined to deal with disabled people, not to mention all the other uncertainties of existence. Then, maybe they were right. His ex-wife was always better with the kids than he was, kinda knew what they were crying about, and how to comfort them while he was always asking them for information, like what'd gone wrong, who'd done what. Which only started more fights.

Christ, Ian suddenly thought, what if Jean were dead? He coughed. Hadn't let that idea in before. Suddenly he hated the coppers even more than usual. They could've come sooner, for Christ's sake.

"You got a photo?" the shorter, fatter one asked. Young to have a gut that size, Ian reflected, going to the office to fetch a few, which Dee'd got out to make up missing person posters, but Ian wouldn't let her. Their jobs'd be in the sewer if they put up homemade A4 posters looking for a lost retard all over the telegraph poles of a suburb like this.

The fatter one whistled. "Now there's a good looking dame."

His mate, clearly gay and not impressed, pulled the photo away. "She's not the one who's lost, idiot."

"Jesus, when do you think I was born?" He turned to Ian. "Who's the looker?"

Ian passed a photo without Julia in it. These guys were parodies of themselves. "Her sister. This pic's more what you want, I reckon."

Gay-boy agreed while fat-boy seemed like he was going to launch into an argument. Ian grabbed the first photo back. Should he tell the coppers that both sisters had disappeared? Just vanished. Interfere while the going was good, before Philip Prettie-Jones could get his hands on her. Except that he knew Julia wasn't really lost. Not in the least bit. And probably not in the market for being found.

He stuck with trying to explain about Jean. It gave him the jitters to think about her out there, hardly able to speak a decent word, even less able to understand questions and answer them. No money, no road skills and if you asked where she lived, she'd go into some gabble about Dave or maybe the van or what she had for dinner last night. Couldn't give you her name and address, in fact didn't know that's what you wanted, no matter how many times or how loudly or how slowly you asked. Despite thirty-odd years of well-meaning

people trying to teach her. At least she hadn't been found squashed in the middle of road. Made no sense, though. If you came across a woman like Jean, it wasn't like you'd take her home and just let her move in with you. You'd have her to the police station within seconds. Well, a bit bloody longer, given how hard it was to find a station these days. And given how recalcitrant Jean was when she didn't want to do something.

"Where's her sister, why wasn't she the one to report this?" Fat-boy was smarter than he looked.

He was saved the hassle of answering. Gay-boy was staring at a sheet of paper on a clipboard type thing. "Hey," he said, "the sister's missing, too. Julia - that her name? Pretty's a pretty weird last name if you get my drift."

"Prettie, short 'e'," Ian said routinely. "If you call Jean Miss Pretty she won't have a clue who you're talking about."

"Did know the sister had pissed off, too? Could they be somewhere together?"

"Ah, not really." Shit. "We tried to ring her, of course. Several times. She isn't answering her phone and she hasn't been at work. For all we knew, though, she could've been having a day off by the beach or in the mountains or whatever. So we rang her husband, Mr Philip Jones, and left a message with him. About Jean. I guess he must have rung you about Julia."

They were nodding their heads. "We only just got this. Newest notifications," Gay-boy said. "She can't've been gone long. What'd'ya reckon about a connection between them?"

"Why don't you talk to her husband?" Ian pulled a pen out of his shirt pocket, as if he was going to do something official. Just like them.

"Sergeant's done that." There was a tick on the sheet, next to Julia's name.

The police bumbled around for a bit longer, having a go at asking Dave about when he'd last seen Jean. A useless exercise if ever there was one. Dave didn't have a clue about past tense questions and thought the copper was asking him to find Jean so set off looking and got himself all freaked out because she wasn't in her room or in the loo or anywhere. Then they decided to take some of her clothing in case they needed to use sniffer dogs, although Ian couldn't figure out where the hell they'd sniff. Dave had another paddy, thinking they were stealing Jean's stuff. Or something like that, Ian didn't pretend to be a mind reader.

"You guys done enough?" he asked while Dave sat blubbering on the couch and Graham ran up and down the hallway banging doors and calling out "Dee, Dee' - which didn't mean the fine young blonde woman Ian was attracted to, but was Graham's word for Jean. "Maybe you could actually go look for her now or something?"

"You telling us our job?" Fat-boy stepped forward.

"Nah, sorry, just getting anxious, mate."

Once they were gone he made a cup of coffee for the boys and settled them back in front of the cartoons. They liked the old Warner Brothers ones best. Roadrunners and coyotes being dinged on the head was a laugh, all the new stuff with the word gags and the story lines in outer space were a waste of time for them. Then he made a coffee for himself, strong, sweet and far too much milk, seeing he was supposed to be watching his cholesterol. Took it into the office for two minutes of peace and time to ring Julia Prettie again. It was clear enough either she hadn't turned up again at home or, if she had, Philip had been withholding information. Julia would've rung if she'd heard, so the obvious conclusion was that she hadn't seen Philip yet at all. Interesting.

Three times he dialled her mobile number. Three times it rang out. No redirection to message bank. Nothing. Should he try the home number? Ian slurped his coffee, walked out, checked on the boys (Dave'd spilled another friggin' cup) and wandered down the hallway. Somehow he hoped Jean'd just pop out from under the bed or something. She didn't. Naturally. Nah, he wouldn't ring Philip Jones, not at this hour, wasn't worth the fear and loathing.

"They were brave, Avril and Sonya," Paul said. "They can't guarantee the agency won't find out, that they weren't followed. Brave in fronting us - no matter what we do, we appear authoritative, it's the penalty of being middle class."

They were walking along the edge of the Parramatta River, which a decade or so ago had been a sludge-thick, polluted stream running between concrete banks. Rivers were back in fashion and this, added to environmental concerns, had seen the river dredged, some storm-waters rerouted, the ferries slowed to avoid eroding the mangroves near the banks and the amount of rubbish swirling mid-stream or washed up on shore greatly reduced. Even in the centre of town the river was now a good place to be.

"I'm worried about destroying Avril's ambitions," Julia replied. "I'm acquired middle class by the way. Not to the manor born. Luck got me in its clutches early on and school rescued me from a future which could have been like theirs I guess."

"Except that you always had the power of a much more traditional beauty."

"That's one of the things I meant by luck," she laughed.

They turned into a cafe, the rich smell of olive oil and sharp cheese drawing them to a table.

"Why do you think they agreed to be interviewed?" Julia returned to the subject, as they waited for their lunch.

"One of Warren's contacts organised it. Lexi does lots of support work for sex workers. She wouldn't have pressured them. Presumably fear is the answer - they're frightened of what might happen to them and wanted someone to know who they were and where they were. Which we do and we won't forget."

"Fear," Julia repeated. "The girls mustn't have a clue what to expect, what the clients will want them to do. Devotees haven't exactly been featuring in the Hollywood films or soapies most kids learn about sex from. Then they're in a hotel room, locked away, and many of them with physical impairments that make running impossible. It's scary stuff. I think I'm beginning to understand why you're so

against this agency, even if it does provide jobs with a decent wage."

"You're worried about the group home, aren't you?" he asked.

Her hand reached over to him. Her skin was cold, despite the space-age gas heater the restaurant had placed among the outside tables. "Yes. It's not Jean's, but I need to find out more. It frightens me that government monitoring of group homes is so poor that someone could get away with this."

"Like I said, a clever legal mind."

"I wish you wouldn't say that."

Why not? he wondered. He didn't want to let it go but there was no choice, the phone rang.

"Boss, where the hell are you?"

"Lunching."

"One minute you're as serious as a ship's ballast and next minute you're a hot air balloon."

"I take it you have some news, which I should've heard earlier. I've been in the meeting with the girls."

"It's not exactly news. Lexi's been on the blower and breathing heavily at that. An' I know I'm not that exciting, Karen reminds me regularly enough. The thing is Lexi's scared, and so's Carrie - which is enough to make me shiver. Or maybe wilt." Warren laughed at his own joke.

"Specifics?"

"None to report. She just told me we should be careful, very careful. You know how close those girls are to what's being said on the street, though. A warning from them's worth taking into account."

Their food arrived and Paul heard Julia thank the waiter. He thought of Yannis, and wondered whether to remind Warren of him. Yannis was another P.I., employed by one of the firms in the sex industry to dig some suitable dirt on another. Yannis was smart, but the turf wars could have been fought on the Somme. Yannis survived, but he spent two years in rehab. And walked now with the aid of a frame. He wasn't the only one literally torn apart by an industry that could be like a pride of starving wolves. "OK. What do you want to do?" he asked Warren slowly. "If the warning's serious, do you want to back off for a while? I know you can take care of yourself, but you've got a wife and kids."

"You're right there boss. On the other hand me dead of boredom won't pay the bills. Besides, I got a better plan. One that'll take me out of harm's way. I got a coupla leads on who might be the

mastermind. How d'ya feel if I follow them for a day or so? Some paperwork involved and chatting to people who won't suspect a thing. Bankers and the like."

A banker who wasn't wouldn't be suspicious? Warren obviously had different definitions and experience than he did. "Fine, great." After all he'd never had the slightest reason not to trust Warren's methods.

"Warren, I presume." Julia said, as he stowed the phone in a pocket. "I'd like to meet him some time. What's he up to now?"

How much did he say? She gave no impression of a woman who was easily spooked. The warning was amorphous, nothing to get a hold on. "He's chasing a mastermind," was all he said, deciding they could discuss more after lunch. As far as he knew neither of them had eaten all day.

"This risotto's good," she said. "Do you still think the brains behind this must be someone with disability connections?"

"Seems so. I've checked everywhere I can, but that doesn't mean I'd find someone well-hidden."

Two cars, blaring sound from speakers set in front and rear bumper bars, pulsed up the street. Around them the volume of speech adjusted to overcome the disturbance. Nearby a child cried as the bass beat against its fine eardrums.

"Why did you leave Clare?" Julia asked, after the car completed two tours of the street. The drivers looking for their lost egos, Paul presumed. He was pleased she'd changed the subject. It wasn't his usual style to give away so much information about an investigation.

"Why did I leave Clare? I left her for what some people might think is the strangest of reasons. I left her because she liked my disability. In fact, she thrived on it." He pushed his plate aside. "I ask myself was it always that way and I was slow to perceive it? I don't know. She was always encouraging me to get more involved in disability movements. And she would insist on being in very public places. You know, Kelllet Street, Oxford Street, anywhere we could have coffee at a pavement table and someone would trip over me because I wouldn't see them and you know how bloody long my legs are. We would meet the in-set and she could show me off. After a while I felt like a circus act."

He adjusted his glasses. "I know you'll say that we've just been discussing this and it's – what, paranoid, unnecessary? – for me to be taking this so personally. That all sorts of people have all

sorts of tendencies and fetishes and that's what makes the world possible because we are not all out of *Vogue* or whatever. Any argument like that is perfectly logical, reasonable and no doubt true. But to be loved for what makes your life shit is not, in the end, very satisfying. I can put up with being blind. I have a good life but, whichever way I reason, the disadvantages are great."

"Seems reasonable," was Julia's only comment.

Seagulls, eager to find their way upriver, flapped by. Paul smiled. "Enough said. We'd better get on with finishing today's commitments so we can meet again by dinner." He was pleased Julia hadn't rushed to express sympathy. She was good at avoiding the inane.

"One more night out of reality? I'll have to turn my mobile on again some time."

"Haven't you?"

"Why have life punctuated by the petty desires of others'?"

"How would you feel about coming to my place? I know it's not as anonymous as the hotel but I'm not a bad cook and we can be more private."

He heard her breath catch. "Sure," she said, slowly, "but I'll need to go to the hotel first to collect my things and check out."

"You're going to work now, aren't you? So, say six-thirty, seven-ish? I'll make sure I'm home by then."

She touched his arm in assent.

He stood up. "You know, you may be right about Clare. Maybe it just went stale. She wants to be committed all the time, wedded to the cause. Whereas, me, sometimes I just want to have fun."

On the way into town Paul checked with Clare and again with Marcia. There was no response to his call to Clare, although he had that uncanny feeling that she was listening as he left a message. Marcia was more forthcoming.

"Do you know how many women we have go through this place?"

"Too many. Domestic violence is through the roof in the disability sector. Greater frustrations," he replied, politely enough.

"All right, you do know. We're all scared shitless over here. I didn't tell you but one of the dolls this morning was actually filled with shit. Real shit."

Paul wished he didn't have to take this information on board. A message? A symbol of defilement? Or was the perpetrator a man with more than one paraphilia? 'Coprophilia' it was called, the attraction to faeces. It wasn't uncommon for a person with one unusual sexual interest to have another in their repertoire.

"That's a bit much," he agreed. "Have you - ?"

An exasperated sigh. "I will go to the police. I need to get the board's formal approval first, but the residents have all voted for it. Except Marie, but we won't go there. I'm about to begin going through the files. They're big. Much easier to read on paper."

Marcia, too, had vision impairment and needed to use extremely high magnification. The computer could do it readily enough but she preferred her large bubble-magnifier that moved much more quickly over a page than a computer could allow her to scan.

Paul thought for a minute. "Do you have notes on who has represented the women? Legally, I mean. Or their husbands, I suppose. We could go back over some years."

"For some, yes."

"Note those down for me, email them to my office. Home as well."

Marcia was quick. "Are you looking for a connection with the escort agency?"

"Could be there."

He hung up thinking Marcia might be a pleasant woman if only she could relax.

The odour inside the van was of too much perfume. The girls were asked not to use chemical sprays, even the famous brands that appeared in the movies and that seductive people were supposed to wear. Some girls couldn't help themselves. Sonya didn't like perfume. The idiot-girl did. She collected small bottles, which made clinking sounds at the bottom of her bag. She always carried a large bag, an ugly oblong thing with a rip in the plastic outside. Nothing could separate her from the bag. The nice Jim had realised this, only reminding her now and then that she shouldn't take it on the job with her. Avoiding the tears that flowed if he tried to take it away. Sometimes, with the other Jims, the idiot-girl scratched or bit. Avril loved perfume too. She read the women's magazines and kept up with what was the most fashionable. For women and for men. Avril was always expecting the perfect man to be around the corner, even disguised as a client. It was very sad.

Sonya resettled herself on the seat. The cloth covers were soft enough but she'd been sitting in the van too long. They'd been out once since lunchtime and Avril should've been back forty minutes ago. Their appointments had been within walking distance, so it was easy to be back on time. She and Jim had checked the hotel in case Avril was still there and they'd been twice around the block and through the car park. Now they were waiting again outside the Mall. It made her fidgety. What if her mother came by? Or one of the old ladies her mother had cups of coffee and cigarettes with? The windows were tinted and it was late in the day, but they'd know it was her anyway. Jim was more scared of the parking police who he said were all nosey buggers. Sonya couldn't understand why the word 'bugger' was so popular. Surely people wouldn't use it so much if they knew what it really meant. Australians were often ignorant, she found.

The western sun reflected in the mirror-glass sides of the buildings across the road. Still no Avril. Jim turned on the engine again. Didn't say anything, just went down past the train station, driving slowly. Sonya swallowed, her mouth felt too dry. Her lips were covered in balm and then in lipstick and then in gloss but the

soft skin that edged them felt like it had been stung by a thousand tiny bees

Hundreds of people around the train station. Some of them respectable enough, old ladies and gents, twenty or thirty countries of origin. Big and little boys slouching, in full view, so they could be seen and admired. She liked the word slouch. It sounded ugly and lazy like its action. Tired-looking girls with too much make-up pushed young children in strollers, plastic bags slung over the handles of the baby carriages. Some pushed in a kindly fashion, others as if each turn of the wheel was running over their own bodies. Sonya felt better about her job when she saw those girls. One or two she recognised from school: they were no older than eighteen or nineteen. Where was Avril? She'd gone to school with these girls too, although they'd all too often ignored her or hissed at her, or walked around her like she had a disease. Should they ring her home? It would be terrible if her family found out. Would they lock her in? Would they ring Sonya's mother?

Jim pulled into the bus lane outside the station. 'What?' she heard him ask loudly of someone on the other end of the phone. Then a few more mumbled words before they drew away fast. A few quick turns and they were in the one-way system of roads that Sonya found so confusing and then into a car park and Jim was getting out the front and coming around to the side door to her. He wasn't looking happy.

'You talked to Avril today?' he asked as soon as he'd slid the door open.

'Yes. Of course, when we check our jobs. They both local.' She wasn't going to tell him about the morning's meeting with the handsome blind man and the beautiful woman. It was already frightening her that maybe their talking had something to do with Avril's disappearance. She swallowed again and again.

'After that? After you got to work?'

'Of course not. We are busy.'

'You sure you didn't speak to her on the phone or anything?'

Sonya's lips tightened. She didn't like the lines on this Jim's forehead. He was her favourite driver, the one who treated them like they were workers just like the girls in uniform who worked the checkouts in the supermarket - only they had more class. One of the other men called them 'the tarts' and swore loudly on his mobile while he was driving. He also listened to unpleasant music on the CD player in the van. The words made even Avril blush.

The fluorescent lights in the car park spat on. Jim stood outside the van. "I've got orders to take you straight to work. Then I gotta go get one of the other girls to replace Avril." Jim looked behind him, listened, and then climbed into the van and pulled the door shut after him. "Sonya, stop looking so bloody scared and think about when you last saw her. Where was she?"

The closing of the door shut off the van-light. Jim was blue-white around the edges but seemed to have no real face, just a mask with teeth. She decided it would be best to answer him. "Going to hotel. You know. Hotel with big sign. She have call to go there and she walk. I walk other way to see client too." Sonya gestured in the direction of the park, where the less impressive buildings squared themselves against the streets.

"Was she OK? I mean, like you didn't get the idea she was going to skip, go somewhere else?"

"Avril? No. She want work. Money."

"Y'right there. Problem is, she didn't turn up. The client's rung the boss and complained. He's pretty pissed off. I better get you sorted and then go back and look for her. She's pretty bloody easy to spot."

Sonya folded her arms over her breasts, neglecting the absence of her left arm. She often did this, took up the position she'd seen her mother and her aunts and her grandmothers all adopt in times of trial, forgetting that she didn't have one arm to cross over the other. "I do not go."

"Y'sure do. Otherwise we're both fucked. Avril, too. You don't care maybe, but this is an operation that is supposed to run smoother than milk out of a cow's udder. No funny business. And that includes you and me being late for a job."

In the half-light his arm looked like a skeleton's as he reached for the door handle. "Look mate, you're a nice kid. I don't wanna see no harm come to you or your friend Avril, even if she's a bit high and mighty for my liking. Best way's to get you where y'going and then get myself back here quick smart. She'll be 'round some place, don't worry. Prob'bly went shopping."

Jim clambered out of the side door and heaved himself into the front seat. Sonya felt the tears at the back of her eyes. This annoyed her, there was no point to them, they didn't bring the dead back to life, they didn't repair the rips and gouges in the flesh, nor the deeper, darker wounds in the heart. She crossed herself and

prayed. Avril would never go shopping, not when she should be working.

The slow sound waves of a ship's hooter splintered Philip's consciousness, which was sharp and terribly unhappy. He looked out through the windows – lightly salt-smeared – to the empty space of the sky, which was all he could see from his study. It was too warm for the time of year, he reflected, shifting his body irritably in the thick woollen jumper he'd donned earlier and couldn't be bothered removing now.

Philip blanched when two of his mobile phones rang at the same time: there were few people who had the number of the second phone. He picked it up, checking for the in-coming number on the display. "Private number calling" was all he could read. "Robin speaking," he said.

"Robin," the cultured voice responded – emphasising his code name in a manner clearly intended to be threatening. "Have you cleaned up this little matter yet? I've had a number of worried men on the phone. It's a real spot of bother."

Philip drew in his breath. Slowly, as softly as he could. He didn't want to answer. His known world was collapsing around him and there was a man on the other end of the phone talking about a spot of bother. Suddenly Philip felt small and insignificant and very, very stupid. Suddenly his whole life seemed to be misguided. No, worse than that, inane. A parody of what a life should be. He could blame Julia and her not wanting to have children. That was certainly one of his own secret, festering sores. But such blame would only gain a notch in the rating of pathos. He was puny, caught like a cocky insect, having flown too close to the web. At the same time he wanted to poke fun at this pompous man on the other end of the phone. The man who was sitting with his over-used and whatever-sized prick limp and damp between his thin thighs. Probably thinking of the money he'd invested and the other, not inconsiderable, amounts he'd spent, the pleasures he'd had, those he anticipated and those he might miss out on in the future – given the difficulties his operation was experiencing. And, like Philip, he was probably thinking of the wife who should have left him years ago and might now finally do so.

"I would have said more a splash. Of bother. John." Philip rejoined, not meaning anything in particular. Stalling for time.

"You always have shown a tendency to prefer words to action," the voice intoned. Deadpan.

"Well said," Philip admitted. "However, it is under control."

"Not the impression I have been given at all."

"The impression you've been given may well be inaccurate. It's a minor – um – dishevelment, if you will pardon the awkward terminology. Nothing more. It'll be sorted by tomorrow."

"And what makes you think that?"

"Intuition. More precisely, an excellent business sense and the fact that I have set repairs in motion." Philip was pleased he sounded so imperturbable.

"Robin, you will have to prove that to me."

Philip picked up a piece of paper, rolled it, closed one eye and aimed at the antique clock – French, not overly ornate for the mid-nineteenth century – which adorned the mantelpiece. He was pleased when he was accurate and the paper hit the centre of the glass, bounced away and landed on the couch. He screwed up another piece. The man on the phone rattled on. Philip remembered the evening they'd spent together not so long ago. The names were born then. He, as Robin Hood, taking from the rich, giving to the poor. The man as Little John, the faithful giant. Who, unlike Robin, was not hung in the end, his body not left, swaying in the wind, to rot.

21

Paul had himself dropped off just short of the El Alamein fountain in King's Cross. The Cross was where Lexi had found a threat sharp enough for her to be warned off and where Warren had observed the sex shop that was their best real evidence of a network of active devotees. More importantly for him, at this moment, was the fact that the people who really counted in the sex trade kept a very careful eye on whoever came in, out and through the Cross. No matter how many brothels opened in the suburbs, how popular phone and cyberspace sex had become, no matter how many prostitutes worked for low fees from their homes, the Cross was the epicentre.

He stood, meaning to be noticeable, before moving, his cane out, to one of the benches. Clare would berate him for taking risks, remind him that he was an easy target. Tough. Up here, on the crest of the hill, the city took on the quality of a film-set. Sound and movement everywhere, people calling, knocking into each other, all demanding attention. Officially he didn't know that Warren met Lexi here, but he'd worked it out some time ago. Her window looked down at the fountain and he fully intended that she or Carrie would see him among the muddle.

After a few minutes, a body, slow and heavy, landed beside him. "Got a smoke, big fella?" a male voice slurred.

"Sorry, don't."

The man smelled - stale food, staler urine, recent drink, the usual. He shifted to lean closer and the scent became an odour and then a stench. It was extraordinary, Paul thought, the different values different humans placed on each of the five senses. For Proust, for Hegel, smell was central, for this man it was presumably irrelevant.

"You looking for trouble or fun or what?"

Paul hesitated for a moment. It was possible the fellow had borrowed his clothes, his slurred speech and his rank odour from a guidebook to good surveillance. The other side of the coin was that, if he were genuine and this were his patch, he might have some useful gossip that could be exchanged for the price of a good meal or a

bottle of scotch. "I'm seeing what comes along. Know of anything out of the ordinary?" Paul replied.

"Nah, nothin' real special. Nothin' changes. Not round here." The man shuffled away along the bench. "Wish I could help you out mate."

"You could help me for a few minutes, if you wouldn't mind," Paul said slowly, measuring the effect of his words by any change in movement, physical alertness and, when it came, speech tone.

"Got nothin' better to do. Is there a few bucks in it?"

"Fifty. All I want you to do is stay here, pretend to go to sleep and watch to see if there is anyone showing any particular interest in me, anyone you think might be watching me."

"Fifty bucks?"

"Yes, if you can do it for five or ten minutes here and then discreetly as I walk down in the direction of Darlo."

"I'm your man. You can pretend you're trying to shake me off from begging. I'll just bang into y'now an' then like I'm being real hassling. Anythin' else you want me to notice like?"

"How good are you at clocking trouble - preferably before it happens?"

Paul heard the man rub his calloused fingers together, blow on them, rub again. The bulk suggested a stockpile of clothing, but heaven knew what warmth there was in any of it. "I used to be a cop," the man said as if speaking to himself. "I reckon I still got a bit o'it in me."

"Guess you meet a few of your old colleagues around here then."

"More of 'em dressed like me than like you, mate. Y'ready? Name's Ted."

"Peter."

"Don't bullshit me, you're Paul Challinor, s'not that long since I left the force."

"Sorry."

"Nah, normal."

They bumped along the footpath, Ted attaching himself to Paul's cane as if trying to trip him up, but not having the co-ordination to manage it. Now and then Paul lost the intensity of his scent. If he were doing the job properly Ted'd be urinating against a bin or collapsing on the edge of the gutter, pulling himself up and stumbling after Paul as if he suddenly rediscovered his prey. Which seemed to be pretty much what he was doing. Paul was on high alert, reasoning

that a man as well-trained as Ted could have better reasons than the proffered fifty dollars to keep track of him.

When they were near the intersection with Victoria Rd, Paul stopped suddenly, forcing Ted to collide with him. "OK, OK," he said, feigning a tolerant anger for an alcoholic loser, "I'll buy you a drink."

They headed for the bar nearby.

"There's trouble brewing."

"Give me some details?"

"One of the places we passed is a brothel, right? Well, more'n one is, but you'd know the one I mean. Classy. There's a window in the front room all decked out in finery - the red velvet style." Ted guzzled his drink, pushed his glass across the table, indicating his need for another. Paul signalled. "So, in that room were a coupla characters who don't usually spend a lotta time together, if you get my drift. In fact it could be said they generally prefer shotguns at close range."

"They were in some sort of discussion?"

"Deep conflag and they're not hidin'. The curtains coulda been drawn, they wanted a few more locals than me to see them in there together."

"A show of strength. Ted, I'm going to ask you to take me back there and introduce me to those ladies and gentlemen."

"You're bloody kidding."

"No. First, though, the open window. Is it visible from the lane opposite it?"

Ted scratched for a moment, releasing more odour. Paul was surprised he'd been let in to the bar. "Lane? Yeah, sure. Why?"

"Do you happen to know a shop down that lane? Not much on the shop front, unusual sex tools inside."

"That pervert place?"

"Would whoever was in the shop, or coming and going from it, be able to see the group in the window? Would they feel like the shop was being watched?"

Another scratch, a cough. "Maybe."

"And there was no indication of anyone having an interest in watching me? Except yourself of course."

"There might have been a little tweak of excitement. Just a wee bit."

"So, they won't be shocked if I arrive. Good. Ted, did Lexi send you?"

"How the hell did you come up with that?"

"Most of us like to think we're famous but I've only been back in Sydney a few years, you wouldn't have known me, or known of me, when you were in the force."

"Smart bastard. Lexi said to say hello. She saw you by the fountain. She passes a bit o'work my way now and then, I guess she must've had some idea of why you were hanging around."

"If I'm a smart bastard, she's a Mensa mind. Give her my love." Paul smiled, lifting his glass. "I owe her one. Now it's time I paid that visit."

The young woman at the car hire company wasn't to be hurried. "The weather's beautiful today," she said, "I'm so glad the wind's dropped for now." She tapped the computer keys one at a time, carefully watching her own manicured and accessorised fingers. "Had these done this morning," she offered, "my best friend's engagement party's on tonight."

"That'll be great. Have you got a car that isn't white?" Julia asked, trying to keep the impatience out of her voice.

"We've been told to recommend white because it stands out so well and it's safer." She returned to tapping, her brow wrinkled. The process of finding a car seemed to be a difficult one.

"Of course, and that's important. I just have a bit of a thing about white cars. It's personal." Julia leaned on the counter in what she hoped was a manner confidential enough that Kylie - that being the name on her tag - would experience a brief moment of bonding and let her have a car. By now a bright pink one would do.

Kylie turned slowly on her heel, pushed aside the carrier bag containing new shoes for tonight's event and bent to open a cupboard. From it she selected two sets of keys, which she held up to the light as if they might mystically convey to her what she should do. "Red or blue?" she asked, facing the window and not Julia.

Blue, Julia thought, please let her give me blue. Red would be as easy to spot as white. And then told herself: this is ridiculous, being held to ransom by this kid. "Blue," she said, forthright.

"The red car's got much nicer upholstery. It'd go well with your coat."

"Blue."

Languidly, Kylie handed over the keys, gave directions to the parking bay, demonstrated the swipe of the card Julia would have to

use to exit the reserved area, and retired to the chair-swirling she'd been amusing herself with when Julia walked in. Car hire at 2pm in Parramatta on a winter's afternoon was not a high demand business.

After the job, Sonya returned to the pick-up point. She walked quickly, telling herself Avril would've reappeared. She was even enjoying the walk – she liked it when jobs were arranged this way, avoiding the van drop-off, making it seem they were ordinary girls visiting friends, or on their way to the shops. Yes, Avril would be waiting for her with Jim, giggling in her usual way. She'd tell a story about having fallen and hurt herself, like the young man outside the Mall, and her phone being broken in the fall, so she couldn't let them know. Or she'd say she'd run into someone important and she'd wink at Sonya to let her know that meant she'd earned some extra money on the side. If she was hurt, it was not too badly hurt. If she'd gone to hospital, they would send her straight home and then it was possible that her parents had confiscated the phone, thrown it into the toilet. Avril's parents thought her disabilities were punishment for a sin they or their forefathers had committed, a sin which God could not forgive and must visit on the family generation after generation. Avril stuck her finger in the air when she told Sonya about this.

Yes, Avril could get away from anything. She was tough and clever and knew what she wanted. Impossible to keep her down. Yes, Sonya said to herself, she'll be there.

It was a different Jim, sitting hunched over the wheel in the van. This was strange – a change in the middle of the shift – and made her anxious. He was parked in the disabled zone, with the sticker showing and the side-panel labelled with "Local Disability Support Services." Sonya bit her lip and walked straight up to the van. It was empty. Sonya sniffed. Avril's scent hung around, but stale, not recent.

"I fix make-up," she said to the Jim, pointing to the shopping centre entrance. Would he follow her? They didn't like changes in routine.

As soon as she was out of sight, she made a phone call. "Where is Avril?" she asked the lady who did the calls. The lady didn't have a name, just a set of instructions.

'I don't know. It's Avril's choice whether she turns up for work or not.'

"She is missing! She went to job and did not come back. You must look."

"She didn't turn up for the job. This means she decided not to go to work. So, it's not our responsibility."

Sonya closed her eyes against the horror of the world. Would it never stop? "She is lost," she repeated. "She is lost."

The woman took no notice. She sounded cheerful. "This afternoon Stephen has booked - "

Sonya pressed the off button and walked into the toilet cubicle. She would flush the phone away. It was dirtier than anything that came from the body. No, she needed the phone. It would help find Avril. She would buy a new sim-card, a prepaid one. She would throw the old card into the toilet. Then the people would ring her and their calls would be lost in the sewer. They would have two missing girls to deal with. Perhaps they would notice that. The customers would be angry, very, very angry. Specially Stephen, she was sure she could rely on him for a white-hot anger that would scorch them into action. It was very good he had booked her, after all.

Her past had taught Sonya to be alert for signs of the time to leave. Leave the school, the shop, the house, the country. The signs were there now. She must go, and quickly. Sonya made her way carefully from the toilets, down the echoing tiled corridor and into the main section of the shopping mall. So far, so good. Jim would expect she was taking time over her makeup.

The mall was a huge place, jangling with muzac, babies crying, mothers placating, teenagers squabbling. Everywhere there were big signs, sale racks, shopping trolleys, coffee shops with tables outside, people, it should be easy to disappear. She dived into a shop, a smart boutique on the upper floor. She would buy herself a coat that covered her arm. Or lack of arm. She would put her hair in a bun on her head and look severe, like a woman who worked in an office. And then she would leave by another entrance. Not much time, for the lady with no name would be ringing Jim by now and saying that Sonya was rude and bad and had hung up on her and must be found. Her best hope was that he would check the exits first, cruise the streets around, looking for a runaway one-armed girl.

22

"We're happy to support you in any way possible, let you know all we know," the throaty-voiced Angela said as soon as Paul sat down.

An offer in a million and very interesting that they should make it. The agency was doing more than ruffling a few feathers. Paul focussed his thoughts, knowing he must play the game their way. The men and women in this room were powerful and as usual, with power came ruthlessness.

"You want this agency stopped obviously, but may I ask why that's so important?" he asked, politely.

Glasses clinked and chairs creaked. The three women and two men around the table were presumably exchanging glances, assessing each other's silently expressed opinions of how much should be said, what information might work against them.

"You may ask."

He smiled. Clearly this was going to be a formal meeting. "Why?" he said, "are you prepared to band together to fight a so-called escort agency that's serving a niche market, and is geographically, and in terms of service-direction, out of your area?"

A cigarette was lit, the smoke not unpleasant. "It's a matter of principle," Angela offered.

"We're losing custom, as you can imagine," Shamin added. "Previously we could charge a premium price for supplying similar services."

"Mostly with imitation disabilities, if what I hear is correct?"

"Naturally, we're not in the business of preying on the most fragile members of our society. I am a patron of the Paralympics. We have very good makeup artists and some excellent equipment. In fact some of us have invested considerable capital."

"So, loss of revenue and return is an issue, but what else?"

"As I said, principle. We've been fighting for years to have sex work properly recognised. It's the oldest trade in the world but our girls have been kicked, spat on, had doors closed in their faces.

That's just what happens when they take their kids to school. There is far worse." Angela again.

"And now we're getting customers who want the same treatment at half the price. Not just the deformed workers, they want the swish hotels and the fake war-games and all the gear."

Angela wasn't going to let her righteous indignation slip. "And all those poor people who've been injured or born with half-arms, what was that drug, thalidomide? How do we know they're being protected? Here we have very good health practices. We've been thinking of introducing counselling."

If it all weren't so serious Paul would have laughed. Brothel owners as moral crusaders.

"Are they attracting some of your S & M customers too?" he asked.

A glitch in the soundscape and then Shamin again. "If the truth be told, yes. Many."

Paul noted that apart from Shamin and Angela, the others were keeping quiet and, from the feel of it, keeping a studied eye on him for any wrong move. Money was worrying them but also the status of being most in demand. Being a first-class brothel owner, or even the Madam, meant being in close contact with some very wealthy and well-connected Sydney identities. You could expect invitations to openings decorated with the glittering national and international stars of stage and screen, privileged real estate deals, your own table in the most fashionable restaurants. You could also expect to be well-placed to have a word now and then in the ears of the law and policy makers, that government ministers would attend your wedding or that of your daughter or son, and the Premier come to your funeral. In the normal course of life, the people in this room vied to be the leaders on these lists - none of them had any intention of being a follower.

"And some of the particular customers you are losing are perhaps wealthier than your average punter? Willing to pay a premium for secrecy - which this agency is already renowned for offering?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps you have a name or two of a customer who may have changed his - or her - allegiance?"

Another glitch in the soundscape. Clearly, however, they couldn't get to the centre of the agency's organisation, they needed his help just as much as he needed theirs. The trick was to reveal the right information and just enough to satisfy them.

Angela finally spoke up, confirming his suppositions. "One piece of your information for one piece of ours."

When Paul was ushered out - with a politeness and promise for future cooperation that was extravagant - he left behind enough reliable information that the brothel owners were comfortable, and carried with him a mental record of three names that would, he was sure, prove to be extremely useful. Each of them was attached to a man who could ill afford the slightest besmirching of his pristine public image. He'd also noted that, apart from money - always a prime motivator - they'd never properly said why they were so upset with the agency.

The car, a mellow mid-blue which would - Kylie was correct - be hard to see on a highway, was in a designated hire car bay near the top of the six-storey car park. Julia nodded at the colour - it was both suburban and forgettable - reversed out and headed for the exit. The swipe-card was required to leave this floor. She pressed the button to let down the window, feeling oddly vulnerable as she put her arm out and slipped the card through the detector. She took the first sharp curve down and the wheels squealed on the prepared surface. She took the second and the third. Images of car chases and dangerous meetings in empty parking lots slipped from the cultural psyche of television and action movies into her consciousness. Despite cynicism, she couldn't help check in the rear-view and side mirrors, couldn't help noticing that a convertible - a much darker blue, with its black hood up - was tailgating her the whole way down.

Outside the sun blared, its lack of heat-power disguised by the sealed windows and air conditioning set to warm. The freeway was alive with traffic - diesel-pumping trucks, workers heading out of town on flex-time, mothers and the occasional father suburb-hopping to pick up children from out-of-area schools, never seeming sure which lane they should be in. Julia put her foot down for a steady ten-kilometre-over-the-limit trip. It was another thirty kilometres to the edge of the city and she wanted to get there as quickly as possible, without interesting the police patrols or computer cameras, which were usually set to pick you up at fifteen ks over the speed limit.

On the way she thought of Paul. As would be expected, she said to herself caustically, and then quickly gave up on the notion of containment, of maintaining a mature distance, and let her mind, her heart, her hopes fly back and forth over every moment they'd spent together. Already it seemed to her as ridiculous to imagine a world without him as it would be to propose to hang-glide over Antarctica. On the other hand, the situation was terribly, horribly complicated. She turned the radio up, told herself not to think forward, not to anticipate an intense, searing pain that might never be felt.

She took the sliproad off the freeway, noting the cars behind her – no blue-black convertible – turned left and then right. The road Sonya had described lay before her, a narrow snake, slithering downhill. The road led to a valley that appeared to be filled by a tumultuous pile of children's blocks, waiting to be tumbled. They were not toys, of course, but hundreds of new homes, which she knew would be internally resplendent with marble-look bathrooms, Italian tiled entry foyers and thin white walls. The houses were all assembled from prefabricated frames and boards covered with a layer of pseudo-stone, and had more garages than a mechanics workshop could utilise in a month. This was what some called MacMansion land.

Julia drove toward the suburb, checking the mirror again as she rounded the final curve. The convertible was behind her. 'Shit,' she muttered. Of course it could be a different car, it could be chance. The convertible hugged closer as she passed through one roundabout and then a second. It was no use taking a quick left or right, the map showed that the roads were a series of intersecting, interconnected branches, each of which sat high on the landscape, curving back on itself or onto another road, another junction, thence back to the one main road. The suburb had literally been designed to minimise places to hide; there were no back lanes, no short cuts, no clever side roads. Julia felt frightened.

She passed a school surrounded by barren playing fields, the fence nearest the houses made of barbed wire. The car stayed on her tail. Julia gripped the steering wheel, suddenly aware how few cars there were, how empty were the front yards, that there were no children, no dogs, no teenagers loitering. A few hundred metres further along, though, there was a small shopping centre. She pulled into the carpark, facing ahead, trying to ignore the sound of the car behind her slowing.

The shopping centre had closed doors, newspaper pasted inside windows, broken signs and cracked glass. There was graffiti and

hundreds of 'tags' - unreadable nicknames - sprayed on every available surface. Only two of the ten shops were occupied. Thankfully one was a sub-newsagent. Aware the other car had stopped, its engine humming, she walked into the poorly stocked store, smiled at the woman behind the checkout - who merely eyed her with boredom - and looked around for a local paper.

"Where is the nearest real estate agency?" Julia asked politely, gripping the paper under her arm, her shoulders and back tense.

The woman chuckled her head back, indicating a northern direction. "Penrith," she eventually added.

Julia paid and walked out to the car, holding the paper open at the 'Homes for Sale' pages. She climbed into the small hire car - which suddenly felt no more resistant to attack than an eggshell - and pretended to study the paper with interest. She was not going to give in. She would drive around the streets ostensibly searching for the perfect home. "Could be here for the rest of my life," she said caustically to herself as she backed out, turned and re-entered the road just ahead of the convertible.

The driver and his passenger were simply trying to inspire fear, Julia decided. Otherwise they would not be so obvious. This analysis was at least partly comforting. After a time the following became routine and irritating. Julia stopped, checked an address, drove, turned, negotiated another curve, another waving line of homes which vied with each other for size supremacy. Now and then, when there was a particularly large 'for sale' sign she pulled up and got out of the car, the newspaper and a pen in her hand. The convertible drove past her then and waited so that she couldn't see the faces of the two men in it.

Carefully analysing the map and watching the car behind her, she came to the artificial lake Avril and Sonya had described. Her foot on the accelerator was more cautious now, her hands on the wheel tighter. She drove slowly, looking from right to left. A van sat solid in the driveway of one house. A van with a wheelchair hoist. Julia drove past, pulled gently to a stop, placed the map prominently on the steering well and bent studiously over it. The van had no signage, nothing to indicate whether it was connected to an official agency. She wrote down the numberplate and the street address. Fortunately, too, like everywhere in the suburb, this street had a house with its need to be sold blazed on a sign the size of a freeway billboard.

Julia got out of the car. She was in full view of at least a dozen homes around. Suddenly she swung around, looked straight at the sleek convertible and began to walk toward it. She would try some intimidation herself. Once she was sure the men inside the car were alert to what she was doing, she ostentatiously lifted her mobile to her ear, looking directly at the convertible's number plates as she did so.

The men in the car hardly reacted. Paid heavies who were simply bored? She kept walking toward them. Slowly one of the men raised a hand. Her pulse reacted; she could sense the leap in her adrenalin levels. The hand continued to rise, the window slid smoothly down and the hand slid out, two fingers thrust in the air. And that was all. A gesture and they were gone, the driver gunning the powerful car along the desolate street.

Julia scanned the windows around her. Here and there the twitch of a vertical blind, no other sign of interest. She made a show of shaking the mobile, as if it weren't working, and she really needed to make a call, and crossed the road, determined to find out what she could find out from the so-called group home with the van outside. She'd ask to use their phone. Once she'd made that visit, she had to hurry. There was someone else she must see before the evening.

23

Warren could feel trouble vibrating in the air. Despite what he'd said to Challinor, he was in the western suburbs again. For a while he'd tried the north shore route, thinking maybe the central point was on that side of town. Bloody hard work - every bugger either driving like he was heading for a funeral or was practising her rally skills. He couldn't help feeling more conspicuous in the tree-lined suburbs on the north side of the bridge. Didn't enjoy it much. Getting old and feeble, he admonished himself. Bugger it; youth had nothing he didn't have, except a flat stomach. Would Karen like him to have a six-pack abdomen? he wondered. He'd ask her sometime.

So, he'd watched the van and it started off ordinary enough; three girls, a drop off, a pick up, a reccy at the shopping centre, the girls in different directions, one of them on foot, which was a bit odd. He clocked off for a bit of food and when he picked the van up again he found its pattern was disturbed, it was criss-crossing streets, backtracking and taking roundabout routes, repassing the shopping mall over and over. When it'd finally pulled up the girl with one arm had a barny with the driver. Some story about another girl missing. They'd nearly spotted him, the driver's eyes swinging over him, coming back again, narrowed and cagey, so he hightailed it out of clear view. There sure was an aura of fear.

When he'd done a short circuit and parked - illegally, but he wasn't going to be long - and picked up a takeaway latte like he was on a work break, he'd made it to the front of the shopping centre just as the van was taking off like a NASA test rocket. He couldn't see who was in it, but from its behaviour he didn't think the missing girl - if there was one - has jumped back out of the lamp.

He decided to call Paul. "Boss, there's something gone wrong. I'm in Parramatta and they're in a tizz worse than your grandmother's perm out here. My theory is a girl's gone AWOL."

"I thought you were staying away from the front line for a while." Paul sounded concerned, or was it pissed off?

"Ah, you know me. Nose as long as Pinocchio and I like to stick it wherever I can. Anyway, the short of it is that something more'n

boiled cabbage's put the wind up them. The driver's working the streets like they're a maze with a treasure in the centre – and he can't bloody find the way on. Isn't this the area the girls you met with came from? Did you meet that really small woman with the tiny arms and legs? She's not a dwarf, too skinny, something different."

Paul bit back the impulse to be politically correct and explain about dwarfism and stereotypes. He was bored with his own seriousness. "Her name's Avril. Maybe it's her day off. We didn't ask them for their shift-times."

"She was in the van earlier, but not now, and I'm seeing some blue-arsed fly behaviour from the driver."

"What about a young woman – early twenties – from Bosnia? She has a left amputation."

"Yep, saw her too. She gave the driver heaps."

"You're sure? One woman missing? Not just on a long assignment?"

"That'd be it, 'cept for what I overheard and the way that driver's behaving"

"OK, if you're convinced there's something wrong, then we need to find out whether we should intervene in some way. Have you got a disguise with you?"

"Karen'd reckon I was in a permanent state of disguise, mostly from myself. Course I have."

"Is there someone in the van now? Other than the driver?"

"Yeah, he just picked up a girl. She must've done a half-hour session. Short, most of this lot go for the long haul – and the big money."

"Do they go somewhere to shower?"

"Shit, that's why they keep going back to one place, not near as nice as the others."

"Head for that hotel, and see if you can ask the driver about the small woman you've seen around. If you're a worker in the building, that'd be reasonable. I'm sure you know how to look interested in finding a girl's whereabouts. Get back to me as soon as you can."

When the line went dead Paul sat, fingers pressed together. He'd called into his office to check a few issues and wanted to get home to prepare for Julia. But Warren was remarkably acute and his news was not good. Avril missing? In what circumstances? Was her

disappearance linked to her meeting with he and Julia earlier? Not a good thought. Against that was the fact Sonya was still in evidence and that the van driver was, if Warren were correct, panicked about Avril's whereabouts. If the agency had discovered the girls were talking out of turn, this wasn't a sensible method of paying them back. He ran his hand over his head, suddenly aware of how little sleep he'd had last night.

If the disappearance wasn't a payback, then what? Another devotee gone too far? Melanie had nearly died, the dolls were still arriving. The police wanted to believe the attack on Melanie was a mixture of accident and panic – how would they react if another woman, working for the same agency, in the same area, disappeared? With very little interest, he suspected, until a body was found, dead, or seriously injured enough to catch their attention. There was no time, money, or will, for preventative policing: so no chance of action from them, no matter how strongly the case could be made for the likelihood of crime.

In another office nearby a phone rang. Paul waited to see if it were picked up. It was 4:30pm so there was a 50-50 chance. The mechanical sound of the answer machine pleased him. He didn't want a colleague, jolly with the idea of a weekend, popping his or her head around the door, asking if he wanted to partake in Friday evening drinks. Barristers were a boring lot. Not quite as bad as solicitors. He decided to ring Julia and alert her to the potential problem. Her work number was already keyed into his phone.

"Julia Prettie?" the woman on the other end said. She sounded startled. "We haven't seen her since yesterday lunchtime. We've been worried."

"I must have misunderstood," Paul offered, "I thought she said she was just taking the morning off, that she'd been there this afternoon."

"Is it urgent? We've been trying her mobile. She's not answering."

"Thanks, I'll try her home number," he replied, placing his thumb hard against the off-button.

Paul revolved slowly on his chair. Where was Julia? He cursed the agreement they'd made to not discuss the mundane details of their lives. "Mystery can be fun," she'd said, "and besides we shouldn't rely on the material, the factual to get to know each other." He'd agreed, he still agreed. In principle. Right now, though, it was

disconcerting. He didn't know her home number, he knew what she did for work and that she was married, but he had no idea of her husband's name and only a guess at where she lived. He did know that her mobile wasn't being picked up and that she was distressed about the agency possibly employing people with intellectual disability. In short, he had no idea where she'd gone and there was no way at his disposal to contact her. It didn't feel good at all.

An hour later Sonya struggled off the bus, her coat slung over her shoulders in an attempt at looking casual. "Excuse me, excuse me," she said, stepping over splayed feet, edging past sharp-cornered bags which slashed at her legs in their black stockings. She thought ruefully that she would be better off showing her stump, it always made people move out of her way - as if the wound from the hand grenade threatened them.

The bus dropped her near a train station that was not on the Parramatta line. She was heading for the city, to Circular Quay, where she would be small and inconspicuous among the mixture of families, office workers, backpackers, seagulls and sad men who had nowhere to sleep but would be sitting out in the sun. She hoped they enjoyed the beauty of the harbour, she thought it was like a sweet or a new dress that was hard to resist. By now, she'd discarded the sim card given to her by the agency and put a new one in its place. The problem was she'd had to give identification to activate the number, which meant there was a record of her name and purchase. This worried her, although she had no idea who could track such records, other than the police and there wasn't anyone who'd tell them she was gone. Not in the agency anyway, which gave her several hours before her parents would realise she was missing.

Once she was in the city and sure that Jim had not followed her, Sonya would try Avril's number again. And she would ring again the lady with the kind eyes. Julia. It was a pretty name. She was not answering her telephone either. Sonya prayed it was a problem with the reception, that Avril and Julia would miraculously be there to communicate with her when she was out of the crowded, swaying train.

24

The way Dee touched his bum when she said she couldn't come out with him this evening reassured Ian. Not much else felt good. His management were on the warpath. The white flag he tried waving was no use. They weren't carrying light artillery and his job was currently in a shallow trench. History had shown how bloody safe that was. Wasn't. Dee was going to her mum's, an anniversary dinner for her parents, who sounded all right sort of people. Southern suburbs, nice, steady as she goes lifestyle. Tomorrow night she'd go out with him. If they weren't all being hauled up in front of some sort of judiciary.

Where the hell was Jean? How many more times could he contact the police before they threw a grenade? Just one to keep him quiet, not enough to blow him up completely. If they found Jean in too bad a state, he'd be in a thousand bloody pieces. By now he'd driven half the hospitals in the city mad. For Christ's sake, she must be somewhere.

He decided to go to the local park and see if inspiration would come. Jean loved the swings, would wiggle her behind onto those dippy rubber seats they had these days, the sort that sunk as soon as you sat on them, squeezing your nuts something awful. No wonder boys thought swings were sissy. She'd scream blue murder till someone came and gave her a push. Pretty skinny she was, heavy enough though, with low muscle tone and no idea how to help herself. "More, more," she'd boom, only the only bit that came out was the 'or' sound. If you didn't give her more, she'd jump off and, if she didn't skin her knees, or land in too much of a heap, she'd piss off. Ian figured that maybe she was actually trying to play hide and seek, not really run away. Trouble was, whenever she did do it, he or the staff member on duty was supposed to fill in an incident form to show that she'd absconded. Crap.

He sat on the swing. Yep, too painful. He got off, sat on the base of the slippery dip, an old one which had somehow survived the onslaught of insurance-conscious council renovation programs. Jean

was never in the park alone, of course, but if she had got out the house by herself she might come here. He looked around, trying to work out what'd attract her attention, make her get off her bum and move on. Nothing much, just rows of boring light brick houses, even the rendered ones just another shade of pale ochre. Nice front lawns, nice shrubs, big fences.

Ian stood up, spat on the ground, rubbed his hands down his trousers, felt like shit, put his hands in his pockets, pulled out a card with a number on it. He'd forgotten it till now. He looked at the card, remembering that the suggestion was there were other ways to make money, if you knew what you were doing in the disability sector. A goodly amount of money, it was intimated, although no details were handed over. Ring this number and we'll set up a meeting. In a city office.

Ian rubbed the card between his fingers. Good quality paper. Not much of that around if you worked where he did. No money to buy pens, had to take your own and then some bastard inevitably nicked whatever you had. Mind you, a fortune was spent on wages, two staff there in the mornings for three guys. All of whom could make their own cups of tea if the staff weren't so bloody busy being helpful and making them so many they spent the next three hours pissing. Pissing often as not over the toilet seat so that the staff got themselves another job cleaning the lid and moaning about Graham or Dave or Jean not having a decent idea of hygiene. Or doing it just to annoy the staff. Least the toilet cleaning kept them out of the residents' hair for while.

The Holden was waiting for him. Rego almost due and repairs needed to get the pink slip. Made him think again about the number and the promise. Didn't have to give up his day-job, they said, in fact it'd be an asset. Interesting. He'd ring them Monday.

Back at his own place Ian realised he wasn't any nearer to finding Jean. Or her sister, come to that, who still wasn't at home and still wasn't answering her mobile. Mind you, when he thought about it, he remembered that a couple of days ago the phone was ringing out, not even going to messagebank. Now he got Julia's brief greeting and the beep that indicated it was recording. Fuck, what could he say? That her sister'd been missing for a bit too long for comfort, the police were talking 'fears for safety' and the like. Nah, best thing was just to leave his name and number, indicate it was important that she get back to him.

Doing that made him feel shit, though. Ian pulled the cask of red off the shelf, sloshed a generous amount of the wine into a tumbler. Three glasses later he idly pressed in the numbers on the card, thinking it was after office hours and a Friday but it'd almost be comforting to hear the phone ring and ring and ring.

Bloody thing answered. He nearly dropped dead. "My name's Ian, I was given this number...."

"Sir, we have an excellent range of services, to meet your every need."

What the hell was this? A call service? "I was looking for a bit of work."

For just a second, the woman at the other hand sounded as confused as he did. "Work?" she asked, like there was a big scratch on the CD of her expectations. "Are you a person with a disability?"

"Nah, but I work with them."

"Just hold a moment." Ten, twenty seconds passed and then she spoke. "Unfortunately our employment office number has been switched through here accidentally. Please pardon the confusion. We need to make an appointment for you within office hours."

Ian gulped a half-glass of wine. "It was just an impulse, maybe I won't bother."

That was the right thing to say to keep her on the line. Her manner perked up immediately, she wanted him to think about the job, whatever it was. "A good impulse," she concurred. She almost purred, he thought. "We're actively looking for people and if you've been approached already, we must know you've, ah, got the right stuff."

'Yeah, right, cool." Another slug of the wine. He hadn't eaten anything and he was enjoying the sensation of the alcohol going to his head. Made him forget the other problems. He murmured a few things to her and she chatted back. Her name was Carmen. Cool name, Carmen.

"What sort of disabilities do you work with, Ian?" she asked.

He almost said retards. "Down's Syndrome, that sort of thing," he offered instead.

"Are there men and women?"

That got him, made him feel queasy. "Um, well, yeah, 'cept the woman, she's not Down's and she's missing right at the moment." It was like being in a confessional, in his little room with just a voice at the end of the phone, a husky voice, a woman asking him questions in a soft way.

"How sad," she said and he felt much better.

"Disappeared, like in a puff of smoke. There one minute, gone the next. Pretty weird, hey?"

He couldn't work out what it was in her tone of voice, but it was something. Sympathy or suspicion, it could be either for all he knew right now. He was a mess of emotions, like he was weaving all over the road, drunk as a skunk.

"Do you know any other women who've disappeared?"

"Nah. Course not. Should I?"

"Recently? You haven't known any other women who've gone missing?"

He wasn't feeling so good now. Did she think he was some kind of dope or something, he'd told her he didn't know anyone. "Nah," he repeated, firmly.

"Sorry, I was just wondering. A couple of stories I've heard."

He grunted.

"Are you OK?"

"Yeah, I'm fit as. But, hey, I better go."

"Sorry to hear about the girl gone missing. Now, give me your phone number and I'll have our office assistant contact you on Monday to arrange a time to meet." He didn't say anything, so she added. "I can tell we'll really want to meet you."

Arse-licker, he thought, and besides, she'd have the phone number come up on her screen. Everyone did these days. 'Cept him 'cause he wasn't going to pay Telstra the bloody eight bucks or whatever it cost a month for the privilege of seeing his ex-wife's number on a screen. Knew her ring anyhow.

"You got it," he muttered. He was about to hang up when it occurred to ask what kind of business it was. "What'y doing in there at this time o'night?"

"We're on call 24/7. We're always here for our very special customers. You'll find out all about it when we meet."

Bollocks, he muttered to himself as he put the phone down. Bloody bollocks.

The wind had whipped around to the south, bringing with it a strong scent of moisture. Skiers would be listening eagerly for the updates on snow-depth, as they headed down the Hume Highway toward the fields south of Canberra. Paul had tried snowboarding once. No disasters, but there were better ways to get a few thrills, he thought. He stood up, closed the windows, shutting out the reminders of recreation. He listened to the internal sounds of the building for a moment, hoping that Friday drinks or family commitments had inspired most of his colleagues and staff to leave by now.

He told himself he couldn't spend all his time worrying about Julia's whereabouts. She was a grown woman and a clever one, she wasn't lost and there'd be a reasonable explanation for why she wasn't at work. He should attend to his emails. He set the reader to recite the list of senders. One from Marcia; he clicked it open.

"We had a special delivery this afternoon. A courier arrived with a parcel. It looked just like marketing for a tourism firm and I was annoyed they were spending so much money but I opened it. Inside was another doll, a small old-fashioned kewpie doll. This one is in a cage that seems to be specially made to be flat so it looks like a video when it's wrapped. I am going to meet with a policewoman now, you can phone me after 6:30 on my home number if you need to. I have had it with this!"

Paul shifted uncomfortably in his chair. A kewpie doll in a cage? Less violent than the previous items, but heavy with symbolism and very strange that it'd been sent by courier - during the day, not overnight like the rest. Why drop caution in such a flamboyant way? In this era of intense fear around terrorism, it wasn't easy to send an unsourced package through any official channel. The courier company would have details. Was there a degree of desperation in Mr or MS X being prepared to take such risks?

Placing a child-like doll in a cage also suggested possession and control. The cage could signify an abduction. Avril? Was her disappearance part of this? If she'd been successfully grabbed by a

devotee, then the out-of-pattern arrival of the doll might well be a declaration of excitement and success.

He tried Warren. No answer; Paul hoped he was talking to the driver. He stretched his arms, easing tension. He remembered Sonya's fear and Avril's bravado. Could they have been followed to the interview, or away from it? Punished afterwards? This extremely uncomfortable thought made him wince. Where the hell was Warren?

He opened a second email from Marcia, which was, in fact, sent earlier than the other he'd read.

"Only preliminary, but thought you should know that two names come up more than once in the legals that I've checked so far. One is Harriet Shannahan, the other Philip Jones. Note, though, that I started with the paper files, not the electronic, so these are not the most recent legal reps."

Philip Jones? He'd gone to school with Philip. Harriet Shannahan had, he knew, left the country and was in Galway exploring her Irish roots. But Philip? Surely not? Paul conjured up Philip's voice, a strong memory from school days. He, the blind boy and Philip, the scholarship lad, had the friendship of outsiders. Perhaps more than that - they'd both enjoyed debating and fast cars. There was a falling out and they lost contact when he left for Queensland, where the university services were better suited to his blindness. He'd only run into Philip once since he came back in Sydney. Philip had jumped ship, gone from commercial law into property development, share trading and other money-making ventures. Still, it was possible.

Paul nodded to himself. The externals of people's lives change, but the personality is remarkable resilient. It took brilliance to design the intricacies, the convolutions, the subtle distortions of the normal which were behind the idea and the extraordinarily successful organisation of the agency. Philip was brilliant, or was as a young man. Yes, he could imagine Philip enjoying the challenge of doing it. He also knew enough of Philip's history to imagine him doing it to ingratiate himself with a very select group - and it was very clear the clients, the customers, the punters using the agency were powerful people with high profile lives. Philip would like offering them protection.

Paul rang Harry Montague, ignoring the fact it was late on Friday and Harry had a life to lead. "You haven't got back to me, Harry," he said.

"Jesus, Challinor, I'm going home. I've got family commitments, you know."

"Good on you. The name I wanted is Philip Jones, isn't it?"

"What makes you think that?"

"The way you just swallowed."

"Arsehole."

"Always good to do business, Harry. Speak with you soon."

"Not a hope in hell of that."

Paul chewed the information for a moment, tasting the bitterness. Then he made a few notes before picking up the phone again. No point in wasting time.

"Serge," Paul said.

"Hey, it's Friday, aren't you going out with the new girlfriend?"

"What girlfriend?"

"I have inside information. You were spotted by Sylvia. She's jealous."

"Sylvia would be jealous of someone getting an invite to a tupperware party," Paul said laconically, thinking that if Sylvia had seen them, there were others who could have too. Not a good thought. "Serge, I know mates talk - you told me so yourself - but not over the phone. Not now."

"Righto. So, what can I do for you at this ungodly family hour?"

"Any possibility of you knowing yet about any Development Applications that look interesting? I have a new piece of information - there may be a guy called Philip Jones involved."

"I've got to go into the study. I followed some of that stuff up." The sound of footsteps; children, television and Imogen in the background. The phone clattered and the keyboard sprang into rapid action. "Isn't Philip Jones a character you went to school with?"

"Yes. Just a hunch."

"Got two possibilities that fit with your original criteria involving applications to do with disabilities," Serge offered. "Apartment and town house development knocked back. Went stale for a while, now there's a new development application. No Philip Jones involved, but there's a disability organisation and the application stresses it meets community housing needs for the disabled. Resident objections kicked it out first time round. Now, here's the other one, pretty odd, had to go out of my area to get the low-down on it but a mate of mine found a connection with the same disability group. It's

a large release of land, through the State Government. The tender included all the infrastructure and the rights to build nearly a whole bloody suburb."

Serge's vocal volume increased: Philip Jones was head of one of the two consortiums now being considered. "This is so easy', Serge almost chortled.

"It's going to be a damn sight harder to make the links in a way that might make sense to a third party, particularly the police. I'm operating here on a hunch, and at this stage there's no crime that can be sheeted to the agency. Are there any other names attached with Philip's?"

"Nothing I can see here. There's the name of the group - 'Choice for All, Disability Support Services' - and a couple of directors - I can send the details over. Jones is noted and also Prettie-Jones. Same guy?"

Paul felt a fist in his guts. It hurt, badly. Prettie-Jones? It couldn't be. He breathed deeply. Julia related to Philip? Prettie was not a common name. He knew Philip didn't have a sister.

"Possible," he said slowly.

"You sound shit, Paul, what's going on?"

"Any more information?"

A cluck of Serge's tongue. A very Russian sound, which he emitted only when thoroughly disgusted. "That's all. Shall I email the details I've got so far? I can dig more on Monday. I have a mate in one of the firms mentioned."

"Do I need to read plans?"

"Jesus, Paul, we've been friends for years, haven't we? I know what's impossible for you."

"Press the button. And thanks, I didn't mean to doubt you."

"It's OK. I've got your measure, and I know I've said something wrong and suddenly you're off your brain with worry of some sort. I'll mull it over when we've got the kids into bed." Serge paused. "I get the impression that woman of yours will come through, though. It's written in the stars."

"You're taking up clairvoyance?"

"Yeah, something unscientific like that. Probably more fun than my day job. The information should be there now."

Carefully, quietly, Paul hung up and placed the phone on the desk, before shoving it across the polished surface as far away from him as possible. Philip Prettie-Jones. The coincidence of the names was too great. There'd been other hints, too. Her husband in share-

trading, her familiarity with the legal profession. Julia was married to Philip Jones. Why, then, was she sleeping with him?

Paul clenched his fists, before uncurling his hands, turning to the computer. He would find out as much as he possibly could about Philip Jones, and his wife. Before he spoke with her again.

26

When she was a little girl, Sonya's aunt used to say to her, 'Life is beautiful, Sonya'. She said this before the war started and she said it again after, much to Sonya's mother's disgust. Her aunt wasn't killed or even maimed and she'd met a very handsome man whom she'd married and lived happily with ever since, so it seemed a good philosophy to Sonya. Standing by the sparkling water at Circular Quay, watching the ferries floating quietly against the docks and the gulls slapping across the sky and the people smiling as they walked by, taking no notice of her at all, Sonya thought that life could indeed be beautiful, even in the most awful of times.

The ferryman called the passengers and she watched them mount the small walkway from the wharf. The wide plank wiggled as the ferry moved and children laughed and old men held on for dear life. Soon they'd be out on the water, gliding between the great big bridge and the Opera House that even people in Bosnia had heard of. Before, during and after the war. One day she would go inside the building and hear the singing, perhaps one day she'd sing there herself. Anything is possible.

She tried Avril's phone again. Then one more time, just in case. Julia's number didn't want to work either, but she didn't feel so alone among the crowd. She thought of going to the zoo. It was too late, the ferries leaving the Quay on the Taronga route were empty, and when they came back they were very full. The gates must be closing.

Sonya bought herself a cup of coffee and a donut. Not the American sort she saw on television. This one was large and flat and glazed with a very sweet coating that was called pineapple, although it tasted only of dark sugar. There was a park with grass on the western end of the wharf area and she sat there, her coat tight around her, so that she could eat and drink comfortably with her one, awkward hand.

Her phone rang. Sonya dropped the polystyrene coffee cup, staining her skirt and making herself feel child-like. Should she answer? No one had her new phone number, it must be an advertising

call, or kids fooling around, just punching in numbers. It couldn't be anyone else.

"Go away," she called into the phone. But it was a small phone and she had to hold it near to get to the microphone, and she could hear a voice saying 'Sonya, Sonya.'

"Miss Julia," she gasped.

"You left me a message, what's wrong?"

Dear Mary, Mother of God. Of course. She had said without thinking: 'Excuse me, Miss, it is Sonya, I am scare'. Then she'd hung up sharply. She hadn't left her phone number, she was sure.

"Sonya, I'm sorry, I've had this phone switched off for the past couple of days, I've just turned it back on. Are you OK?"

"How you get my number?"

"It gets recorded on the phone. Are you in trouble?"

Such a foolish girl. Whoever had Avril's phone would now know her number as well. She wanted to throw the silly phone away. Everybody now was able to spy on every other body. The whole world was full of suspicion, like being always at war. But she must not worry about that now. Her friend needed her.

"Avril is lost and I am run away."

It took Sonya several minutes to explain. In her head she could say everything perfectly but the English that came out of her mouth was muddled with anxiety and fear.

"I'm going to come and get you," Julia said to her. "We need to go to the police, get help."

"No, no, not police. Please, no. Avril, she is very scare of police. Her mother and her father, they will kill her, she say. She mean it, she do. Can the tall man, he help? Mr Paul."

"Mr Paul," she heard Julia repeat very softly. Like she was stroking the fur of a cat, gently. "Perhaps. Sonya, I'm not sure if we can tell him right now, but we'll talk about it when I get there. You mustn't stay out. Soon it'll be dark and you might be noticed wandering around alone with nowhere to go."

"No police?"

"Promise. Now, tell me exactly where you are."

While Paul waited for yet another taxi to arrive, he made coffee in the first floor staff room and wondered if it were properly dark outside. The time told him it should be, but there were so many things he could only know intellectually. Or emotionally. He wished

he had a photo of Julia and that he could see it and puzzle over the expression, try to glean some meaning, get at what might be called truth. He poured the coffee, and reminded himself that it was pretty bloody unlikely he'd have a photo of her yet, even if he weren't blind. Unless they'd laughed their way into one of those cramped booths, with the half-curtains and cracked seats, that used to be common in railway stations. He'd been in them more than once, during moments of drunken fun with young girlfriends. Now he wondered why.

The coffee was bitter on his tongue. The cab hadn't come. Julia hadn't rung. He had friends who said they never thought about sight, that they considered the world exclusively in their own sensory dimensions. How on earth did they manage? Did they never hear descriptions of beauty and lust to see it, did they never contemplate the ease of simply opening a book, any book, never lie on their beds and imagine knowing, without the necessity of immediate touch, the rolling hills, the green grass, the grotty, burned-out ends of days? Did they not imagine seeing, just seeing, rounded or pert or drooping breasts as they walked down the street? How could they bear knowing only the bodies of those who allowed them to touch? He found it impossible to bridle the imagination, to stop his mind from seeking possibilities, hold it back from a furious gallop into the unknown.

A horn. He slugged his coffee and made for the door, signalled in the direction of the cab, found his way over, got in. Leaning forward, he said quietly to the driver, "I've changed my mind, I won't go straight to Randwick. Would you take me to Mrs Macquarie's chair? Thanks."

Wind buffeted the car. The southerlies were marshalling their forces, adding their scoops of snow-cold to the desert-driven westerlies. The traffic was disorientated by the pounding. Last night he'd been on Bondi Beach, with Julia. The sea would be flat today, cut off by the knife of the wind. Not that he wanted the sea. Oceans were never personal, they sucked and swallowed and heaved as they suggested eternity. Anyone's eternity. Everyone's eternity. Right now he wanted his very own.

"Do you know the concept of denumerable and non-denumerable infinities?" Julia had asked him, as they ate a quick Thai meal. Only a few hours ago.

"Maths was never my strong point," he'd replied, "it's more difficult to learn with sheer memory when you get to the harder problems." Serious as usual, he thought now.

"This isn't maths. It's — I don't know. But the idea is that if you count infinity, use numbers, even if you never reach the end of the counting, it's more defined, constrained, it's a smaller infinity than the one you don't, or can't, count."

"So, each number is a boundary, a restriction in itself? When you count, you miss all the smaller parts."

"Yes, counting ignores the infinity of possibilities between each number."

That's what he thought he'd found. The infinity of possibilities between each number.

"Ever been in love?" he asked the driver.

"Why do you think I drive a cab, mate? Dozens of times, sometimes every second day. How 'bout you?"

Paul relaxed briefly into a grin. "More than once, I guess."

He could feel the driver looking at him in the rear-view mirror. "You got a new girl? Y'know I reckon that there's one love that's always gonna be better than all the others. I had a girl once, and did I have the hots for her. We were both bonkers about bushwalking. You wouldn't think so to look at me, would you? Oh sorry, you can't see, can you? Anyway, I'm a fat bastard."

"What happened?"

"It's a short story. We was both married, and she had a young kid. I had me third on the way."

They stopped. Paul could hear the driver drumming his hands on the wheel.

"How did it end?"

"You mean did the jealous husband come and drag me out by the balls? Nah, it wasn't so exciting, it just had to end. We both cried a lot — I don't mind admitting it — and that was it. But I tell you, if ever I get the chance, I'll be right in there again."

The car turned right, the thwick-thwack of the indicator the only sound.

"Do you know what's happened to her?"

"Too right I do. I drive past her house every bloody day. Just checking she's OK. Now and then I put the garbage out when she's forgotten. Her old man's hopeless at that kinda thing."

"Does she know?"

"I reckon she oughta feel it in her bones."

Paul smiled. "I'm sure she does."

The driver offered to walk him to Mrs MacQuarie's Chair. "I've been there before," Paul said.

"Like love."

"Like love," Paul agreed.

He walked, now and then kicking at the earth, crusty from too much wind. Philip Jones had certainly trumped him. Finally. Their friendship had fallen apart, twenty or more years ago, over love. Wendy, the head debater from their sister school, asked Paul out, in front of Philip, who was a year older, potential dux of the school, champion debater, and had been voted the best looking guy at the school formal. Wendy ignored Philip as if it were he who was blind, and deaf, and irrelevant. Paul remembered the tension in the room, Wendy's determined disregard of it, his refusal, the way she walked quietly, proudly, out, while Philip stayed.

"Well done, old chap," Philip had said, in that imitation public school-style he adopted. "She's only a piece of skirt, shouldn't come between friends." Paul had known then that Philip was desperate for the girl.

He stopped, took off his glasses, turned his head to find the western light. He'd forgotten to keep to the path. What must be dealt with was the fact that Julia was married to Philip Jones. Had been married to Philip when they met in the café, when they walked across the sand, when they were in bed together. Julia was Philip's wife and Philip was closely linked with the escort agency that he – and more recently, she – had been investigating.

The wind tore around Paul, a creature momentarily diverted from its path. He could not, did not, accept he'd been duped. He drew himself up, stood braced against the eddying, swaying, whirling air, not caring for the moment – just the moment – what would happen if he found that she had tricked him, with smartness and sex, to give over secrets of the investigation. It defied all his logic, all his cautious intellect, but he acknowledged he felt an almost tribal attachment to Julia Prettie, the woman he had known for less than two full days. He felt, in every cell of his being, that in some archaic and ineffable way, she was 'his woman', and he 'her man'. He also knew, beyond doubt, that this did not make her innocent.

The air in the underground car park was thick with the haze of too many cars and too little ventilation. The lack of oxygen was getting to him and Warren smothered a yawn. He'd already fronted the driver, who was not at all happy to talk but who conceded that the girl Warren was looking for might not be available in the immediate future. When asked if that meant she'd given up on the job or maybe run away, Jim suddenly looked like a bloke who's seen his wife across the bar, while he's there, pissed, and chatting up the barmaid. Didn't admit to anything in so many words. The expression was enough for Warren.

He'd rung in, checking with Paul and firming up a name and some background for the small woman with the funny limbs. Also her friend, Sonya, who he was dead sure he'd recognise as well. The boss was quiet in a way that might be described as ominous, maybe even furious. Warren knew better to ask why, but it puzzled him. Now he was hanging around, dressed in a different hat, jacket and attitude, hoping to clap eyes on the girls in the van, suss whether one of them was Sonya. Then he'd get back to Challinor again, who was too quiet but was still being pushy about details. In fact, the pushiness added even more of a sense of a story gone wrong when it was half-told.

Warren watched the hotel shift-change staff arrive and when they'd all been sucked up the lift, he let himself into an aging Commodore – no alarm, no gadgets, and just vacated. Only a temporary measure, the bloke who owned the sagging car should be proud it was being used in the cause of justice. He settled himself in the driver's seat and chewed a toothpick – he was doing his dago-worker look. The car stank, the guy obviously smoked.

Another ten minutes and the rear-view mirror showed the van was still stationary, the driver nowhere in sight. Warren rubbed his stubble; his rapid daily growth helped him in slipping from one personality to the other. When some action was on the way, he'd be out of the car and hunting around in the boot, performing as an electrician or plumber called to an emergency. Better be soon, or he'd be asleep.

Once he'd got the info – which Challinor wanted ASAP, including the capitals – he'd have a go at tracking Avril down. Didn't seem likely, but it was possible she'd headed home, for reasons they couldn't fathom yet. Like maybe she got sick, or her bloody grandmother died. Not that he believed that. The girl'd clearly gone AWOL. Every angle must be checked, though, and he was bloody good at that.

A shadow at the car window. Shit, he'd let his guard down. The shadow, which revealed itself to be an oversized bloke, head currently cut off from view, knocked on the window.

"Whaddya wan'?" Warren asked.

The shadow bent and the face thrust itself into the window-space. Too close for comfort. "Piss off," the shadow grunted. The features were hidden under a baseball cap, pulled low, and dark glasses, but the voice was like a fist and the muscles of the neck rippled like a steroid-user's dream. There was an ugly intensity to the man's stance. And Warren recognised the baseball cap. It belonged to the van driver. Who was now disguised by a body much bigger than the last one he'd seen.

"I bloody werk here," Warren mumbled, fake Eye-tie accent.

"An' I bloody shit in a gold toilet. You're good, mate, but not as good as me."

Warren clenched his hand on the gear stick. Keep control, he told himself. He knew now who the man with the muscular arms and the tight-fisted voice was, and it seemed Cousin Ray, as he liked to be called, had identified him too. How the hell did the bastard get to be here, in Parra, under a few tonne of the kinda bland concrete hotel Ray usually avoided like his working class roots? Last time Warren'd tangled with Ray was when the bastard was head minder for the children of a very powerful media mogul. They'd almost been on talking terms then, until Warren'd got a job with the mogul's ex-wife. Professional competitiveness can turn truly nasty in such circumstances.

Right now, Warren eyeballed Ray, taking in the uniform and the scar on his right cheek. Wouldn't surprise him if Ray'd got it through cosmetic surgery, rather than the real violence it threatened.

"Since when is this your patch?" Warren asked. He wasn't going to admit anything, but he dropped the accent. No point inflaming the situation.

Ray didn't bother answering. He just looked, while the tension in his body increased and the strong odour of his sweat dumped itself all over Warren. Ray wasn't gunna forgive him for last time, for being the one who'd dug deep enough to get the lady a better settlement than the husband was happy with. Ray woulda lost a bonus or two and broken more'n one rung in his personal ladder of success. What's more, it'd been easy to get under his defences.

The shadow across him deepened. Ray was leaning further forward, completely blocking out the light on the wall behind him. The smell of him grew. Warren figured Ray wanted to grab him, screw his neck, shove a physical threat into a choke-red face, but for some reason he couldn't. Probably been told not to. Always Ray's failing, a too-ready following of orders. No initiative. Or maybe the problem was Ray was freaking, just knowing he shouldn't have shown his presence to the enemy, so he didn't want to make a mark as well.

"Like I said, piss off. You won't find nothing out. And if you do, I'll have your balls."

It was cheap and they both knew it. Warren put his hand down to open the door on his side of the car. He and Ray weren't the shooting type, but the man backed and reached for his own belt.

"Just going, must'a got confused," Warren said.

He was allowed out. Couldn't avoid the sensation of eyes drilling into him.

"Lost y'car?" Ray drawled.

Warren didn't bother turning round. Ray might not fancy shooting a man, but he'd have a go at some tyres if the need arose - which could be dangerous on the slippery floor and in the over-sized car. Warren climbed into the four-wheel drive, which would now need to have a new coat of duco and different extras added, turned the ignition and backed out. No movement, no sound. Conclusion one: Ray wanted him outta there. Conclusion two: Ray had his number plate and there'd be someone on his tail before he left the building.

Paul's own home felt oppressive with its shelves of zealously organised files, books, tapes and CDs - small strips of Braille down the spines - and the carefully placed furniture. Every pro, con, possibility, aspect was weighed and measured. All thought, no heart, he said to himself. Only calculated risks allowed. Not a way to live a life. He paced, his long legs swallowing the space. He had to

think, pull the threads together. He had to admit Julia's potential part in it.

On the way to Randwick, he'd contacted Marcia. The police had come and gone with a shrug of the shoulders and a minor attempt at being sensitive. One of the women currently staying in the refuge was now convinced her husband was responsible for the intrusions. Marcia discounted that theory, as she had all along. She maintained she knew the whereabouts of all the partners, and the guy in question was in Melbourne. She'd checked his workplace. The woman still insisted, saying she shared with him a belief in the occult and he could have spirited the dolls in. Marcia was not amused. Neither was Paul.

On the other hand it made sense that the threats attached to the dolls were directed at a woman living in the refuge. Or it'd made sense until the doll in the cage turned up, out of the time-synch and not hand-delivered. Was the sender no longer able to do the delivery himself?

Warren was still switched off, which was out of character. Should he worry about this? Paul put it on his list of concerns. Warren had promised to get back within the hour and it was twice that now.

He step-measured the living room, the hall, all the available spaces. Was there a relationship between the woman thrown into the lake, the appearance of the sadistically mutilated dolls with their brutal notes, the arrival of Julia and the apparent disappearance of Avril? He rubbed the back of his neck, flicked away the wish for massage, and dismissed the initial attempted murder as a potential piece of the package. The perp in that case was on remand in Silverwater Correctional so, unless he had a friend with whom he could communicate privately from maximum security – a friend who was willing to do some very dirty work – he couldn't be behind the dolls.

He continued to pace. Devotees had a history of going to extreme lengths to achieve satisfaction. Some even spent years convincing a surgeon to cut off their own arms or legs, in an effort to align themselves with the amputees they were so attracted to. Others pretended – spending so long in wheelchairs that their legs atrophied, wearing glasses that mimicked the loss of central vision so that eventually their brains no longer properly processed visual information. However, most devotees managed to hide their obsession. Which brought him to Julia.

He halted in the centre of the large living room, forcing his mind to concentrate. Understanding motivation was his business and

his success in it was what made him such a highly paid barrister. That, and the fierce memory for detail - which he attributed a positive aspect of his blindness. He brought to mind the one occasion, three or four years ago, that he'd spoken with Philip Jones since school. They hadn't mentioned wives or partners, although Clare was on the other side of the room. Philip had just given up law, which surprised Paul enough for him to ask the banal question of why.

"You know as well as I that to make money, real money, in the law in this town, being bright is not enough," Philip had said. "You also have to have connections. Being a scholarship boy at one of the better schools is worse than being a kid from the sticks - everyone who matters knows your antecedents, where you lived, what your parents do. And they curl their lip at you, no matter whether they belong to the Labour or Liberal parties or wouldn't declare their political allegiance if their next fuck depended on it. When you went to the school you and I attended, there's no hope of reinventing yourself with a more illustrious past."

"And making money is important to you?"

"Money has a certain glamour, don't you think? I'm going into share trading. The suits are better." He'd laughed. "Honestly, Challinor, I don't enjoy the stuffiness of law either, the repetitive jokes, the same old clubs. A sort of boiled cabbage approach to life."

Philip had all the qualifications of a man who might go into a niche-market escort business. A precise knowledge of commercial law, which he could easily have kept up to date, a desire for wealth, a chip on his shoulder the size of a Canadian redwood, and enough cynicism to dilute the guilt. He also had a woman with disability as a sister-in-law. Did that, though, make Julia part of the puzzle?

The phone rang. Paul swore to himself.

"Why are you - not us - making this decision about who gets involved in this project? How do you know this woman is kosher?" Clare demanded.

He wouldn't tell her she might well be reading his thoughts. Or that the new evidence might suggest Julia was anything but tried and true. The best he could say was that he was working on a gut feeling - which had never been high on his list of reliable reasons. He remembered his response to meeting Julia, who seemed to have dropped out of the sky, his questioning whether she was a devotee with a more subtle style than most. The truth, at least as Clare would see it, could be far worse than that.

"You're right, and I have no defence."

"No defence? You mean you have sold yourself to the devil for no reason at all?"

She was cutting close to the bone. "That's not precisely what I said," he replied as evenly as he could.

"I'm sick of your precision because you're leaving half of what should be said out anyway. It's a very obfuscatory precision."

A branch screeched against a window in a nearby room. "We all act on impulse now and then," he replied.

"You're not telling me anything. And you're not telling me you're madly in love with that woman. Whom I must say I quite liked but that is entirely beside the point."

"Clare, I - "

"Oh give over, Paul. You're the best barrister in town and maybe the best fuck too. But there are times you are a total shit. And this is one of them. You've potentially ruined one of the most important investigations we've taken on, and all for - a piece of skirt. Except that you won't even admit to it." He heard her light a cigarette, an action she employed when angry. As far as he knew, she, like Bill Clinton, never actually inhaled. "And then you leave those bloody silences which drive me mad. But of course I'll forgive you, because I always have."

He wished it were later, that he wasn't anticipating Julia's arrival, that he wasn't worried about Avril, and Warren come to that. Knocking back a half bottle of wine was looking very attractive. Or perhaps Scotch. He spoke softly. "Clare, I don't want you to forgive me. I'm tired of you forgiving me."

"What did you say?"

"I said - indirectly I agree - that it doesn't work for me that you are so forgiving. It feels paternalistic. You seem to think anyone with a disability has to be forgiven. Poor dears, we all suffer so much, we have to be let off any ordinary demand of decency or behaviour. So patronising." He heard the indrawn breath of someone just dealt a body blow. "I'm sorry, I should've left well enough alone."

"I know why you are in love with that woman. She wants you to protect her. She's beautiful and tough and she wants to rest her head on your shoulder. That's it, isn't it?"

Paul spoke slowly. "I think you may just be right. And I'm not sure that's such a terrible thing. The world's a better place for it - when it's wanted. And given freely, without obligation."

Clare sighed. "Paul, it's fine, although I'd have to say I'm not sure you're totally free of paternalism yourself. It's hurtful, but I think I do finally understand why things went wrong with us. No, don't say it wasn't all my fault. I know it wasn't. It's going to be fine, I'll come up swimming, I'm that kind of girl. And I wish you luck with Julia. I really do. You shone together." The cigarette sound again, she must truly be smoking this time. "But you still need to find out for sure if we can trust her."

Some phone call, he thought, easing open the doors to the pool area. The rain and cold swooped, a flock of birds of prey. Paul considered going back and throwing his body under a warm shower. Instead he willed himself to wind back the pool cover, and climb into the narrow strip of water. He swam, up and down, up and down, counting his strokes, counting the laps, measuring the metres, telling himself not to react to Clare's words. In a few minutes he'd return to working out the problem of the agency. For now, he needed to trust, not to think.

Julia smiled when she saw Sonya. There was nothing pitiable about the attractive young woman who sat on the seat looking across the harbour. She startled at Julia's arrival, it was true, but no more than anyone whose thoughts were interrupted. They walked back to the hire car – a different make and model from the last one – in virtual silence, remarking only on the noise of the hawkers trying to sell them a last minute place on a dinner cruise and the number of children racing around, scaring even the sea-gulls.

"Where we go?" Sonya asked as she clicked her seatbelt into place.

Julia studied the back lane, the spilling garbage bins and the small Chinese child sitting on a step in silence. Where were they going to go? Back to the hotel, she assumed. She hadn't been there yet to collect her things and check out. However, despite her quiet confidence, Sonya's fear for Avril made the air shudder with urgency. She wouldn't be happy with the hotel.

"Mr Paul?" Sonya offered.

Paul. The girls would've assumed them to be a couple, Julia thought. They would've given that impression, too, at that moment in time. She couldn't tell Sonya things were very different now. "We're not married, you know. We don't – " She stopped. It might worry Sonya even more if she said she and Paul didn't know each other well. How true would that claim be anyway? What did 'knowing each other' mean? "I'm not sure we should go to see him straight away, there are some things I need to sort out first."

Sonya's disappointment was as palpable as her anxiety. Although she'd turned to Julia with trust, Mr Paul had clearly impressed her. "O-kay," she said quietly. "How we find Avril?"

Julia started the car, made her way carefully down the cobbled lane, watching for any sudden movement. The child had gone inside. "You're right, Sonya, we'll go straight to Paul's house." At least she could tell herself she was brave.

From the on-ramp Warren could see the traffic on the freeway was denser than that thick-head Ray. He'd decided to go west, outta the city, travelling with the heavy end-of-day traffic that would squeeze him and the car that followed him out of line – and hopefully out of sight of each other. Warren let pass three opportunities to enter the stream of traffic. The car behind him didn't hassle. Sydney drivers weren't renowned for their patience, so this confirmed his belief the car was a tail. His figuring was that he needed to spring into the traffic when the going was dangerous, when two cars couldn't make it at the same time. The tail'd be caught, waiting and it'd be bloody difficult for the buggers to force their way back behind him in the peak-hour scramble. If he was lucky, it'd take them a couple of minutes to even get into the swarm. Specially seeing convertibles gave loads of people the shits, they were so pretentious; no one was gonna make way in a hurry.

When he finally got onto the freeway, he drove with an eye to his rear and side mirrors, and did some thinking. The presence of Ray'd brought to mind all sorts of possibilities. First, it was evident that the ordinary driver was removed from the job at a moment's notice. Which suggested they were scared. Ray was presumably put in to prevent any more kidnappings and to keep his eye – cloudy as it often-times was, in Warren's estimation – on anyone and everything around. Ray didn't come cheap. Big money was being waved around. Another interesting thing was that Warren hadn't heard any goss about Ray moving on. S'far as he knew the boofy bastard was still on the payroll of the media guy. That big, gold ring he'd noted on the ham-fist had to come from somewhere. So, Ray's little on-stage performance was maybe a hint to the source who was funding the op. Challinor needed to know this.

The convertible was several cars behind him. Warren blessed the fact that it was Friday and late arvo at that; even the most polite of drivers discovered belligerence when they were set in the direction of their first beer for the weekend. The convertible kept trying, zig-zagging lanes whenever it could, but no bastard was giving it a real chance. Two ks to the next off-ramp. Maybe worth the risk. He could edge along, playing with the traffic as best as he could, make a last minute dive. Once off the freeway he knew a couple of easy-to-miss side roads with bush blocks running along them. So long as he could stay ahead of the tail, all he needed was quick right turn, a nip into one of the long driveways and he'd be like Houdini. Unless they knew the territory they'd be well lost by the

time he came out the other side. Beating through the bush was a bloody sight easier in the big Ford than in the pansy car they were driving. Not that he was planning on hanging on to the Ford that evening. A change of car was required, secret and pronto.

Ian couldn't take his eyes off the card with the number, even though the strain of focussing on it was giving him a headache. He'd already put it in the bin and taken it out again more than once. In a vague way, he knew the card was evidence.

By now he was pretty confirmed in the notion that the number he'd rung was for a call agency. What else could he think when the woman purred out her spiel in such a throaty, bedroom voice? Not phone sex, which was common enough. Something out of the usual. So, what the hell did they want from him? There were a coupla suburban brothels with workers who specialised in giving a blow job to blokes with disabilities, but the Carmen'd struck him as a girl who expected clients with money to spend. He couldn't see how they'd want him to pimp for clients. There was something pretty weird and sick behind it all.

Looked like his job was going down the gurgler and the card wasn't a magic lamp to a new one. He musta done something badly wrong to've landed himself in this pickle. Jean Prettie still missing and him majorly responsible. Did this mean the end of things with Dee? She was nice, plain damn nice, and he needed nice. Sure as hell, she'd be giving him the flick. Ian felt tears at the back of his eyes. He was a pathetic no-hoper of a bastard.

He shuffled to his feet. The wine cask was near enough empty. Which was OK as it'd been on the go for a few nights, so he hadn't skulled too much this evening. He was still carrying the card. He decided to put it down, put all of it down. The curiosity about the card, the worry about Jean Prettie, the thought of contacting her sister, his maybe overblown concerns about what the husband might get up to. He was back now in the tunnel. And Dee was at the other end, waving at him. Goodbye. Ah shit. Ah fucking shit. The world was so fucking mean. Ian squeezed out the last of the wine. Cheap muck, like his life.

Just as he was falling asleep Ian twigged that that bloody woman, Carmen, was real interested in the fact that Jean'd gone missing. Here was another puzzle. He tried to think about it. Only a void where there should be a brain. Knew she'd been hurried, anxious,

when she heard him talk about it. Then the shutters went down. Should he pass the number on to the police who were looking for Jean? Before it was too late or whatever. Took him so long to consider that one, he was snoring.

Philip poured the man in front of him, the thin, conservatively dressed man sometimes called John, a brandy. He hadn't known anyone who drank brandy – cognac to be more precise – in years. Fortunately the bartender of the intimate city bar had done some work for him now and then and had been handsomely rewarded: he was happy to go to the cellar and find an appropriately aged bottle.

"Robin – no, it's time to dispense with any other name, don't you feel? Philip, we think that you have some information that we might need, about those leaks – which there might still be time to stop. Our impression is that you are aware of who might be handing over information. We, of course, all know to whom the information is going. Is this not correct?"

The brandy in Philip's glass sent out a dull sheen as he swirled it. He would let John talk, not admit anything, certainly not bring Julia into the discussion.

"Our primary concern is names, naturally. Mud sticks. Particularly, in this town, mud can strongly adhere when it is deemed necessary. And we are associated, when perhaps we can't afford to be. You do understand what I mean, Philip?"

Philip cursed himself for ever agreeing to deal with this man. For years he'd made his money through the law, then a clever playing of the market coupled with keeping both his mouth and ears carefully closed. Political machinations long ago ceased to interest him. As for the underworld politics that more nearly ran the show, he kept himself resolutely away from any of it. He'd slipped up, though, when he met John, allowed himself to be overly impressed by the old-tie accent and the casual mention of connections Philip did indeed dream about. He felt feeble as he reiterated. "Don't worry, it's all very discreet."

The man tipped himself another brandy. He had minders; two big, burly B-grade movie-men, to drive him home. They were at another table, distant enough to be able to observe more than just Philip and their boss, close enough to watch every movement of his hands. Had they wanted to; they didn't appear interested.

"I, and my other colleagues and associates, we are all very much aware of your attempts to ensure discretion, Philip, and we thank you for it. To date you have been most impressive." He took the brandy to his lips, held it there.

"Thanks."

"However, times have changed. Just one name." John held up a thumb in an odd gesture. "One name might be, shall we say, enough to open a floodgate. Or close one. It is always so hard to predict who might feel inclined to shift the attention from themselves."

Philip decided to feign impatience. "This is all very well. The fact is that there is no way of proving who is behind the service. Other than credit card records, and the businesses and charities have been very useful in clearing the payment issues."

"You know that, and I know that, Philip, but it takes only one person – one believable, potentially knowledgeable person, to tell those who might listen, that a business is not quite as legitimate as it might appear. And then where are we? One thing inevitably spills into another."

The room was beginning to fill up with after-dinner drinkers, their voices slurring together to form a thick background hum. It was out in the open now, as much as it would be. 'A believable, knowledgeable person,' was clearly Julia. Philip pulled at the collar of his shirt, wishing he'd thought to change into something less formal. He was tired of having to spend so much on his clothing. The money he made didn't increase exponentially with the price of his shirts, Julia didn't notice, the women he took out were primed to be impressed with him anyway.

John continued to speak in that almost effete voice of his. Philip pretended to listen. He had a plan to convince this man that all would be made right. Or at least a plan to buy time, the time he needed. It was a risk, a terrible risk, but he wasn't prepared to go down without a fight.

The waiter came to Philip's subtle signal. "You must have just a sip of Michael's signature cocktail," Philip said to the man across the table, "it's superb." He nodded to the waiter, who moved quietly away. "Now, have I told you that I have asked my wife to provide a little support for our enterprise? She is with Challinor as we speak."

When the car stopped, Avril wasn't frightened. For weeks, when he wasn't ferrying the customers around, Zac'd been following her, so him offering her a lift to the hotel wasn't a new thing. The car was new, though, and that was what convinced her to get in. She wasn't going to be seen in any old bomb with a broken bumper bar – like the 80s Ford Laser he'd been driving when off-duty – but the shiny silver Peugeot was in another class altogether.

"Five minutes of yer time," he said, turning toward the park and not the hotel.

That freaked her a bit. Everyone knew the park could be dangerous and then there was Melanie. Nice kid, tipped into the lake, nearly died. Still, the car was air conditioned, with the wind sealed off and her like a princess in it so she didn't object.

Zac did a half-circuit. Parramatta Park was huge and he was driving nervously, his foot backing off the accelerator and then thumping onto it too hard, the car jerking, almost kangaroo-ing, so it took them a while to fetch up in one of the more sheltered spots under the trees. She figured the driving was due to the new car and wasn't too worried, except about the time of her appointment. She didn't want to be late. If the client complained her wages'd be docked and that didn't suit her at all.

"Zac, I gotta get to work," she said, thinking that he probably wanted to kiss her and that was fine but she wasn't giving any more. He was a nice enough boy and the car was impressive but she had her sights set on independence, making up her own mind about her life's direction. She was young, she was earning money, she wasn't going to hook herself to some bloke with oversized eyes and a crappy job.

He turned the engine off and squashed his lips against hers. His mouth was really wet, like he'd been holding saliva in for hours and it was all gushing out into her mouth, which was pretty disgusting. There was nothing she could do, she was pinned in place by the seat belt which he'd done up and she couldn't undo, cause her arms didn't make the length or the angle needed to get to the clip.

"That one's for me," he finally said, straightening up. His prick was poking up against his trousers but he wasn't doing anything with it, which was a relief. She hated it when they jerked themselves off, making her watch. "Now I gunna take yer to a new job."

"No way, I'm booked. I wanna go the hotel. That's where you take me."

"I got orders."

Zac started the car again. She looked at his face. It was kinda twisted, like he was doing something he didn't want to. She looked down at his crotch again. The erection was over, caput. He put the indicator on, driving out from under the trees like he was an old man. "Come on, Zac," Avril said, "we can meet on my day off. Just take me to work, hey?"

"Can't."

"Come on."

"Can't. Don't ask me again, or there'll be trouble."

There were tears streaming down his face but he was staring straight ahead and still driving in the wrong direction. The seat belt tightened as the car lurched again; she felt half-strangled. Avril swallowed, realising that the liquid in his mouth had been fear. She didn't know yet what he was so scared of, but she figured whatever it wasn't going to be something she was happy about.

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To their left Julia saw Centennial Park, acres of emptiness, tendrils of blackness reaching to the silver night sky. "We're not going in, or through it," she said when she felt Sonya shiver.

She drove more slowly now, watching for street names, doubling back, taking intentional wrong turns, careful of any car lights that shone in the rear-view. None stayed with her. She parked a careful few houses away and left Sonya in the locked car.

"You're very late," Paul said. Stiff, abrupt.

Julia closed her eyes. All she wanted to do was to throw herself into his arms. Lust, drama, fulfilment. Instead she had to face a world sullied with her past, and her present. She straightened her back, spoke as evenly as she could. "I have a good reason and I also have Sonya in the car. Avril's disappeared and Sonya's run away. Is it safe to bring her in?"

"It's a small world," he said dryly. "Warren's already told me about Avril. Of course it's safe to bring Sonya in."

"It's not entirely 'of course' - I've been followed. Not recently as far as I can tell."

"Then we shouldn't be standing in the doorway."

She noticed then that the lights were on. Lights that weren't necessary for him, which he'd presumably put on because he was waiting for her. It wasn't hard to guess he'd found out about Philip. She hadn't fully anticipated the level of pain - on her part; it was much harder to know what he was feeling.

"Your house is lovely, although not quite what I expected," Julia said, when she and Sonya were inside, and he was hanging their coats - her leather one which they'd bought together, and a woollen one of Sonya's - on the stand in the wide hallway. She was making small talk for Sonya's sake.

"Too suburban? I need the space."

"The colours are good, too," she said, as she entered the large living area.

He smiled then. "They're compliments of an interior decorating service, in consultation with myself. I only bought this house after

Clare and I split up." He gestured them to the couches, his smile departing, but his manner less intense.

It would be all right, Julia told herself. She would explain. He would believe her. She hoped. How she hoped.

"Julia and I have a few things to talk about later," Paul said, reading her thoughts, directing his voice to Sonya. "We can leave that until we've worked out what to do about Avril."

Sonya was staring straight ahead, taking no notice of her surrounds, or of the ripples of tension in the air around her. "No police," she said.

Paul sat on the couch opposite them. Julia waited. His silence, she thought, was designed to make a witness speak, rush out words that they might not have intended. If only she could get her own confession over and done with. Instead Sonya explained that Avril's family were very strict and she was frightened of what they might do if they found out about Avril's job. Sonya had already rung, asking for Avril, finding herself talking to a very angry woman on the other end of the line. She was frightened, too, that if she involved the police, her boss - for whom she had no name - would find out and pursue her. "I am scared," she said. "We have been warned so many times to be quiet."

"That's fine," Paul agreed, "we can do better than the police. They'd insist, anyway, on only taking a report from someone who's got the authority to know Avril's gone."

"You think I do not know she is gone?"

"I think you know very well that you care for Avril. The police like rules, however. Sonya, would you mind going over the rest of what's happened?"

Her experience fitted neatly with the observations Warren had rung through earlier, which Paul briefly reported on. Julia noted his body was tense but that he was not keeping information from her.

"Do you know if Avril had a boyfriend? One who might be jealous or angry?" he asked.

"It is possible. I mean, she doesn't have a boyfriend but there was a man who say he want to be boyfriend. He say he love her and want to have babies with her. He say he will be devoted for ever and ever."

"Where did she meet this man?"

Sonya moved uncomfortably on the couch. "I do not know." Sonya's voice wavered for the first time. Was this reminding her of

interrogation, Julia wondered; did she face that in her own country before her family fled?

"Don't worry about it right now," Paul offered. "Can you tell me if she saw this man in the past few days?"

"Yes. He come to the van and look inside. Avril say he is love-sick cow. She doesn't want to give up her job for him. He has big eyes and he just look and look."

"What do you think, Julia?"

She spoke carefully. "Sonya told me on the way here that they'd be particularly warned to be careful with voyeurs, that they were the least predictable clients. There may be something in this."

Eventually Sonya's information was as complete as it could be. Her fine-featured face was drawn and her body limp. Julia suspected she'd never been so far or out so long alone in Sydney before. "We need to get you something to eat, Sonya," Julia said.

"I'll find us some food in a minute. I need to ring the name of the hotel and the man's description through to Warren first." Paul rose, business-like, and headed out of the room, any emotions kept tightly under control. Julia wanted to go after him, explain. She couldn't; there was Sonya to consider. As well as her own potent mix of fear and guilt.

In the background, as he tried Warren, Paul could hear Sonya and Julia speaking quietly. It was possible Avril had chosen to disappear. It was also possible that if she'd been abducted, her captor may not have harmed her. Not yet. Kidnappings almost always ended in tragedy.

Warren was terse when he finally answered the phone. "See you in two minutes," he said.

Paul stopped himself expressing surprise. Warren rarely came to his house, and never before when he was on a job. Something was seriously wrong.

He returned to the living room, maintaining apparent calm. He listened for a car. None came. Instead there was a brief scratching on the glass doors that opened to the back garden. Technically there was no access to the yard. The sides of the house were closed off by the same high, sheer metal and locked fence that surrounded the pool. There was no rear lane and the properties all around had higher fences than his, guard dogs on one side, alarms and security lights on all three.

"Tarzan?" Paul enquired, as he opened the door. Best to keep it light.

"Nah, testing my wizardry. All the rage with the kids."

Paul wanted movement, action. First, though, the introductions, the eyebrows he couldn't see, but knew would be rising, the sorting-out of pecking orders and protocols. There were times when life was too similar to a court of law for his liking.

Sonya waited on the couch, her tears drying, hope returning. She enjoyed the way the couch enveloped her. Paul was with the other man in a room off the corridor. He said the other man would help them find Avril. She could see Julia in the kitchen, which was a bright space at the end of the living area. She was making coffee and opening the fridge and the cupboards and finding bits and pieces of food for them. The smell of the rich coffee beans made Sonya feel at home, even though she could see that Julia and Paul were upset about something. They were worried about Avril but there was more to it than that. This confused her because she had thought they were in love when she met them earlier. Perhaps it was a lovers' fight. She wondered if she would one day have a lovers' fight, or would she have to spend her whole life in a little flat alone? The lady who had offered her the job had been so sweet and nice and promised that it would be secret forever. The job wasn't sweet and nice and even if it stayed a secret from her family, Sonya would always know what she had done, how she felt. Dirty.

Julia came over and offered her some food. They smiled at each other but neither of them said anything. Sonya ate and thought about Avril. Avril was proud of doing the work, proud of her skill in earning so much. Why was this so? That one of them could feel they were betraying all possible love, while the other could think the job was fantastic, a key to opening up a much better world? She thought, too, about the idiot girl who wanted to get married to all the clients. Who just wanted to be loved. Human beings were very interesting, she had to admit that, but maybe in the end they were all the same.

Warren and Paul were in the study, the door closed at Warren's insistence. Said he didn't know the women from soap-bars.

"The first thing you should know," Warren said, "is that I did some fancy work with some cars. Even the satellite spies couldn't've followed me here."

Paul gestured Warren's concerns away, although he was very protective of his address. A previous investigation had resulted in a small bomb through a smashed rear window. The syndicate that was employing people under government disability incentive payments – and saving themselves several million a year in wages while making a huge profit on what the workers actually produced – hadn't liked their scam being unveiled. There'd also been death threats by phone, fax, and, less often, post. Paul didn't take them seriously, Clare was more intense, but the harassment got to him now and then so he preferred silent numbers and careful guarding of his whereabouts.

"Why the need to come here?"

"I'm limiting the phone. There's guys around who specialise in intercepts – and all of a sudden I'm popular with members of that crowd." Warren explained about his conversation with Ray. "Ray's big and beefy and got eyes in the back of his head. No brains – which is how come that when he saw me, which was smart, he was stupid enough to let me know he had."

"You're sure he's still working for the same person?"

"Positive. Checked with a mate on the way over here. Bennett's his employer all right."

"And Bennett's a smallish but important player in the push for relaxation of media ownership laws. He's not the most thuggish kid on the block, but he wants to become bigger. Not a man who'd want his name linked with an escort agency."

"And a man who's said to have trouble keeping his wives. Perhaps he has unusual tastes."

It made sense. "Bennett behind the agency would explain why the brothel cartel is so concerned. If things don't go his way, he can simply get one of his editors to put a word in a journo's ear. Dig up a scandal in the Cross, pass the information to the police in return for favours past or future. Closures left, right and centre. I'd be worried if I were them, too."

"Boss, if I was you I'd be worried right here and now. Ray shouldn't've talked to me and he'll be shitting himself that he's let the cat out of the bag. An' he'll know it ain't no little domestic type o'cat. My fault it's happened, but it's too late to wallow and we gotta take account o'the fact that you and me are gonna be the talk of some parts of town right now."

The room felt too small. Paul roamed it as best he could. Cats in bags, dolls in cages, himself feeling trapped, the metaphors were piling up. Did they get them any closer to finding Avril? "The central problem now is Avril's whereabouts," he said, hoping he was voicing his true thoughts, that the burning issue of Julia wouldn't consume him.

"Sure, but how do we find one small woman in a town the size of this? There's more'n four million people out there could've taken a shine to her and decided to keep her for their very own."

"You and I make a decent amount of bread and butter knowing that human beings are not isolated. Six degrees of separation applies particularly well to criminal behaviour. We need to find the place – or person – to start with and the rest will inevitably be available."

"If we can read the signs."

"And read them quickly enough."

"Police?" Warren asked. "Sometimes the bastards can be helpful. They can do the plodding when you're in a hurry."

"We've promised Sonya we won't go to them, but I'm just about to ring Clare. Her contact is in Missing Persons; we can at least check whether her family have reported her missing."

Warren noted the 'we' this time included Julia, not Clare. Interesting. He half-listened to the conversation between Paul and Clare, noted also the change in expression when Challinor got off the phone.

"Clare's contact just happened to be there with her, at this very moment on a Friday evening." Paul was smiling, broadly. "The good news is the last activity of this very contact's day – before buying the champagne to take to Clare's – was to direct a couple of officers to interview Avril's parents. She's been reported missing and the parents must have been convincing enough to get the police moving."

"Excellent. Do we have to keep Clare up to date with what we're doing?"

"She said she wasn't interested." Paul smiled again. Clare had in fact said that she'd spent the last week trying to decide whether or not she could finally give up on Paul. That she'd thought she still wanted him. But now she'd made up her mind. Mike was good for her. Working with Paul wasn't.

"Are we going to be able to keep tabs on the copper's progress? Is Clare up to that?"

"Might be stretching the friendship. Let's look at what we've got ourselves. The most likely scenario is that she's been grabbed by a devotee." Paul sat down, slipping back into business mode, going over the information about the man who'd been attaching himself to Avril. Not stalking, as far as they knew, but some indicators that it could turn that way. "Further to that, I spent some time in the Cross earlier today. The pleasant ladies and gents gave over a couple of names that can act as leverage with the agency. I have a good lead to the legal adviser, too."

Julia's connection with this same legal adviser might come in useful, but not if Warren blew the issue sky-high. "Devotees do resort to desperate acts," he went on, keeping his own counsel, explaining instead about the dismembered dolls, the wording of the threats that accompanied them. "It does seem that often where there's one paraphilia, there's another. S & M is a popular accompaniment, too. Keeping Avril a prisoner might serve some purpose in the abductor's mind."

"Not a pretty idea. Could lead to anything."

"There could be a connection between Avril's disappearance and the arrival - by courier - of the caged kewpie. The image is strong."

Warren gave that a moment's thought. "You want me out there to see this woman, Marcia? See if I can sniff a trail to the pervert with a Barbie fetish?"

"You could put it that way."

"Shouldn't I be back out in Parra? That's where things are happening."

"Yes and no. You'd be invaluable - but not if Ray gets wind of you back in his patch. It seems reasonable to leave the agency to get on with it for the next couple of days. If they've got Ray protecting the workers, we can assume they know as little about Avril's disappearance as the police. We can also assume they're pretty worried about it."

"What'y gunna do?"

"What I'm good at: get all the evidence together, try to make the links. Talk to people. Might follow up on those names I mentioned. If we can get access to the agency's records I think we can find the culprit. There's enough in what Sonya knows, and you've found, to suggest that whoever has made her disappear met her as a client. It'll be a process of elimination, and we're going to have to do it very quickly, but we can do it."

"Why would anyone at the agency agree to spilling their champagne anywhere near you all of a sudden?"

Paul held the glass paperweight taken from his desk. The coolness was pleasant. The thought of Julia as a hostage was not. "Because I know too much," was the best answer he could give.

Warren drummed his fingers on the desk for a few seconds. He could feel the understated urgency in the room. Challinor was like that; on the outside giving the impression he wouldn't be disturbed by a cyclone, a computer brain zapping inside. More emotion than usual, Warren was sure of that, just as he was certain Challinor wasn't telling him all the facts. "Her mate out there's really worried about the girl?" he asked, thinking he'd like to inquire about the beautiful Julia, but bugged if he could think how to do it. He didn't like it; she was breathing trouble all over the boss.

"Aren't you worried? Specially now you've had a chat with Ray?"

Warren swallowed, keeping his own counsel for the time being on his other concerns. "Yeah, big time."

Warren left through the front door, in a hat and coat borrowed from Paul, which he wore well despite being three or four inches shorter. A chameleon, Julia thought, he could pass as Paul, even used the cane as if he'd been doing it all his life.

When the taxi – ordered as a decoy – had gone in one direction and Warren in another, Paul returned to the living room, his face set. Julia wanted badly to touch him, but Sonya was looking questioningly from one to the other. Their stock of small talk had dried up.

"There's some new information," Paul said, sitting down. "Information which makes us fairly sure your employers are looking for Avril too. Which is a good thing, as they have a lot of resources at their command." He ran his fingers over his cropped head. They were all tired and there was a lot more of the night to get through yet.

"Is Warren look for her too?"

"He's going to visit some people who should be able to help with finding her." He paused. "Sonya, I know you won't want to go, but we need to get you home. Your parents will be out of their minds with worry and when they start looking for you it'll only make it more complicated for Avril."

"I cannot do this." Her tone was stoic. Then she hesitated. "It will be better for Avril?"

"It will be much better. She won't be found easily if you're reported missing as well. It'll be assumed you've gone off together."

Sonya's voice was small but strong. "OK, I go home."

"I'll ring your mother, it's not too late, and explain..."
Julia trailed off.

"That you had a fall and we rescued you and took you to the hospital." Paul finished the sentence.

"That is big lie."

Paul nodded, a smile in the corners of his mouth. Julia calmed the memory of those sensuous lips on hers. "Not a bad lie," Paul was saying. "I'm sure I've got some ointment and bandages. The injury can be under your hair, so the bruising won't have to show."

"Duplicity," Julia said, "none of us are above it."

"Including you?"

"Including me, but sometimes it's necessary, and not harmful."
She let the words echo for only a moment. "Paul, I've been out to the house that Sonya and Avril mentioned and I've been to see a friend. I think I know how the agency is laundering their money. I can't say whether this will help us find Avril, but it's worth having everything on the table, isn't it?"

"Yes," he replied, with an emphasis that made her wince.

"We'll talk when we drive Sonya home."

"Julia, I'm not sure how safe it is, you and I, heading west at the moment. I have a driver I sometimes use. She's very reliable."

"We should do it."

Sonya broke in. "No, I want driver. You must find Avril. It is not good to waste time."

"Sonya," Paul said, 'you're very smart. I'll ring her now."

The refuge was a big-bellied, late Victorian detached home with rear lane access and old stables in the back garden. Enormous iron fences all around. Plenty of places to hide. Bloody hard to get into.

"We weighed it up," Marcia said. "Decided we needed two-street access to get women and children out in an emergency. Put the fences up and the gating system to stop unauthorised entry."

"Ever heard of Fort Knox?" Warren bent over, inspecting the electronic pad that controlled the gates from inside the house.

"Women's lives are more precious than gold."

"Yeah, sure." Why was it some people never knew when to let up? Gave them ulcers, or cancer or a heart attack.

To his surprise, Marcia unbent a little. Maybe got the message. She needed to, he was in a hurry. Boss'd insisted he didn't tell Marcia about Avril though. No point in making her more twitchy. "Would you like me to show you what I think might have happened?" she asked.

Outside, lights beamed down on every access point. The inside lighting was pale in comparison, giving more privacy to the residents. "And staff," Marcia added, leading him to the side of the house, "we've been threatened more than once." She stopped. "This is where the dolls were found. Except the one that came by courier, of course."

A small side door, with an aging sandstone step, initially designed for the casual use of family when the house had extensive grounds. A hundred years ago, Warren estimated. Now, small semi-detached houses crowded the erstwhile mansion.

"I think the dolls have been passed through the fence. On a pole of some sort." Marcia pointed and mimed the act.

Bloody good thinking, 99, he wanted to say. "Were they all small enough to fit in a small container? One that wouldn't unbalance a pole and which could be tipped?"

"They were all packaged very tightly, so that when we unwrapped them the hideous faces and bodies sprang at us."

"If a pole was inserted low enough, it wouldn't set off the alarms, either. Very clever."

"You could put it that way."

Warren smiled, acknowledging Marcia's jibe as reasonable this time. "So, we're looking for a bloke who's bright, probably educated and can get himself into the property next door. No chance it's a neighbour?"

Even in the night-light Warren saw Marcia blanch. "Hadn't even thought of that," she admitted. "There's been an old couple there for year who've been sympathetic enough. Now I come to think of it I haven't seen them for weeks, maybe months. I'll have to check who's there."

"Don't worry, that's my job, and I'm gunna do it right now."

Marcia let him out, using a remote electronic control to swing the front gate open. The roof of the small veranda next door was low, making it hard to tell whether or not there were any lights on in the house. Warren strode straight to the door, rapped politely, waited, hammered, and hammered again.

He took a torch from his pocket and moved across the straggly grass toward the spot where the sight line to the refuge's side entrance was perfect. The grass was a thin, native variety, of itself too tough to retain any sign of someone squatting on it, but otherwise better for clues than an imported lawn. Warren stayed back a couple of feet from the fence and poked gently, shifting aside the thin grass so that he could see the ground underneath. Yep, prints. More than one. Broken up by the grass, of course, wouldn't be useful for identification. Clear enough to be yelling at him that someone'd squatted there several times recently. At night, when there was enough moisture in the air for a print to be made deep enough to last in the otherwise dusty ground.

Warren gave Marcia a thumbs-up, then gestured her to go inside the refuge. What she didn't see was all the better for her. A quick tour around as much of the outside as possible and then he was goin' in. At the back, the blinds down, windows a dull, dirty look. Contrasted with the side facing the refuge where the panes of glass were cleaner than a Mr Sheen ad. His intuition was looking better than a teenage girl's, that was for sure.

The rear door was a flimsy affair, strapped to shoddy hinges when the back veranda'd been closed in some time in the 50s or 60s. It was almost like he was invited in. Not quite what he expected inside though. Warren flashed the torch, expecting to see either a

camp set up in an old folks' vacated house or an organised den of iniquity. Whips, bondage, equipment along those lines. Nothing of the sort in evidence. In fact, the place was resoundingly empty except for the guy hanging from a rope slung over the lintel of the door that shoulda' been the back one. The smell of his shit was still fresh. Putrid, in fact, but not a maggot in sight. Only been there a matter of hours. Stupid bastard, Warren muttered, heading further into the house. He'd get the police in soon enough, but right now there could be evidence that he needed more than them.

A dream woke Ian. He jumped up, ignoring the slosh of booze in his belly. He just had a feeling. Maybe because things couldn't get much worse. He was going to ring work and find out about Jean Prettie and then he was going to give Julia one last try.

When he rang, the bloody house phone was engaged and the fax machine line was turned off. What kind of organisation happened when he wasn't there? The dream was with him, urging him in some inarticulate way to keep at it.

When he finally got through it was like all his Christmases had come at once. "She's found," was all he heard, before he nearly wet himself. "Hang on," he said. He put the phone down and got himself onto the bog. Relief wasn't in it.

"Where?" he finally got to ask. "When? What happened? Is she all right? Shit, how is she?"

"The police've just rung. She's all right, they think. They're taking her to hospital so she can be checked over. I haven't got any more information, they wouldn't release anything to me. Said I didn't have the authority. No wonder they get called pigs. Do you wanna ring them?"

"Sure. Yes. Now. Jesus, give me the number."

Ian wrote it down. Carefully. On the notepad he kept near the phone, no scrap of paper for this number. No way.

He jumped up, cleaned his teeth before he rang them. Silly bloody thing to do, of course, but why not? It made him feel better. Then he decided to ring Dee, who would be with her family but would be sure to think this was important enough for an interruption.

She did. She practically purred at him down the phone. Ian felt set, and happier than he'd been since the early days. Of his adulthood, his fatherhood, his marriage. He liked being a dad. He'd like being Dee's lover, too, he reckoned. Wasn't sure he wanted any more kids, but didn't need to think that far ahead right now. Needed to ring the coppers. Be nice to them. Hope he didn't get Fat-boy on the other end of the phone.

It wasn't Fat-boy, it was some really pleasant woman who told him they'd be sending Jean from Nowra Base Hospital to Prince of Wales and that he could ring in the morning for all the details, 'cause she'd just come on shift. But, yeah, it was fine to inform the relatives and his superiors.

He didn't waste any time in doing that. He rang the assistant manager who was on call for the local area and practically crowed. Then he tried Julia Prettie. Why not?

A police siren could be heard. Sonya had left, the tension in the air increased. Julia considered whether to ignore her phone, ringing too loudly. Slowly, she extracted the small machine from her bag, holding it for a moment, listening to the high-pitched sound outside.

"Yes," she said crisply, thinking that the chances were that it was Philip. Was it guilt making her answer? Or did she think he might be useful? The latter, more likely.

"Shit, you're there."

It wasn't Philip, and she had no idea who it was.

"Haven't you been listening to your messages?"

She'd played them for the first time late that afternoon. None from Philip, which had puzzled her. One from work, another from her friend Barbara. Two from Ian, Jean's house manager, not saying much, asking her to call. She'd filed those in her mind for later, now she recognised the voice.

"Ian, I'm sorry I haven't got back to you. I've been busy. I know I missed visiting Jean the other day."

"I'm not beating about the bush. Jean's on her way to hospital. In Nowra. It's a long story."

Julia's mind, or was it heart, somersaulted. Jean, ill, seriously ill, while she'd been having illicit sex and then racing round the countryside, playing amateur detective. The promises she'd made to protect her fragile sister disregarded, even her phone turned off. "Hospital?"

"She disappeared. Now she's found. Like I said, she's in Nowra, which is fair way away, but it's OK."

Disappeared? Julia stood up, asking Ian to wait a moment, quickly taking the two steps to Paul. "Can I use your land-line?" she asked him brusquely. "I think we both need to hear this."

He swung in his chair, his hand reaching for her, reading the tone of her voice. She took Ian's number, and pressed it in with the buttons on the larger phone as quickly as she could.

"Sorry, the mobile reception was poor. Are you certain Jean is all right? That's the most important thing."

"The police reckon she's literally pissing herself laughing. They're not letting anyone near her yet, not until they've interviewed her."

"Interviewed Jean? Haven't you explained that won't work?"

"Tried to. Coppers're thicker than two short planks." He almost said, they're thicker than Jean and only stopped himself just in time.

"OK, tell me about her disappearance."

She felt the alertness in Paul's body, picking up on what was going on.

Ian blurted out as much as he was prepared to admit to, reiterating how often he'd tried to get hold of Julia.

"Is there a connection with Avril?" Julia asked Paul, when Ian finished.

"Who are you talking to?" Ian asked, his tone suspicious.

"A friend of mine has been listening. In fact, we're looking for another young woman who's disappeared. Possibly abducted. Did the police mention anything to you?"

"Jean wasn't abducted, as far as I know," Ian offered, aware that he sounded lame. This would really be another spanner in the works and he was on for more trouble right now. "She was in the house one minute and gone the next. You know how she likes to go walkabout, but it's not like there's anyone hanging around these streets. It's pretty boring out here, y'know. And Jean's not, like, up to working out a time and place to rendezvous. She can't tell midday on a clock. Or midnight, come to that."

Julia turned to Paul. "It's true, Jean's always wandered. It was one of my jobs when we were kids to find her. She loved playing hide and seek, but couldn't work out how big a thing she needed to hide behind, so she was pretty easy to spot. Sometimes she liked to do it ten or twenty times a day – or night. She wasn't against two am or three am."

Paul didn't say that a truly obsessed person might well cruise past or stake-out suburban group homes and might take any opportunity that presented itself. And a vulnerable woman who liked hiding games would be a very easy target.

"Listen, dunno if this's connected, but I did talk with a lady o'sorts earlier who was looking for people with disabilities." Ian was clearly thinking as he spoke. "To do some work, she didn't say precisely what."

This time Paul asked the questions. "It's Paul Challinor here. I get the impression you have a feeling for what this work was?"

'Well, I guess you could say it didn't seem regular stuff. Not packing shelves or whatever."

"Work was offered to you as well?"

"True. How'd y'know?"

"We – Julia and I and a couple of other people – have been looking into an escort agency which employs people with disabilities."

"Holy cow! I mean, I guessed, but I didn't believe it could be for real. I reckoned I was seeing goblins or somethin'."

"Can you give us the phone number of the woman you spoke to?"

"You bettya."

Suddenly Julia cut in. "Did Philip know Jean was missing?"

"Yeah, sorry, I needed to get in touch with someone and your mobile was outta action and you weren't home. We tried real hard to find you, y'know."

Julia bit back the words. No point in venting her anger on Ian. Philip knew and had not bothered to find her. He must have been able to, if he'd tried. Her nails bit into her palms but she controlled herself, gathering a few more details before hanging up.

The room felt empty. Julia realised Paul had walked out while she was writing down phone numbers and contact names. She made a swift decision not to wallow in guilt. That was too simple and letting her life go on all too smoothly was part of what'd led her into the mess of having a husband like Phillip.

"Julia, do you want to go to Jean straight away? We can organise it." Paul asked, as he returned to the room.

"No, thanks. From what Ian said, I'd probably pass her in an ambulance on the highway, going in the opposite direction. She's in Nowra, soon to be on her way here. I feel all right, truly."

"So, you've had no contact with your husband in the past twenty four or more hours?"

"No."

She said nothing more, although he was sure she understood that her absence from contact with Philip was significant to him. Her shock at Ian's news, too, was convincing and supported the theory that she was acting without her husband's knowledge. Clearly the veracity of the story of Jean's disappearance was easily checked. He didn't know, though, where she'd been this afternoon – when she'd told him she'd be at work. Although his mind and body rebelled against it, he didn't know either whether she could have been acting out of some misguided sense of saving Philip. Could he trust the emotion he'd felt since meeting her? They sat, silent, in the armchairs, which were really only there for the occasional visitor, to lend warmth in an environment Paul knew to be otherwise austere. He wondered if she was taking in her surrounds, the over-sized desk, rows and rows of shelves and specially constructed filing cabinets. Would she think him clinical, distant? Or was she not interested in such mundane thoughts at the moment "You were very late. You wouldn't have come, would you, if it hadn't been for Sonya?" he finally asked.

Julia stood up then and walked across the room. There was the sound of a plane flying not too distantly overheard.

"The shoes are comfortable," she said, inconsequentially, referring to the ones they'd bought on their shopping trip, together. She came back and pulled over her chair so that their knees touched. "I would have come. Not tonight, though. I needed more time."

"In what way would time have made a difference?"

"To what I know."

"About?"

Her body, or the small part of it that was against his, was cold. "It's difficult. I wish I could pretend we're back in the dream-time of last night. You're so powerful, you know. Being with you has been so exciting. Not like a roller coaster or anything ephemeral like that. And not just the lovemaking, also the talking. I love serious talking."

She paused. "This isn't what you want to hear, is it?"

"It's exactly what I want to hear. What I want, though, may not be the most relevant thing." He reached to hold her hands, cupped them in his larger ones like a child might contain a personal treasure. "All right, I don't want to – but I will ask. You're not here because you're Philip Jones's wife? Has Philip sent you here?"

"I have absolutely no idea what you are talking about."

"Don't you?"

"Paul, stop this. I can see you've found out I'm married to Philip, but I don't have any idea why you'd think he'd send me to you. That's completely crazy."

Their knees were still touching. Another plane flew overhead. For a moment he imagined it was thunder, a storm seemed apposite.

"Julia, I have every reason to believe Philip's involved in the agency. Therefore you and I meeting seems a spectacular coincidence."

No hesitation. "That's exactly what I thought. When we met - in the cafe - I had no idea about Philip. I knew he had a new business, of course, but knew nothing about it." She sat back in the chair, her hands sliding from his. "I'm the loyal type, you know. Philip and I haven't been getting on for ages, but when I met you I gritted my teeth and told myself that, while you were too attractive for words, our meeting shouldn't matter, mustn't matter. Of course it did matter. A lot. Then you were in the middle of this investigation. What you told me and the pieces I knew came together, and I realised that there might be a connection between Philip and the agency. I felt sullied, tainted. I had to find out."

Suddenly she sat forward, grasped his hands, not at all lightly. "Hang on, you've distracted me. Was I supposed to be seducing you to stop you doing something about him? That's outrageous!"

Paul rose slowly, going over to the windows, tracing his long finger down the cold glass. "I didn't think that. I had to ask. It's my job to suspect and explore every angle. For God's sake, Julia, you're a highly intelligent woman with an established life, a husband, a job you love. You're out there. And you hate disabilities, you had your childhood ruined by dealing with a disabled sister. What exactly was I supposed to think was the reason you were prepared to run off, at least for a night, with me?"

He strode over to where she was sitting, stood before her. "I can't see you. I can't watch the way your face moves when you think. I can give you all the bullshit in the world about judging your reactions and it's good enough bullshit but in the end I am never, ever going to be sure that you're not hiding something from me."

"Paul, for heaven's sake, you're standing there in your dark glasses, towering over me, using the facial expressions you tell me you've been trained to use. You think that I can tell more about what you're thinking than you can about me? Ridiculous. I've just laid it all on the line and you are so concerned with your own issues you're

not listening. I'm falling in love with you. But I'm not giving in to this nonsense."

"And I thought I was the leopard waiting to pounce," he said. "Should I get down on my knees?"

"You're impossible."

For the first time in hours, they both laughed.

"Now, can we get on with finding Avril?" Julia asked, soon after. "I've left a bag of stuff in the hall. It contains a computer and some, I hope, other useful items."

The light-filled evening sky was opaque, any potential for pleasure well hidden. Philip felt terribly alone, letting himself into the building and into the office which belonged more properly to Robin, who was him but not him. Too late to try to convince Julia of that, he thought. Too late to convince John that Julia was on their side. By now everyone worth their shoeshine boy would be laughing at him, guffawing in a genteel way about his wife, his glorious, gorgeous wife running off with the enemy. Without him guessing, at least to start with. Too late, too fucking late for anything. Or almost. There was some honour he could salvage.

The bleep of the computer was the nearest thing to a comforting sound he'd heard since morning. The building creaked and groaned and echoed. Were they in bed together now, while he was up, his clothes neat, his hair brushed, his face shaved, and his brain aching? Find the names, find the names, he said over and over to himself. Don't think about anything else. He owed that to someone. Himself? Julia? Perhaps to Jean. Bloody Jean. If there'd never been Jean their marriage might have been different. Children, for instance, mainly children. He wanted them, while Julia maintained that the concepts of childbearing and rearing were, for her, stained with pain. Tests, he argued, even though he knew Jean's state wasn't genetic, had come on her later. A cord around the neck, an accident in pregnancy, so many unintentional problems could cause a child to wrench the heart of its mother, Julia replied. Let alone the intentional accidents. Of course he knew what she meant by that.

By the time Julia's mother died and Jean had been found somewhere to live, and Julia had relaxed enough to think about pregnancy, their marriage was unpleasantly - what? - set in thick, immovable concrete. That's how it seemed. In retrospect.

Philip methodically made his way through the clever computer web he himself had spun. He'd done a good job, an excellent job. Which was a pain in the buttocks at this moment. Eventually he put together a list of names. Men who'd seen Avril. He got the computer to sort them, rank them by dates and the number of visits. Challinor

would've done it like this, he told himself. Always had a head for organisation. He wished he could really hate the man.

The tension in his body wasn't easing. His arms ached. He stretched, forcing his mind to deal with the code he was using. Once upon time he'd imagined he could infiltrate ASIO by using the very tricks they employed. Eventually he emailed a coded version of the list of names to his private address. Paranoia wasn't high on his list of preferred characteristics but he didn't want to carry a copy on any form of disc or storage device with him right now. He also emailed the code-breaker – disguised, of course. A few weeks ago, only a few days ago, he'd been puffed up with the thought that, if worst ever came to worst, he alone could recover the details. And he'd thought almost joyfully that then he'd have the power to implicate, to point fingers. It'd consoled him that he, Philip Jones, scholarship boy, son of a minor clerk and an overworked hairdresser, was owner of the knowledge that it wasn't long-legged, tight-breasted, high-class whores who satisfied the desires of the men who featured on the pages of the major magazines and newspapers. With the girls missing, he wasn't so sure any of this mattered. He wasn't brazen enough to forgive himself a death. And if this were the case, the police would be involved. So now, he had to delete the records, clean everything out of the office. Once he'd done that he could use the details he now held, those that gave him the edge. He knew Challinor, or his minions, were looking for the lost girls. At least he'd beat him to that.

Eventually Julia made phone calls, extracting as much information as possible. Jean had been found in a flat near the train station in Nowra. Three hours ride from Sydney. Almost unbelievable, except that Jean had always fancied trains and would get on one – any one – at every available opportunity. The police reported that there were no signs of sexual interference. The flat Jean was in was filthy, littered with food scraps, unopened tins thrown at walls, reams of toilet paper trailed across the floors. The residents of the flat were away for a couple of weeks and there was no sign of any other person having been there with Jean.

When she'd spoken to the hospital and they'd told her Jean was sedated but not badly injured and would be sent to Sydney early in the morning, Julia sat back and sighed. There was nothing she could do immediately. The nurse had been sweet, even put the phone to Jean's ear so Julia could speak to her. The only response had been a slow giggle. Reassuring.

"We'd better get on with finding Avril," she announced to Paul. "Let's check the computer."

"You're sure you don't want to go to Nowra?"

"We'd probably pass the ambulance bringing her back here. Besides, Jean's survived, we have to make sure Avril does now."

"Good. And Jean's helped us get a contact number for the agency, which we will put to good use soon. What will Philip do when he realises his laptop is missing, by the way?"

"Probably nothing worse than he's going to do anyway. I've been followed, it's possible that we were followed together last night. You're investigating the agency he's protecting. I disappeared, leaving a lame excuse on an answer machine. Philip's anything but a fool; he'll know by now that you and I are together."

"He'll be furious? Vengeful?"

Julia ran her hand through her hair. It needed a wash. She was tired. And happy, despite Jean, despite Philip, despite the metaphorical bed of nails she was walking on. "I don't want to think about Philip – not as a person. Do you have a broadband connection?"

"Sure, there's an extra lap-top connection, just plug it in here." Paul reached over and pulled a cable that ran along the edge of the desk.

"In a minute. Let's just think through again what we're looking for. If we're clearer we might have more chance of tapping into the logic of it all."

Paul stretched his legs out, leant back in the chair and clasped his hands behind his head. The long day, with all its tension, should have sapped his energy but he felt alert, determined, excited. "OK. Do you mind starting with what you've uncovered about the money laundering?"

"Fine, if you think it'll contribute." Paul nodded and Julia continued. "This afternoon - it seems a lot longer ago - I visited the house that Sonya and Avril told us about. You know, the group home. I got the name of the agency that runs it, or is supposed to. It's not a government organisation. And then I spoke to a friend of mine who works in the appropriate department about how agencies are set up, what the requirements are for funding."

"What I found was that government - both state and federal, mostly state - gives money pretty much willy-nilly to organisations that claim to support people with disabilities. There's almost no monitoring of how it's spent and whether the agency does what it claims to do. The government departments also rarely - or never - check where the organisation gets its own share of the funding from. Books are outrageously easy to fiddle."

"So, you're suggesting that a group - or series of groups - could set themselves up and have a legitimate front, run a couple of residential places for people with disabilities, and - "

"And show money raised through 'donations' that is then paid, along with some government money, to 'workers' who don't actually exist."

"Julia, this is extraordinary. If you're right, it's - well, it's unethical in the extreme. It fits, of course. And finding the group home and the parked van gives us a place to begin looking if nothing else turns us." Paul leaned toward his computer, made a few notes. "Let's look at the more direct information. We know that Avril has disappeared on the way to or during a job. Sonya tells us the client complained that she didn't arrive, but that might well be a ruse. So, his is the first name we need to look for. Do you think it's possible to find that name on Philip's computer."

"Well, he's got the office in town. I'm sure there won't be an appointment book, Philip won't keep that on his home computer."

"Sure. OK, what else have we got? There's your list of disability organisations and we now know that Philip owns some of the real estate the agency uses. We presume that he's the brains behind the complex structure of the organisation. We also know that Alan Bennett's biggest and best thug has miraculously walked on stage in more than a bit part. Which makes us think Bennett is a backer. If not more."

"Is all that important in finding Avril?"

"It's a possible path into finding who might be a customer. My hope is that Philip has an address book on the computer, which might well be helpful if we know who to look for. You see, the agency hasn't advertised in any way we've been able to detect. Which means that its reputation has spread – and like wildfire – through a network of people. If we can work out where Bennett met Philip and where each or both of them might have friends who could be left anonymous messages, we have somewhere to start. We can look for club memberships, too, and any connections with organizations that Bennett might be a member of."

Julia shifted uncomfortably. "I know so little about my husband," she said. "We really have been leading separate lives. He joined the Royal Yacht Club, which could be where he met Alan Bennett. What if Philip has a friend or friends listed in the Parramatta region – either home or work addresses?"

"That'd be helpful. Julia," Paul paused. "We may have to resort to some kind of coercion."

Her voice was tight. "You mean if we don't find anything, we might need to threaten Philip?"

"Or if we do find some information, but not enough."

"If it has to be," she said. "Let's open this computer up."

Paul straightened, preparing to move aside for Julia to sit at the desk but she was already beside him, pulling a chair over. "Let's do it together," she said, reaching across him to the cable. He smiled at the touch of her body. She'd forgotten he couldn't see a thing.

As Julia clicked the email programme open, Warren rang.

Warren wasn't being allowed to leave the scene. He'd found the body, and after breaking into the house for no good reason as far as

the police were concerned. Paul could act as his lawyer – the police'd enjoy a bit of American crime-com, Warren had assured Paul. More importantly he needed Paul to come so that he could hand over some information from the crime scene.

"We'll have to go," Paul said, when he'd found all this out from Warren. "Do you want to drive, or shall I call a cab?"

"I'll drive. I'm bringing the laptop with me. A pile of emails have just downloaded and I can look around the files while you're playing clever buggers with the police."

Lights fused into a thick blur as they headed across Anzac Parade, down Cleveland Street. The cars leaving the city fought for space, the subtle growl of BMWs and Saabs pitted against the reverberating roar of souped-up Holdens, the sudden light-swipe of lane switching. Cinemas, restaurants and pubs were closing, while nightclubs were just yawning their way into their day.

"There's plenty of rushing, but no wind," Paul observed. "Perhaps that's a good omen."

"You haven't told me exactly what Warren said."

"The dolls I mentioned? It seems the person sending them was holed up in the house next door to the refuge. He hung himself this afternoon. Or that's what Warren's assumed. The police are asking a lot of questions, and won't say anything themselves until the autopsy."

"This may sound hard-hearted, but isn't it a good thing we can rule this guy out? As a kidnapper for Avril, that is."

"Sounds sensible, not hard-hearted, although we can't be sure until the time of death is determined."

Julia crossed King Street just as the lights changed and headed down Carillion Avenue. The back way through Stanmore was their best bet at this time of night.

"You're saying he could've abducted Avril and killed himself afterwards? Where on earth would she be if that's the case?"

"It's always possible but Warren says there's no signs to indicate anyone else has been in the house. Based on what he observed, my hunch is that the fellow organised the final parcels to be sent by courier and then went back, alone. Possibly topped himself while watching the delivery."

"I'm not sure my life so far has prepared me for this particular world. Maybe, when all this is over, I'll change career. Right now, I'm just going to concentrate on getting us there. This isn't my part of town and I don't want to get lost."

"Gees, I've explained till I'm blue." Warren was growing seriously impatient. He'd shown his private investigator's licence, explained about the dismembered dolls – police had a bloody record of them as well – and consequently why he was there. They weren't having it. Or if they were, they were having a bit of a laugh at his expense. Fortunately, Challinor turned up.

Constable Theopoulos whistled. "You didn't tell us yer lawyer was blind."

"I can hear," Paul said, calmly enough.

"Shit, oh sorry. Oh shit."

Paul ignored the constable. They were standing at the front of the house. The scene would be taped off, he assumed. There weren't many lights and not too much activity; the police weren't taking this too seriously. "I need to talk with Warren for a minute," he said, adopting his most professional manner. Such a con in its own way, the professional demeanour, he thought. Useful though.

"What have you got for me?" Paul asked, as soon as Warren indicated there was no officer within hearing distance.

"Boss, I'm gunna pass you a little card. Our bloke, our dead one, was familiar with the agency. Remember the cards I saw handed over at the shop in the Cross? Found a neat little package o'them under the lid in the loo."

"You were looking for drugs?"

"Anything of interest."

"What's on the card?"

"Instructions, contact numbers. A bloke's name. I notice your lady friend is with you. You happy for her to read it?"

Warren was asking more than whether or not Paul would be willing to show Julia the card. He was asking how much she could be trusted. "Absolutely," Paul agreed, hoping Warren heard enough assurance in his tone. "Will you be OK if I leave you here? It'll only be a few minutes, I had a chat with a friendlier and more sensible member of the force on my way over here. That should be him who's just rung them now."

"Good one, boss, see you soon."

Avril's arms were aching. She tried to think of something, anything, other than the almost empty room in front of her and the man who would return to it soon. She remembered that mad book she'd read when she was at school. The one in the English countryside, in the big old house, with the lunatic in the attic. What was the girl's name in it? The one who was like a mouse, never game to speak out or show what she wanted, but getting it in the end. Jane? Yes, that was her name. Silly cow. The question that interested Sonya was whether or not the book was about devotees, in a peculiar, never-admit-to-it kinda way. After all, Jane fell in love with a bloke old enough to be her father when he had a mad wife. In the end she married him, when he was blind and had lost an arm. Avril found it strangely comforting to think of a woman as a devotee. Jane mightn't have had much going for her, but at least she wasn't into being cruel.

Cruelty wasn't what she'd expected. She'd thought Zac was an innocent. Not like most of the clients. She thought about Sonya for a moment, knowing she'd be freaked out of her brain. Sonya was so sweet. She hated all the peculiar stuff the clients wanted. Avril remembered one guy rubbing himself against her feet, spurting his stuff between her toes. Her feet were seriously deformed. Another guy'd even tried to hold one of her orthopaedic boots up on his prick. Weird. Others wanted to pretend she was a kid, or a trapeze artist from a circus. Must've had running-away fantasies, Avril figured. Some, thank the Holy Mother or maybe Mary Magdalene, just wanted straight sex. There'd been a few times when it was really good sex. Now and then they treated her like a lady and did the kinda things you see on the movies. One guy told her she had the best tits he'd ever seen, and she thought maybe he was right. Her tits were just like they were supposed to be, good slope, great up-lift, fantastic nipples. A bit big for her body, but then anything decent was. She enjoyed the guys who licked her nipples. Hard. Not vicious, she didn't like vicious.

Zac wasn't vicious. He wasn't cold and calculating either. He was sick. For a couple of hours, maybe more, he kept her in the

kitchen. All white and stainless steel, the kitchen was, like in the magazines. He offered her tea and coffee and food and watched her nibble like she was a goddess whose every move was a demonstration of perfection. It made her queasy. He wouldn't let her out of the room, except to the toilet, which was directly off the kitchen. Funny place for a loo and the small room smelled of new paint. It looked like it might have just been put in.

Then came a phone call. Zac nearly jumped out of his skin. Within seconds he was dragging her down a hallway into a room with a door so heavy he had to thrust her and his own weight against it so it'd open. He cried while he was stringing her up. Probably wet himself when he was making the bloody cross he attached her to, just thinking about her up there on it. A total wimp, with a very, very mean streak. He bound her tight, her arms and legs stretched like Jesus in the pictures, her fanny exposed and her bra still on. Disgusting.

She wasn't going to be able to stand it much longer. Already she was passing out, either Zac or the pain bringing her back to consciousness with a silent screech that ran through her body like electricity. No good screeching out loud. Everything was prepared ahead, including the soundproofed room she was hanging in. Even the floor was padded, which meant he could creep up on her if her eyes were closed, 'specially if she'd gone out to it for a few seconds.

Avril suspected there was a listening device or a spy-hole hidden somewhere, too, because she'd woken several times to him in the room, stroking himself while watching her. Stroke, stroke, so gentle with himself. She knew what she'd do if she got hold of his vile private parts. He'd know what disability was then. He'd really know.

Not that it was all down to Zac. He'd driven her straight to the house but even with the blindfold on she could tell he wasn't completely familiar with the route. He muttered, giving himself directions. She guessed, on the basis of what he said and by the style of the roads - long curves, wide lanes, no traffic up close to them - that they were on the north side of the city. Out of her territory, among the quiet, conservative wealth. None of them would want to know a woman like her.

The house wasn't his, he'd fumbled with the key, and she got the smell of someone else when the door finally opened. No words, just a whoosh of movement in the air. Whoever it was walked - nearly ran - past her, out of the house. A car started up and left. She'd

bet a mint the guy at the door was the one who rang later. She also bet he'd be back. The mystery-man, not Zac, was the one holding the bankroll, and the keys. She wasn't interested in money any more. She just had to get out the place. Out.

She cried a little then. What was the point of keeping a brave face on it? She'd had to do that all her bloody life and she was sick and tired of it. More than sick and tired. She was really ill, she was so thirsty, she could put the whole country into drought just by drinking. In fact, if she didn't get her medication soon, she would die. It was hard to decide whether or not that was the best option. A coma and then death. At least the pain would go away. She felt so shitty, it might be a relief.

Her head was drooping again. Out of her control. But she could keep her eyes open, watch for whoever came in through the one entrance – or exit – to the room. She wasn't going to let them have any satisfaction. No, death wasn't an option. Trouble was, she needed insulin. And she didn't have any. Not here, and seeing she hadn't exactly been planning on being away from home this long, not even in the bag that bastard Zac'd flinched. He was probably going through it right now, getting himself excited over the smell of her perfume and her lipstick, trying on the condoms that weren't meant for him. Avril let her head stay where it was, flopped down on her chest. There was no point wasting her precious energy on lifting it. She would wait and rest till they made another move. She wasn't giving in, not her.

36

The night was dimming with cloud. Julia opened the car door, climbed out and tried to take in where she was. She'd seen so much of Sydney in this one day that places were folding over and falling into each other. They'd pulled up just off a busy road, not far from a station and a shopping centre readily identifiable by the regulation over-sized signs for supermarket and variety store chains. Paul stood fifty metres or so away; she watched him for a moment. That must be Warren he was speaking with now. Already she felt Warren was part of her life, too. How had the past forty hours or so happened?

She carefully lifted the laptop from its case and moved into the back of the car, placing the computer open on the bench seat. Philip was such a private person she'd never even used the same computer he had. Taking his laptop from its hiding place – he stowed it in a well-masked drawer and probably didn't realise she knew he owned it – was almost the ultimate betrayal. He deserved it, of course, but she couldn't hate him. He was too sad. He would have thought he was giving the workers a job with a decent wage, that he was respecting their active sexuality. It was logical and not ridiculous. But only part of the story.

No time for thinking about Philip now. Instead she had to think *like* him, work out his passwords, follow his organisational strategies. So much contained in the small space of the laptop. His email was the most sensible place to start and she didn't need a password for that. She clicked the icon.

Paul's footsteps approached. Julia opened the last email, downloaded as they were leaving Randwick. It had a large attachment, which appeared to be about racing. Horse racing and boat racing. Odd: Philip raced a yacht competitively, but he eschewed horse races, except for those annual events that might get him on the social pages. Was she being too cynical?

"We should hurry," Paul said, his cane clicking against the car.

"Hang on, there's a curious email on Philip's computer. Philip has a penchant for codes and I think this may well be one."

"We need to move out of sight. OK?"

"Sure, fine. Give me ten seconds. It was sent by a guy called Robin Nguyen, have you ever heard of anyone by that name?"

"Nguyen's like Smith, very common. Robin's presumably anglicised." Paul made his way around to the passenger side of the car, opened the door.

"Smith – or Jones?" Julia said, quietly.

"Of course. Julia, I think you're onto something. Do you think you can find out more from the email, or other files?"

The screen shimmered in the dark. She stared at the lists of figures and cryptic comments. "I don't know. I really haven't a clue whether we can get more out of this, in a short time. On the other hand, the disguise wouldn't have been set up to fool me, so maybe there's something to be found out. Maybe luck's with us and it'll help find Avril." Her hand tightened and she snapped the computer shut.

"Warren's slipped me a card with a name which might be helpful. As well as that I made a visit this afternoon and garnered some other names. Codes are much easier to break when you know what the answers are."

They'd passed a late night café, which Julia decided to go to. Returning to Paul's would take too long and her home was out of the question. The cafe looked innocuous enough: a Lebanese pastry shop servicing elderly men staying away from their wives and young people desperate for sweet food after too much alcohol or dope. They took a seat in a rear corner, from where Julia could watch all of the room, the comings and goings. The woman who took their order gave the impression she was used to people who didn't want to be noticed.

Julia placed the computer on the table. They were half-hidden by a fake palm in an ornate pot, and no one was taking much interest in them, although there were two leather-jacketed blokes at the corner bar who looked like they were auditioning for a spy thriller. The screen slipped into action. The email opened. Long lists of figures, cryptic comments, which could be legitimate racing form. "Let's leave Nguyen for a minute, it's an adopted name and not truly cryptic. What are the names you have?"

Paul handed over the card Warren had given him and gave her the other three names verbally. Julia typed them in. One first name: Zac. Three full names, two of which she recognised as what the media liked

to call 'well-known Sydney identities'. Two Anglo, one Italian. "Eastern Suburbs," she commented.

"At least two of them live there, yes. I'm presuming Zac is the driver Sonya told us about, so he's an employee, not a main player."

Their coffee arrived, its aroma strong and sweet, its colour a refined but unarguable black. "Could be none of these is the man we need to find, but their names might be the key. Let's think for a moment about what Philip might have done."

They batted ideas back and forth, keeping their voices low, huddled together as if intent on a late night game they'd played a dozen times before. Philip had always been good at maths, loved the way of thinking: what he'd chose would be simple and elegant - and nothing as bland as the Fibonacci numbers. "I need to scribble," Julia said, reaching for her bag, marvelling again at the ease with which Paul retained and manipulated information in his head. She couldn't do it, she was sure. "It's something to do with the way the racing odds are written."

"The subtraction of say, 25 to 1, gives us the first initial perhaps? Twenty four would equate to a letter."

Julia rapidly copied the list of odds, reading them aloud as she did so. "Good, it's a real possibility," she agreed. "And the form guide - the wins, places and losses would give us frequency of use statistics, as it were. The name of the horse matched with the first initial would break down to the name of the customer."

"Or the worker, with the rider as customer."

Julia groaned, theatrically. "Philip is not that tacky!"

"We'll give him the benefit of the doubt." Paul smiled. "How are we going for attracting local interest by the way?" he asked.

"Don't think any one here gives a toss about us. Looks like there could be a minor drug deal at the table by the bar. Seems to be a local sport - watching the deal go down - from the faces around."

"So, working backwards from the initials and names, what've we got?"

Julia tapped the pen, stared, referred back to the screen, wrote some possibilities. There'd be an arithmetic or geometric sequence underlying the code that shifted the letters to numbers. The sequence would have some meaning to Philip. She stared at Paul, not really seeing him. She had to get it. Right now Avril's survival was hanging on this.

Their second coffee arrived, syrupy with sugar, spiced with cardamom: they'd both be wired, but they needed to be. "While you're

working on that, I'm going to ring the number Ian gave us," Paul said. "I'll be dissatisfied customer. If Zac's the pick-up boy - which he could be on the available evidence - then he's not likely to be working tonight. So, I, as a well connected customer who knows Robin Nguyen, have been stood up by the driver and I'm going to let all hell loose if I don't get satisfaction. Now."

Julia pushed aside the pages of figures. "You're hoping that they'll admit Zac's unexpectedly not available?"

"Yes, and rattling the agency might wrong-foot them enough that they do something revealing. We know they're already in a panic."

"Go for it," Julia said, thinking there'd be no point in trying to stop him anyway. She scanned the café again. The two thugs remained in the corner, on their third or fourth coffee from the look of it. "The public phone is outside and it'll be safer. It needs to be used regularly, or it'll be ripped out. Not everyone has a mobile for an emergency, you know."

Paul grinned. "Don't you ever give up on your social conscience? My mobile number is blocked, it won't be recorded." He was already pressing the buttons.

"How on earth do you remember all these numbers?" Julia muttered, momentarily watching his face and his seductive mouth before returning to concentrate on the cryptic messages before her.

Ten minutes later they were both grinning. "That's the first time I've used algebra productively since school." Julia felt pretty pleased with herself. The alphabet had been translated into numbers using a complicated sequence. Paul's call had netted confirmation of Zac's absence from work and they had a short list of two clients who matched with both Zac and Avril. It wasn't going to take long now.

Her eyelids were wooden. Avril couldn't lift them. She could hear, though, and what she heard was making her very happy. Zac was getting what her mother called a dressing down. Funny bloody way of putting things. What was Zac saying? He was talking to some geezer called Robin. Robin was the boss. More or less. Maybe not the really big, big, boss, important though. Robin certainly had the shits, if Zac's responses were anything to go by.

Avril tried to move her right arm, but her brain wouldn't cooperate. Her arms weren't wooden like her eyelids and the rest of her face, they were filled with poison. She felt sure of that, the pain was so weird. Zac was yelling into the phone, saying he was on another job, he couldn't leave, no matter what, it wasn't his fucking fault. Then his voice dropped and he hissed. "Yeah, OK, it's for fucking Charters."

A sharp cracking sound. Her eyelids still wouldn't lift. The sound was sick. The other guy must've come in, 'cause suddenly there were a lot of sounds, all very nasty. A body being hit, smashed. If only she could open her eyes. Then, maybe she didn't want to see, maybe it was safer not to. She knew it was a bashing, though, 'cause her dad beat her mum. And this particular beating was hard, harder than she'd heard ever before. Yeah, Avril was definitely pleased she couldn't get her eyes to lift at this point in time.

Paul calmly pressed the off button. They were in the car. He'd rung Zac, on a hunch and a hope, and he'd answered.

"He's confirmed it's Stephen Charters."

Julia's hands shook as she pushed the car keys into the ignition. "When you were pretending to be Robin, you sounded exactly like Philip," she said.

"Acute attention to sound, I've always been able to mimic voices." Paul didn't seem perturbed.

"But you don't know Philip?"

Paul reached for her arm, noting its stiffness. He should have told her. "Philip and I were best friends, of a sort, at school," he confessed. The muscles in her upper arm flexed but she didn't pull away. "I've only spoken to him once in nearly twenty years, but I remember his voice."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I don't know exactly. Not wanting to talk about Philip, and some residual guilt about running off with my erstwhile best friend's wife, I suppose."

Her body relaxed a little. "Paul, I don't think you ever 'suppose' anything. There was some other reason, which makes sense to you."

"Perhaps. Perhaps I was shocked, too, to find out it was Philip behind this. We spent a lot of time together as adolescents, we were both outsiders. But it's not relevant now, Avril's more important"

She wasn't going to make life easy for him, Paul thought, as she remained quiet. Good: it was the challenge of her that he so enjoyed.

"There's one hell of a lot of talking we're going to do sometime soon," was all she eventually said.

They struck out across the city again. This time the direction was to the north. Charters had made the mistake of using his own home, or at least a house with a rates notice in his name. Serge had been able to get a match, a precise address, for Charters – and the other suspect – with lightning speed and Zac'd been too weak or frightened to disagree.

They crossed the Gladesville Bridge. The immense height of the single span structure was a sensation in itself. "I think there's a car clinging to us," Julia commented, as they veered to the right at the end of the bridge.

"Hopefully it's Warren, I SMS-ed the address. He'll have checked your cars make and plates when we saw him earlier."

"Could be the police, too. There's a shadow on the roof which could be a sign or a siren. Shit, we can't afford to go faster in case we get pulled up. This part of town is notorious for it." Her anxiety level was rising, though, focussing now on the young woman.

The lights continued to hug them as they via-ed to the left and took the up-ramp. It wasn't Warren, who called Paul, asking to meet. They needed to plan.

"Tell Warren I want to do a drive-by first, so we know what we're talking about. We also need to see if this car really wants to

marry us or not. Warren can meet us in the street parallel in five to seven minutes."

Julia was giving an excellent impression of out-professionalising Warren. Paul relayed the message, hoping Warren didn't hear too much of the grin in his voice: it'd be disastrous for their friendship if he did.

Philip shouldn't have come alone, he knew that. On the other hand, short of ringing the police - who would only snort through their hairy noses - who would help? A few days ago John would've lent him a minder or two. Now it was more likely that big Ray had Robin Nguyen and/or Philip Jones on his list of most undesirables.

Philip crept forward. Charters had done a good job at making the house appear an ordinary, expensive North Shore residence from the outside, but up this close Philip could spy faint outlines of bars behind the heavy curtains. No simple way in. The rear of the house had a single-storey addition with an iron roof. Perhaps his days of mountaineering would come in useful. Gently, Philip ran his hands along the back walls, looking for holds, a way of getting up. Perhaps a rope? He edged back toward the garage.

Philip felt like crowing. Metaphorically speaking, of course. Charters or his minion - Philip assumed it was that sycophantic fool Zac - had been foolish enough to leave a ladder in the garden shed attached behind the garage. In deplorable condition, it must be admitted, but useable this once. The tools he'd thought to pocket were much better looked after.

It didn't take long for Philip to lever a sheet of iron loose enough to have a good look underneath. The powerful pencil torch helped. Wouldn't be seen from inside the house? He could get in and, yes, there was a man-hole. He just had to hope that the small window on the external wall truly did denote a toilet. If it did, he'd be able to get the manhole cover aside and drop himself down without too much difficulty. Philip was beginning to enjoy himself.

A few minutes later Philip, dirtier than he'd been in a decade or more, was listening intently through a partly open hole in the ceiling. He could hear the hum of a refrigerator and the soft tick of an analogue clock. Must be near the kitchen. The complete absence of human sound was almost nauseating. Literally. Remembering scenes from escape films, he dropped an old nail onto the toilet floor. It

resounded and echoed but nobody came. Philip dropped onto the toilet, nearly losing his footing, but making it down safely.

His heart thumped with threatening fervour but he dusted himself down as best he could and kept going. An eruption of voices so sudden that it was more shocking than a spotlight trained on him, sent him into a room off the main corridor. In time, he got in there in time. From inside the room – he could flick in behind the curtains if he had to – he tried to make out what was going on. Charters's well-bred accent was discernable but only if he listened very closely. For the man he'd met as a war hero, of sorts, peacekeeper anyway, was speaking through teeth so gritted or a mouth so twisted, speaking with such fury, that his voice sounded strangled. The other man was pleading. And choking. There was scraping on the floor. At first Philip thought Charters might be dragging Sonya or Avril along the ground, then he realised, from the pattern of thumps and pleadings that it was Zac. Philip waited. He heard the kitchen door shut. Muffled screams.

Philip sat for a moment – how long he couldn't tell – with his head in his hands. Something terrible was occurring in that kitchen. Something terrible could happen to him if he re-entered the corridor. He felt tears in his eyes. Told himself to summon courage. He said a few conjugations of Latin, a trick he'd used at school before he sat exams. The grammar stimulated a small piece of the mind that was a long way from the brain's centres for fear.

He still wasn't sure whether there were one or two women for him to rescue. The reports were that Sonya had disappeared as well as Avril. Charters had been in Bosnia, so it wouldn't be unreasonable to think he might feel a warped connection with Sonya. All the evidence suggested she'd simply run away when she realised Avril was missing. In fact, Ray's spotting Challinor's off-sider suggested he might've had contact with Sonya. Philip knew by now Challinor had interviewed both girls. With his own wife present.

He had to force himself out into that corridor. The horror was still underway in the kitchen. Philip thought it was burning flesh he could smell. He refused to retch.

The corridor led to a larger, grander hallway. Several rooms off it. Not hard to surmise which one the girl or girls might be in. The door looked like it was taken from an armoured tank. Fortunately it was open.

What Philip saw did make him physically sick this time. Blood all over the walls, and the peculiar floor, Avril strung up on a

cross. Was she dead? She looked dead. Philip breathed deeply. He thought of closing the door behind him but it could have an automatic lock. Instead he simply walked, through the blood and bits of skin, to Avril, pulling out the insulin from his pocket. This is what he'd come to do. The files he'd insisted the agency kept showed her diabetes. He tried to ignore her appearance, the way she was hung on the cross, tried to move up close to her like a doctor might. It wasn't easy but his mother was diabetic and he knew what to do. At least he'd watched before and these days the injections were simple enough.

It took him a few moments – more peculiar, elastic time – to work up to touching her. She was warm and her foot recoiled just enough to convince him his effort was worth it. He could not have death on his head. Philip raised his hand and felt good for the first time – in how long? – as the liquid travelled into the poor creature in front of him.

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The front of the house was screened by thick golden pines, planted years before, when natives weren't popular. A driveway to the right, what looked like a recent model Peugeot parked outside the garage toward the rear of the house. A pathway, narrowed by overhanging trees, leading to the front door, which, surprisingly enough, was lit.

"We need to get around the back of the house." Julia said, as they turned back out of Charters's street. Then she gasped. "Shit."

Paul waited.

"We've just driven past Philip's car."

"Go back, see if he's in it."

Julia slowed, did a U-turn. She parked behind the Audi, letting her headlights shine inside. "No one in the car. What's it doing here?"

"The same thing as we are, perhaps?"

"Christ. What if he's - ?"

"In on the abduction? What do you think?"

Julia chewed her lip. "No, I think he'd enjoy the challenge of running the business - at a distance. I can't imagine Philip actually being this sordid."

Warren pulled up, a hundred metres further along. They stopped speaking as he dipped into one yard, disappeared, came out closer to them. He climbed into the back of the car.

Paul explained, avoiding giving Warren the precise details of Julia's relationship to Philip. That would have to be admitted to, but not when it would lead to an intense and possibly catastrophic distraction. "According to what I could get from Zac, there's only he and Charters there. Or that was the case when I rang," Paul continued. "It may be best - if Philip is in there - if we simply storm in."

"Two's plenty. Three's an army. Storms are dangerous," Warren pointed out, without stating controversial, but obvious facts like that Paul was blind and Julia female. He was getting a bit scared of this woman.

"I'm going to ring him," declared Julia.

"You're what?"

"I'm going to ring Philip and ask him what he's doing in there."

"Bullshit," Warren drawled, not even in the mood for his usual way with metaphor. Still, he couldn't help but like the cheek of it. He'd been planning on getting some sort of view inside the house, maybe gleaning enough to frighten the police into getting out there, pronto. All very well to be a hero but they didn't know if these idiots had weapons or what. Dead heroes had been dogging the Australian psyche since the Anzacs. Maybe this Philip character would spill enough beans for them to get the coppers in straight up.

Julia was already on the phone.

Philip felt rather than heard the sirens. They bounced inside his head, adding themselves to the cry he was suppressing. He had a vague idea Julia had rung him and that she'd somehow arranged the sirens. Couldn't believe that. Couldn't believe he'd been stupid enough to leave his private phone on. But he had.

He kept his eyes shut, keeping reality at bay, desperately trying to locate the pain, which washed like the waves from a cyclone all over his body. He didn't feel like he had a bullet wound, although he'd heard a noise and felt - how long ago was it? - an impact. Inside he was cold, outside he felt sure he'd been thrown into a bath of fire, his head held down mercilessly. He hoped he would die soon.

Slowly, becoming aware of noises in the room, he felt down his arms. His coat was torn and there were sharp pricks of pain the length of one side. That's right, he'd been dragged. His right arm was thicker than the left, he thought. He couldn't tell if that meant one arm was swollen or the other had lost some of itself. Confusing.

"Stop being such a bloody lady," a man's voice said, loudly and unexpectedly enough to flip Philip's eyes open without the need of his will.

A broad-shouldered man was standing far too close to him. He was dressed in some sort of army regalia and had blood all over him too. The man should think of changing his style.

"This isn't American television," Philip stated, believing, at that moment, the observation to be important. He didn't approve of American television, although he did watch 'The Simpsons' and the

crime shows from time to time. He thought about this in some detail, it seemed a good topic.

"Fuck you."

"Yes, no doubt, but surely there is no need to put it so crudely." He was pleased with the sentence. Well put together, in the circumstances.

He felt a kick to one side and relapsed into closed-eyed stupor. So much more enjoyable.

A few seconds later Philip was again awake. His right arm was throbbing and twitching uncontrollably. Which only made the pain into agony. He thought of the young woman, the one who got abducted. All of this had something to do with her, he was sure. He looked around. There was a young woman at the back of the room, and he spent some time trying to understand why she was dressed as an angel, but hung on a cross. Jesus never became an angel, did He? Or not exactly?

"Who are you?" he asked as equitably as he could.

"What?"

"WHO ARE YOU?"

"I'm Avril and I think you saved my life. But there's blood coming from your mouth."

"Never," said Philip, truly shocked. How gauche.

"True. Me too."

"Are you in pain?"

"What'd y'reckon? But there's sirens and Stephen's just pissed off and something's happened to Zac. So I think we're going to be all right."

Philip wiped his mouth. Blood. He stuck his fingers - those of his left hand - in his mouth. No blood. He swirled them around, as if he'd forgotten his toothbrush and had to rely on water and friction to have decent breath. Still no blood. "It's not from my mouth," he announced, almost triumphantly. "It's attached itself. Externally."

"That's great," Avril said. "Any chance you can get me down from here?"

"I don't think I am able to move," he said primly. "I will attempt this in a few minutes." With that, he again lost consciousness.

39

For twenty seconds after he woke, Paul felt blissful. Julia was curled around him, they were naked, the sun was warming the room, the wind was only an occasional rustle in the trees outside. Reality hit like a hangover. The night had certainly been something. The medical team, which had stormed in as soon as the police had done their work, had assured them Avril would be fine. In the end - she needed considerable care for the time being. Philip Jones, too, had been on a stretcher. Badly beaten, one arm with a huge gash, probably caused by a special-issue army knife, but alive. Zac, on the other hand, was near enough to dead, while Charters was raving. Paul thought Charters's incoherence could be a good act, designed to ward off immediate charges. Paul felt his own body ache. Only temporary, and he promised himself a holiday sometime. He hadn't had a holiday in years but Julia made him think it was not only desirable but possible. Would she come with him?

"Do you drink tea or coffee first thing in the morning?" he asked when she woke.

"Tea, with a coffee chaser. Can't we stay in bed? No, I know. On Christ, what about Jean?"

He ran his fingers over her hair, drew her to him. "No-one has rung." They lay for a minute or two. "I've never had a relationship start in quite such a complicated fashion."

"How many relationships have you had?"

"Feel those notches on the bed head." He laughed, hugging her now in an easy fashion, as if they'd been doing it for years.

"Not half as many as on my bed," she replied.

"You win. For the time being. Now I'm going to make tea. And then I'll check the emails and make coffee. There's a phone by the bed if you want to make calls. Sonya should have read her SMS by now. We'll be able to see Avril later."

Julia and Paul made their way down the hospital corridor. The first of the day's hospital corridors, Julia reflected. While they

were drinking their tea, Ian had rung her to say Jean had arrived. She was in Prince of Wales. Later they would go to Westmead to see Avril. Lucky she liked driving.

Their shoes squealed on the hospital vinyl. Outside Jean's door, Julia stopped. "Paul, I want you to meet Jean, but I want to tell you a family secret first." She rested her head against his chest. She loved the feeling he gave her of being protected. It was old-fashioned, and perfect.

"Jean wasn't born the way she is now. When she was three, and I was five, my father beat her. He did it often but this day it was very bad. No, wait, don't say anything. What I also need to admit is that he beat her because of something I'd done. It wasn't much - some food taken from the fridge - but I didn't confess. I let Jean take the rap. What she got was a life sentence."

Paul said nothing. He stroked her hair.

"So now you understand my tendency to guilt. It's got a good basis."

He waited a moment, giving her time to say more if she wanted. "Julia, it seems to me that you both had a terrible childhood. What happened was an ordinary bit of childish behaviour. My brothers and I let the other take the blame more often than I can count. Terrible things happen by chance," he finished softly.

"What if I knew she'd be beaten?"

"You were still a child. Julia, we've got a lifetime to talk about this - let's see how Jean is now."

A lifetime? That was an attractive idea. Suddenly Julia thought they might not need to talk about Jean's past, her past, too often. Perhaps it was over. They'd have to give Jean more chance to get out on adventures, though. According to all reports, Jean had just had the time of her life, escaping the confines of staff, eating her way through usually forbidden foods, not having to bathe or brush her teeth, not having to be bossed and managed and observed. Not so dumb after all.

Julia pushed open the door.

There was Jean, sitting up in the bed, her hair neatly plaited, wearing a pretty blue nightgown, trying her best to destroy the cotton blanket that should have been covering her. The intent expression on Jean's face turned to a grin when she saw Julia.

"Do-a," Jean called, holding her arms wide.

It was all over the news like fake tan on a model. They'd even downloaded stuff showing women in wheelchairs in indelicate poses, their private bits whited out with a little strip, so the innocence of children wouldn't be threatened. Fat chance. Warren watched the footage from last night, spotting himself, Challinor and Julia there, right up close with the SPG. Amazing what they could do with camera lenses these days. Had to give it to the TV channels. And to Paul, who'd be shitty to be on the TV, but who never let a mere detail like not being able to see his own hand deflect him. Not from trouble anyhow. Man was attracted to trouble, addicted to it. And now there was this new woman who, from what Warren could glean, was trouble incarnate. Made her perfect for the boss.

When the kids'd left for a party and Karen to see her mum, Warren decided to follow his nose out to the hospital.

A few straggling journos were hanging around when he arrived. Apparently Charters was in the place, under guard, and that Zac guy too, although he was maybe not going to survive the day. Funny how the posh guys always came out relatively OK, while the other buggers really took the fall. Not that either of them were gunna get much sympathy from him. Warren stepped over a sound boom and around a knot of his old colleagues trying to poach each other's titbits, one bloke interviewing a nurse who'd seen f-all, from what she was saying. Good looking lass, Warren noted.

Wasn't hard to find the ward they'd taken Avril to, although it took a bit more ingenuity to get in. Supposed to be a relative. Or the law. He used the service lift, which stank of blood and something like formalin. He hoped they weren't carrying too many pickled bodies up and down. Warren was always good at forethought, so he was wearing his janitor's uniform. Not perfect for the hospital he was in, but likely he wouldn't be noticed. Not with all the carry-on.

He nodded at the police guard, who looked more bored than a kid at his great-aunt's for arvo tea, slipped inside Avril's room. Sure enough Paul was there. And that woman, Julia.

Avril was already sitting up like a princess in bed, talking about selling her story, getting enough out of it for a unit. Had to start somewhere now the job had folded. "'Sixty Minutes' and *Women's Day* are offering," she said proudly.

Avril turned to Julia. "Your husband or whoever he was - I thought you and Paul was married - anyway, he saved my life, he was pretty brave. Can I get to say thanks?"

"He's in another ward here."

"Cool, I'll go for a wander when I'm back on my feet. Hey, did I tell you Sonnie's already been in? She's a hero, as well."

"She's very pleased you're found."

"Me too, mate, me too."

The wind was gentle. Paul smiled at Julia, noting the scent of rain in the air. A good omen, he said. There'd been too much wind and not enough rain for months.

They reached the car. Under the smell of other people's lives, the hire car carried a hint of their own recent past. This was good.

"The most extraordinary day, few days. Can't believe how tired I am." Paul stretched himself as far back as he could go in the too-small seat. "Of course, when we get home, we'll have to discuss the next job."

"You are joking, aren't you?"

"Didn't you say you'd be trying to work out how all the money was laundered?"

"Sure, so?"

"It's a mystery waiting to be solved. Think of the truly decent disability organisations that can be funded with the proceeds."

Julia watched the corners of his mouth turn up. She knew they'd do it, though. They'd search out all the pieces, put them into a pattern, force the blinds up on government ineptitude. It wouldn't be easy, but with two of them on the case – three, including Warren – they'd do it. But not today.

"What if a share of it has come my way? Inadvertently. I was married to one of the bosses you know."

"Julia, I like the sound of that 'was'. OK, you're right, let's take the day off and have fun."

"Paul Challinor, I'm planning on more than a day of fun in my life. More than a day in the next week, in fact. So, let's go back to bed."

"You're on."